



# ON MOORSTEAD

Louisa Trent

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*The reign of Edward The Confessor, the year 1051, England*  
*(Fifteen years ere the Norman invasion of William The Conqueror)*

ON MOORSTEAD,

'Tis eventide. And deep within a darkling fen of heath and heather, an Anglosaxon  
witch dances by moon-glow,  
Whilst a brooding Norman lord watches transfixed.  
Around them, swirls a smoky scent:  
Mossy peat. Magical potions. Medieval passions.  
And malicious politics.

# Book I

~In which the witch wantonly injures the warlord~

## Prologue

The barking hounds drew nigh, the dogs' frenzied yelps curdling Avice's blood and prickling her flesh. Her fleeing footsteps barely skimmed the earth, and still the mastiffs gained on her.

Her burning lungs laboring, she held a hand to the achy stitch in her side.

Gracious goddess! How to elude the pack and their noble beastmasters?

The well-trained animals saw her as quarry, differing not at all from the hare or the fox. Should the canines catch her, they would bring her to ground. The pack would then rip her apart, limb-by-limb --

If given the directive.

Would the pursuing noblemen give their dogs the order for blood-spill?

No seeress, Avice relied on her natural instincts, same as everyone else. In this instance, her gut told her nay, the royals would not order the pursuing animals to spill her blood.

But not out of any sense of charity. The nobles who gave chase little understood the meaning of mercy. They would not give the command for one reason and one reason alone: In their jaundiced opinion, she amounted to sport. No more than a respite from courtly ennui. Assuredly, the barons would make her beg, ere making her suffer, but they would stop a few rapes short of actually killing her.

Perverved pigs! Swill-eating swine. Boars rutting in the mud owned more decency than these snout-whiskered brutes. Aye, she kenned what the royals wanted from her. 'Twas the same fate every unprotected female faced across the land.

Why, oh, why had she taken it into her head to go a-walking alone at cockcrow?



Ne'er should she have ventured a foot outside her cottage a'tall, what with the new overlord entertaining a fancy hunting party up at the keep! As sure as rats nest in thatched roofs, when Lord Gralam of Normandy's guests caught sight of her strolling through the woodlands, they had put aside their quest for red deer in favor of pursuing her tail.

Well, no wide-eyed doe was she. No common trull for the taking. Neither jaw-snapping dogs nor their cruel royal masters would find her easy pickings.

Shoulders hunched, Avice rounded low to the ground. Her boots now pounded the spongy turf. A leap and a hurdle took her o'er a tumbled-down fieldstone wall. The lichen-covered rocks represented all that remained of some long-dead tenant's farm, marauding Danes having burnt everything else long ago. The once productive earth had now gone to seed. Save for a few tenacious betony plants, carking bindweed had choked out all vegetation.

So bloody sad! Her heart drummed in her chest, sorrow for the past pumping alongside dread for the future. Tyranny and neglect had almost obliterated the moor folk. One invader after another had plundered the land and enslaved its populace. This current influx of Norman nobles -- all friends of The Confessor -- amounted to more of the same.

Regardless of their country of origin, be they Anglo-Saxon reared or Norman-born, the nobles amounted to a royal pain in the arse. Bugger them all! The whole foul-smelling lot of them! After leading her pursuers on a merry chase, she would give her would-be rapists the slip. No man enslaved or plundered her!

Avice swiped at the sweat beading her upper lip. Narrowly avoiding an unearthed tree root here, a bent sapling there, she cast her sights to the horizon.

A brook twisted and turned up ahead, the watery depths dividing pasture from woodlands. Brave the currents and the lead dog might just lose her scent ...

And the noblemen could go scratch their pox-ridden bollocks to alleviate their boredom.

For all that the *aequinoxium* had come and gone a fortnight since, spring had yet to awaken the dormant earth and thaw the ice-jammed waters. No help for it, Avice gritted her teeth and plunged into the half-frozen stream.

*Ack!* The frigid waters chilled even her hot witch's blood.

Sopping wet to the skin and shivering to the bone -- courting ague for sure -- she emerged on the opposite side.

And the yelping hounds, tracking the acrid smell of her fear, kept coming.

The saturated linen skirts of her gunna and the sagging wool of her tunica further hindered her escape. Both dragged in the muck, slowing her down. Her buffer between the pursuing beasts -- one four-legged, the other, two -- decreased with each of her heavy steps.

Too close, much too close, to shift her shape now.

The moors! She must reach the heaths and heathers. On the peat bogs, she kenned every rabbit warren, every foxhole, every rotted, hollowed-out tree stump. As a child, she had oft squirreled herself away in their musty enclosures to daydream. Those hidey-holes promised her sanctuary now.

Of a sudden, doubts assailed her. What if she stumbled? What if she fell? What if the moors remained forever beyond her reach?

What then, what then, dear goddess, what then ... ?

No choice then.

Save death.

Avice snickered to herself. Not her own death, of course.

Blueblood flowed in the nobles' veins. She, however, had descended from hardy peasant stock. If she must make a mortal choice this new morn, the barons, not she, would feel the brunt of it.

Though ... *though* ... explaining away the high-ranking stink of all those piggly corpses might prove difficult --

As well as deadly to others.

After similar mysterious incidents, witch hunters from court had descended upon outlying villages. In a quest to root out heretics, the inquisitors had set every cottage aflame, the inhabitants within royally torched.

A shudder shook Avice from head to heel and back up again. What was to prevent the same atrocity from happening here on the moors?

She would.

The choice was hers to make. Someday, she might indeed meet her fate on the faggots, sent to the flames by kingly decree, but ne'er, she vowed, would she take innocent lives with her.

Avice tossed her head. This situation called for a more discreet use of her powers. An alternative she had best come up with right quick --

Faster than a trot, slower than a gallop, the steady canter of a steed approached. The lone rider must have broken rank with the noble party. Whilst the rest of the piggin' royals followed behind on foot, the lone hunter chased her on horseback ...

Her heaving chest fit to burst, her breaths shallow and ragged, Avice turned about and looked the courser directly in the eye.

*Discharge your rider, Equus!*

At her unspoken command, the dark stallion reared and bucked, tossing his equally dark rider onto the ground --

Just as a hedgehog materialized from out of nowhere and darted across the trail.

The spiny creature would provide a convenient excuse for the accident, thereby removing unwarranted blame from the guiltless steed.

Well satisfied with her ploy, Avice released the animal from her mind-connection.

*Yer task here is done, Equus. Go, and take me thanks with ye.*

Empty-saddled, the destrier bolted for the stables up at the keep, and Avice turned her attentions to the fallen nobleman.

Lord Gralam of Normandy, himself.

*Ack!* Now, she had gone and done it for sure. After toppling the overlord, group rape was the least of her worries.

Thinking to hide her identity, Avice turned her back.

"The barons will expect amusement when they catch up," the new overlord said from behind her. "Strip off! Bare to the skin."

Rather than heed the order, Avice dove for the trees.

A *whoosh* split the air and came with a dagger attached. The blade's point punctured the drooping shoulder of her too large gunna. The throw's mighty force slammed her into a gnarled oak, leaving her unscathed, but deftly pinned. Ere she recovered from the jolt, a fur mantle sailed past her nose and dropped at her feet.

Lord Gralam of Normandy rasped, "The gold pieces within are yours -- for the inconvenience."

*Inconvenience!* Is that what the new overlord called rape?

Whether freely given or harshly stolen, a forfeited maidenhead left a woman with naught to barter for marriage. Along with the taint of promiscuity, she also faced the very real possibility of growing a big belly. With no way to feed a hungry babe, save the age-old one, many a good maiden ended up on her back.

And the Norman thought a few miserly *pieces of gold* would recompense her -- or any woman -- for *that* lifetime of misery!

Avice stared at that rich fox fur cloak, luxurious garb signifying noble wealth and lordly prerogative, and something inside her snapped. Just broke clean apart!

On a surge of defiance, she stepped out of her run-down boots. A rip and a pull freed her threadbare linen gunna and thin wool tunic from the pinning knife. Save for her headdress, she stood naked.

And proud.

*Eat dung and die, Norman!*

The overlord had different ideas. "Don the fur and run!"

So! To up the ante on their malicious sport, the downed hunter thought to dress her up like a fox, did he?

The full extent of his cruelty tasting like a bitter herb in her mouth, she bent o'er. Mooning the new overlord full on, she reached for the piggin' cloak. The gold pieces, the price of her maidenhead, the payment for her *inconvenience*, rattled, the clinking of precious metal doing little to drown out a decidedly male groan.

Bundled in the mantle, the deep hood disguising her face, the sumptuous fur hiding her body, her coif still covering her hair, she turned 'round and faced down Gralam of Normandy.

Agony had bleached his swarthy skin, contorting handsome enough features. One look at his leg told her the fall had broken the bone, the ragged whiteness of which jutted out of the skin at an unnatural angle in relation to the knee. If e'er he walked again, his gait would contain a pronounced limp. At best, he would go through the rest of his days, pain-wracked and shuffling, a vestige of his former self --

Unless she interceded.

After administering a sleeping draught of mandrake and poppy and vinegar, she could pull the broken leg straight. Set properly on a stout oak splint, the bone would properly knit. He would walk again, run again, ride again --

Rape again.

*In a pig's snit, he would!*

As barking hounds crashed through the trees, her lips began to move.

Softhearted witches burnt at the stake, cruel nobles burnt elsewhere, and only a fool would heal someone who would condemn her for her troubles.

No fool she, after laying a curse upon the Norman's head, Avice took off, leaving the overlord lying there, crumbled and broken, upon the ground.

## Chapter One

A narrow shaft of moonlight darted through the arrow loop and pierced Gralam as he tossed and turned abed. The annoying illumination was just one more pointed barb added to his already sharp misery.

Resettling his aching leg beneath the furs, he flung an arm behind his head and stared up at the vaulted ceiling. Why would she not leave him alone?

*She* being a young peasant wench he had rescued from rape.

Each eve, she would invade his solar and fling a heaping platter of scornful derision in his face. Rather than lavish him with well-deserved accolades for saving her questionable peasant virtue, she accused him of *something* -- he knew not what -- as he hovered on the cusp of sleep. Until now, rest at the end of a long hard day seemed more punishment than reward. Little wonder he had given up on the pastime.

With all his twisting, his goose feather pillow had turned lumpy. He punched the middle to rid the down of knots. Naturally, the effort proved a great waste of knuckles.

"Fiendish night terror! Begone!"

But nay, she stayed. A constant source of irritation.

Regardless of what he did, his mind always returned to her. A twelvemonth since a riding accident had claimed the use of his leg, and still she haunted him.

Christ's bones! Why did the wench detest him so?

In truth, her belligerence confounded him. And really, how dare she hate *him*, a lord of the realm. In comparison to his importance, a lowly serf such as she had no more worth than the muck on his boot soles. Why, she should have dropped to her knees and kissed his feet in gratitude for his intervention! After all, he had given her his best fur cloak, paid for her inconvenience in gold, told her to flee, and then waylaid the hunting party so she could get away -- all accomplished at great personal cost to himself. His guests from the House of

Wessex had not taken kindly to having their assault cut short. That little wench had single-handedly ruined his chances of currying courtly favor. Royal influence he needed to save his skin, anti-Norman sentiments being what they were in this damp and dismal country.

Gralam let go a long sigh. Giving up on sweet oblivion -- sleep only grew more elusive with each restless hour -- he dragged himself from the tangled tick, took up his cloak and carved walking stick, and left his solar for the parapet. Swallowed in darkness, he would pass the time 'till dawn limping back and forth above the ramparts. Or, mayhap exercise would lessen his leg cramps and exhaustion would finally claim him there against the battlements --

That is, if fortune smiled favorably upon him.

Of late -- and as the heavy baggage beneath his eyes would attest -- fortune frowned upon him more oft than grinned.

After huffing and puffing up the last step, he immediately commenced a clumsy back-and-forth shuffling pace along the tower wall. His cloak lifting in the breeze, Gralam wondered once again about the identity of his nocturnal accuser.

Having caught only a fleeting glimpse of her visage and that through a thick fog of discomfort, he had no idea what the tart looked like. Not even if they danced nose-to-nose would he recognize her --

Unless, perchance, she glared at him.

Her glare, now *that* he would recognize immediately. What had he done to warrant her animosity?

Even his political opponents, many and virulent within The Confessor's court, refrained from exhibiting such unmasked revulsion of his person.

The same went for mortally wounded enemies on the battlefield. Warriors everywhere understood the impersonal nature of bloodletting. After all, there but for a mightier sword, the honor of the kill might just as easily have gone to them.

Not even his father showed him personal contempt. His sire based his scorn on cold principle, not on any actual heated feeling.

Ne'er, not in all his born days, had he confronted anything quite so hotly intimate as his nocturnal visitor's regard of him.

And that included in bed.

Like a bonfire, her wrath singed him to the quick!

Gralam ran a weary hand o'er his heavy lids, down his gaunt, bristled cheeks. Since the accident, he had become a hollowed-eyed ghoul. All because of her. What more could he have done for her? What more had she expected him to do?

"I command you, speak!"

The billowing winds carried the shouted demand o'er the stone parapets and across the moors. When no returning answer blew back, Gralam bunched his black cloak 'round his shoulders. Leaning heavily on his walking stick, he left the keep's palisades.

The walls were closing in on him, trapping him, suffocating him. He had to escape!

For some reason, his route took him outside the gates, across the drawbridge, to the heathen heath. He detested the wretched moors! What strange paradox led his feet here?

Peat squished under his boots, the moldy scent of death and decay withering his nostrils. Did the fetid stench foreshadow events to come? Would his connection to Normandy spell his undoing? Would a young wench's hatred never allow him rest?

So his dark thoughts went, 'round-and-'round, without hope of resolution. And like those circling dark thoughts, a plume looped above his head, ringing the treetops in a rope of billowing ashes --

And the scent of hallucination.

The smoky fragrance dragged him deeper into the bogs, a fey realm of pagans, fairies, and aloof people of small stature, crafty ideas and odd customs. As an outsider, he walked -- *limped* -- warily here.

Ere he saw her, he heard her, chanting some unintelligible verse, which surely had no basis in Church dogma. And what did he do? Run -- correct that -- *shuffle* away? Hide? Make the Sign of the Cross, as any rational and cautious God-fearing overlord would do?

Alas, nay. He stood there, irrationally under the stars, incautiously out in the open, his sleep-deprived eyes widened upon her.

Ah! What an otherworldly reed of a female! Her unbound fair hair competed with the stars in hue. The looseness signified her looseness. Or, at the very least, a distinct lack of Christian piety.

Squinting in pain brought on by the long journey, Gralam tried to make sense of it all. Lack of sleep could play tricks on the mind. Had he perchance conjured her up?

Too late, he realized, 'twas the other way 'round.

"You are *cunning folk*," he said, giving them both an easy way out of a dire circumstance. "You deal in herbs, not spell casting."

She shook her head. "I use aromatic plants to practice the Dark Arts. Sorcery."

Despite his father's oft-repeated pronouncements to the contrary, he was no coward. Yet, at her blatant confession of witchcraft, he fell back a pace or two. "Good Lord! What black magic do you perform?"

"Now, let me see." *Tip-tap*. She drummed her pointed chin with two fingers. "I employ a fetch, talk to the dead, change my shape at whim. A white gyrfalcon is my favorite disguise, but any animal will do me in a pinch. I rather like black cats ..."

"Appropriate," he muttered.

The saucy puss grinned, tilted her jaw in a way sure to entice. "Suffice it to say, with the assistance of spirits, I hold supernatural power o'er others. What ye heard, what ye followed, what brought ye here to me tonight, was me rune to ye. As explanations go, this one is a broad sweep of the broomstick to be sure, though I do believe my answer covers the extent of me abilities. Any further questions?"

He cringed at her boldness.

And at the boldness of the Cyclops that suddenly rammed against his breechcloth for release.

After the accident, he had lost his potency. And limp as grass, he remained. To have his virility return now, and so auspiciously, caused his suspicions to rise --

Along with his cock.

Of a temperate habit, he had never experienced such a powerful carnal urgency. His rearing manhood left him more than a little confused. Delighted, naturally, but still somewhat taken aback.

*Christ's boner* -- er -- *bones!* Did the one-eyed monster levitate as a byblow of this female's natural charm? Or, had another sort of charm, sinister in origin, resulted in a return of his lost vigor?

Gralam sniffed the air.

He knew it! *Henbane!*

Whilst engaged in their craft, witches would oft burn herbs to promote a trance, receiving visions on each inhale. Regardless of his military acumen, without a sprig of thyme or dill to ward off the hallucinatory plant, he had no defenses against its poison. *Suffice it to say*, his vulnerability alarmed him.

The sorceress shook out her linen skirts, and then smoothed the dull-toned gunna o'er her shapely thighs, clearly outlined under the thin material. Though she wore no distaff, a spinning tool that outwardly proclaimed a female's industriousness, he would never doubt her busyness. In the wanton pursuit of their evil occupation, witches never rested. This one most likely performed her wickedness from dusk to dawn.

"Best be forewarned -- though I cannot enter yer mind, I can decipher yer expression." She rolled her eyes with abandon -- did she do everything with the same spontaneity? "La! Men are so easy to read! No amount of *thyme* or *dill*," she said pointedly, "or even angelica grown in the holiest of monasteries will protect ye from me this eve."

Above the smoke, their gazes connected. Lingered. Locked. Even in his rich nobleman's cloak, he felt naked, exposed, stripped of all subterfuge.

White knuckling his walking stick, Gralam resisted her control like a castle under siege. "You, sorceress, have bewitched me."

"Not yet!" Now her eyes twinkled with mischief. "But rest assured, I shall."



## Chapter Two

The witch began to dance. Thrice around she twirled, her long fair hair thrashing her shoulders like flaxen whips, her bare feet flying -- dare he say, above the ground -- her hips undulating, her breasts ...

*Dear Lord!* She had left off her tunic and under her loose gunna, her pert breasts pointed directly at him.

Battling her seduction, her cantrip too, Gralam gave his command. "Your name! You are to give me your name at once."

She swayed so close to him! They almost danced nose-to-nose -- save, unlike her nimble feet, his lameness kept him rooted in place.

"Avice the Enchantress." She offered with a whimsical laugh, "Ye may shorten that to Avice, if ye like."

Nay, he did not like! He liked naught about this, especially her familiarity with his person. Her second self-incriminating proclamation placed him in an extremely awkward position. In fact, her confession amply justified a fiery death at the stake. As overlord, duty dictated he condemn her on the spot.

He cut through her damnable forthrightness with a sword-sharp word: "Halt!"

She came to a stop directly in front of him. Unarmed, a full foot shorter than he, having no more substance than a dream swaggered in rags ... and yet she ruled him. A tiny slip of a female, and her spell-sspinning governed him.

"I can put you to death for sorcery," he said with stiff authority. "Know you not who I am?"

"Such self-importance!"

"I am overlord ..."

“Hush, say no more. Ye will only dig yerself into a deeper hole with me.” She applied two fingers to his mouth.

At her touch, he swore steam rose. His testicles, already heavy and tight, now felt like two blazing boulders. And his erection! At her provocation, the length and girth blew up out of all proportion. The discomfort of his loins effectively silenced any further admonishment from him, even without the press of those two dainty digits against his mouth. He could hardly breathe, never mind speak.

Not so she. Avice laughed merrily, the witch. “I ken yer name, Lord Gralam of Normandy. Yer station outside these moors matters no more than a thimble of piss to me. Here, all that matters is the man ye be inside. Who be ye *really*?” Removing her hand from his mouth, she thumped his chest where his heart wildly beat. “Simply put, what kind of man dwells inside here? That question begs for an answer, and explains why I called ye here to me.”

How dare she? Of all the effrontery, thinking he, a Christian lord of the realm, would ever grant her, a lowly pagan peasant, a reply as to the quality of his character!

Particularly irksome when, to his own consternation, he found he had no answer.

Was he Anglo-Saxon or Norman? Who held his allegiance in these politically perilous times? And how might he, an outsider, ever hope to rule the odd mixture of clans who inhabited the moors? Finally, and most importantly, how could he, a warrior-killer, hope to become an agent of peace?

During his mind-stutter, Avice the Enchantress took a great inhale of night air. “Ah, smell that peat, would ye? To my nose, ’tis richer than kingly incense.”

Determined to denigrate this happenstance ... and its impact on him ... he shook free of her allure and found his tongue. “’Tis not peat you smell, but the smoke of burning henbane seeds.”

“Why can both not be true, and at the same time?”

“Egad! You speak in riddles!”

“Riddles, ye say? Forsooth, I offer this up as a solution: Here amongst heather and heath, we walk upon level ground. Not peasant and lord, not Anglo-Saxon and Norman, not witch and warlord -- simply man and woman. One need not follow only one destiny in life.”

Absurd to give the witch credence, yet he found himself hearkening to her words. At five and thirty years, he had fought in numerous military campaigns, had shed blood and had the favor returned. In recent years, though, he had lost the heart for constant killing and had sought, at least on a temporary basis, another way to make his way in the world. Upon hearing his son’s alternate point of view, his father had stripped him of his paternal inheritance. He had no lands, no holdings, no fortune --

Which explained his presence in this ungodly backside of the world.

Gralam had shamed his warrior-sire, had disgraced his family's coat of arms. His father had even declared their shield should no longer portray a proud and roaring lion, but rather a squeaking mouse.

By rejecting the last call to war, by abdicating his responsibility to the family name, Gralam had failed his father. His twelvemonth of impotency merely reflected that failure, only confirmed his own worthlessness. Now, even if he changed his mind about returning to battling, he could no longer lead men to war, not without riding destrier, an ability that required two strong legs. Since the accident, he had not sat a palfrey, never mind a warhorse.

Still -- when all was said and done, why must he bear the brand of coward for dropping a sword he had carried since he was but a lad? Could he not now take up the banner of peace and still show courage, still show himself worthy of his father's respect? Why could he not be both warrior-killer and peacekeeper in the same lifetime? And why, for God's sakes why, could he not remain his father's son, regardless of their disagreement, regardless of everything? Why must one condition exclude the other?

Of a sudden, an anvil pounded in his temple. His head almost exploded with the merciless refrain. Who had put these subversive thoughts in his mind?

With a graceful turn, the culprit moved away from him. "On the morrow, I shall expect an answer to me question," she said imperially. "Arrive on the moors promptly at dusk, for I shan't tarry long. Unlike the nobility, we witches have useful things to do."

"Question? What question?"

"Who ye be, *really*," she flung o'er her shoulder as she walked away.

He followed her with his hot gaze 'till she disappeared into the smoky darkness, his mouth feverishly agape at her temerity, his ears blistered with her laughter, his skin burned as if by the sun, and his cock --

Impotent no longer, his manhood spewed fire.

And with his recent run of bad fortune, Gralam feared only Avice the Enchantress could put out the flame.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the mud-plastered walls of a neatly kept little cottage, Avice hooked two fingers in her mouth and blew.

The whistle caught Martin's attention. "Hold up," he bellowed to the oxen harnessed in tandem, his booming voice matching his great stature whilst belying his gentle nature.

Cutting furrows in the earth with the plowshare's blade provided grooves for the rain to run off, whilst the moldboard's curved plate turned o'er the dirt. Exposed to the air thus, weeds soon wilted and died, and a farmer could plant tender seedlings in the tilled soil. Such intense cultivation required awe-inspiring strength and saintly patience.

Her best friend possessed an abundance of both.

Martin cupped two massive hands 'round his mouth. "Come for a nice chat, have ye?"

"Aye, that and more," she shouted in return. "Truth to tell, I have an ulterior motive for me visit."

Putting aside his work, Martin approached. Considering the size of his footsteps, the ground hardly trembled at all.

"Regardless of the reason, Avice, 'tis blessed I am to see ye," he said to the top of her coif.

Owing to his elevated height and more, everyone looked up to Martin. Owing to his great humility and more, Martin ne'er looked down on anyone.

"Now tell me," he said. "What is this ulterior motive?"

To dodge his gaze, she surveyed the tiny plot of land. Far less than an arpent, and shared with Martin's brother and sister-in-law. "Are Agnes and Simon about?"

"Both working up at the keep, Agnes cooking and Simon blacksmithing -- why do ye ask?"

Her gaze grazed his at a wide angle. "I need privacy --"

"Oh, indeed? One can only hope ye have nefarious designs on me person." Like a lecher, he wiggled his sunshine yellow brows.

Mimicking him, she wiggled her brows too. Then, taking a sprig of dill from the pouch hanging at her waist, she threw the herb at his bare head, narrowly missing a nearby cloud. "Me? Have designs on yer person?" She hooted. "More like ye suffer from a head too big for ye hood!"

Since their shapes had grown interesting, so had they jested with one another. Now, however, the time for seriousness had arrived.

In preparation, Avice lowered her voice. "Please to keep our conversation confidential."

Martin nodded his golden cap of hair, the bowl-style favored by the monastery he had joined. "Agreed."

Thus assured -- the Godly and honorable Martin would ne'er lie -- she proceeded. "I am here to listen to yer take on the pig-headed Norman up at the keep."

"Pig-headed, eh? Sounds like yer mind is already made up about our new overlord."

Her mouth twisted. Martin had an uncanny knack for sorting her out. "Ye can persuade me otherwise."

Now he furrowed his brows like the field he tilled. "How so?"

"Folk confide in ye, Martin. They trust ye with their secrets. Ye hear things --"

"Having only just returned to the moors meself, I have heard very little." He started unrolling the hiked-up sleeves of his tunic.

The giant stringently followed the tenets of his faith, and the Church prohibited nudity of any kind, as well as lovemaking for any reason other than procreation. That sort of thinking completely escaped Avice. To her mind, nudity was not an occasion of sin, but a means of exultation. Naught brought a body closer to the Earth Mother than nakedness. She frolicked in the altogether whenever possible and rejoiced in her female attributes. And love, now that was not a diminishing commodity one must save, but a wellspring that never ran dry. The more one gave away, the more stores of love one kept on hand.

His brawny muscles all modestly hidden in coarse cloth, Martin added, "Lord Gralam arrived here o'er a twelvemonth since. Surely, ye have heard talk of him yerself."

"Ack! I have better things to do than ear every blathering mouth in the village. And even if I did, with whom would I exchange this gossip? All the day long, I see naught save big-bellied mothers-to-be, screaming at me to loose them of their latest mouth to feed. That, and the sick and the infirm. And they seek respite from their miseries, not idle conversation. Only the hale and hearty tell juicy tales."

"Folks travel great distances for yer curative skills. I admire what ye do --"

Avice waved aside his avowal of admiration. Since childhood, Martin and she had shared a bond. On his side, truth and integrity strengthened their tie with each passing year. On her side, falsehoods and deceits threatened their closeness at every turn. Whilst he shared everything and all about himself, she had always kept the most elemental part of herself hidden from him --

Namely, her witchcraft.

Had Martin gotten so much as a whiff of her true nature, he would not have admired her at all.

The web of lies she had spun to protect him ... and keep him as her friend . . . shamed Avice, and in that shame, she dropped her eyes. "I understand the Norman overlord left for the court of The Confessor strapped in a lowly hog cart. Tell me true -- did that happen?"

"Aye, it did. Unable to sit a steed for the journey, a wagon that normally brought sows to market brought him to the attendance of the king's physicians."

Her chin came up and she snorted. "Royal physicians, me rosy arse. Those cleaver swingers be royal butchers, the lot of 'em!"

"I grant ye that. The word is -- Lord Gralam left court in worse condition than when he arrived. He should have gone to see ye instead, Avice. Ye would have fixed up the poor devil right proper."

Despite the heat of the day, at Martin's misplaced faith in her, Avice turned corpse cold. "Did the lord mention how he sustained his injury in the first place?"

"A careless trip o'er a log is what Agnes said he told her."

Avice chafed her arms, then crossed them about her middle -- the actions did little to warm her. "Not a hedgehog, then?"

“Gralam blamed only himself for the accident.” Martin made a fretful face. “Does aught ail ye?”

The shivering hit her hard. Shaking her head both with and against the tremors, she persisted. “Is that what he called it -- an accident?”

“Aye, and rightly so.” Martin shrugged. “Personally, I have naught bad to say against the new Norman overlord. Oh, some complain about his standoffishness, his formal ways, but Agnes calls him ‘unfailingly proper and polite.’ She says, ‘he is far superior to the rest of us’.”

“He shits same as everyone else.”

“Avic! Watch yer language, would ye now?”

She blew out a breath. “What I need to hear is this -- has the overlord e’er done rape?”

“All noblemen rape, Avic, regardless of their country of origin, regardless of their fine manners. Best stick to ye own kind and stand clear of them.”

Refusing to drop the topic, she dug deeper. “Ere his accident, did Lord Gralam molest any females up at the keep?”

“Ne’er heard such a tale -- nay. Then again, females generally ascribe those sorts of incidents to demons.”

“The only true demons be Normans and royalty.”

“Lord Gralam answers to both, and still he seems fair and just to those he owns.”

The cold left her. “No man owns me!” she said heatedly.

“Lord Gralam absolutely does own ye. And that goes the same for me. That is, if I decide to come home for good. None of us be free to do as we choose. But I believe this present overlord a decent man. Already, I see and hear of small improvements he has made. Not only up at the motte-and-bailey, either. In the village, too. Unlike the greedy overlords of the past, this one might stay put a while. Mayhap if he does, bellies will no longer rumble louder than the choir in church on a Sunday morn.”

“Forsooth! I ken naught about choirs and churches.”

Martin waged a big finger at her. “The Good Word strengthens us, one and all. Ye should attend vespers, Avic.”

“And ye should get yer big thick skull down out of the clouds for a moment, giant, so I might reach ye.”

Martin immediately rounded his back.

“Me thanks for yer concern.” Going up on tiptoe, Avic kissed his cheek. “But preach yer soul-saving to someone else. Yer breath is wasted on me.”

As Martin touched the spot where she had affectionately left the imprint of her lips, she stepped away, her thoughts harkening back to one of her friend’s former remarks. “So,

even now ye have not made up yer mind to stay put on the moors or return to the monastery?"

"I still have contemplating to do. And praying. Devotion is not easily forsaken." Tucking in his head like a turtle, he said shyly, "Whilst gone, I thought of ye all the time, Avice. Even when on me knees in the pew, I did think of ye. Ye are dearer to me than anyone -- save God."

"Ah, Martin!" She sighed. "E'er and anon constant and true to yer beliefs and to our friendship." She slapped his muscled arm. "Ye big sentimental dolt."

With an upward wave and a downtrodden turn of heel, Avice departed.

### Chapter Three

Careful not to step on a centipede, the venomous insect having crept out from beneath the feathery fronds of a maidenhair fern, Avice ambled along the wooded path.

To think the new overlord of the moors had refused to blame even a lowly hedgehog for his injury! Though she had called up the creature for just that intended purpose, the lord had foregone the readymade excuse and had, himself, accepted the full responsibility for the mishap.

Owing to that morn's revelation, she now entertained some niggling concerns about the nobleman's guilt in her attempted rape. Trifling inconsistencies that warranted further investigation --

Avice bit her lip. Truth to tell, ere this morn, doubts about the Norman's complicity had crept into her mind.

Which went to explain her actions of that prior eve.

Unable to cast her pesky doubts aside, she had succumbed to impartiality. Letting go of her bad opinion of all nobles in general, she had summoned up one noble in specific. She needed him to answer a few pertinent questions regarding her close call with rape.

Such as -- what had motivated the gift of his cloak? A garment, she now admitted, had prevented the hounds from ripping her apart. The thick fur had masked her scent and sent the dogs running in circles. Was the garment a means of rescue? Or, a means to humiliate her? What a jest, hunting down the naked peasant lass dressed up like a fox ...

Of course, had Gralam condescended to explain his logic a twelvemonth ago, she would entertain no nagging questions now.

Nor would he suffer a game leg.

Had he shown himself innocent of intended wrongdoing, ne'er would she have called for his steed to throw him. Even later, lying on the ground, his leg broken, he could have



explained himself. Had he proved himself innocent then, she would have seen to setting the bone straight. But cold arrogance defined the Norman's temperament, as a hot temper defined hers. Now, they both paid the price for their natures.

Bad enough her neglect went against her healer's beliefs. That causing another pain blatantly disregarded all the fundamental rules of her craft. But suppose, just suppose, she had injured and laid a curse on the head of someone utterly *blameless*. Someone -- a hero, in fact -- who had prevented her group rape. What then?

All well and good to say her callous abandonment of an injured man filled her with regret. Remorse alone was insufficient. What would she *do* to rectify the situation?

Make him amends, of course.

How?

She would just have to wait and see, she supposed.

As to punishment -- her atonement must fit the crime.

Raising the skirts of her loose tan gunna, then shimmying her brown tunica up to her waist, Avice backed up to a boulder draped in moss. The patch of green would provide a soft cushion for her bare haunches. After parting her thighs, she diddled her wet passage with first one finger, next two, and then applied her thumb just so.

*Ah ...*

Her jaw gone slack, her fingers beating out a shallow rhythm, her thumb pressing, pressing, *pressing*, she began to pleasure herself.

She needed this. Needed to fortify herself ere beginning her search for the truth. Carnal release strengthened her witch's power. She did hunger so! A dark, ungentle, earthy hunger. A hunger that possessed a life of its own. A hunger that ebbed and flowed according to her woman's courses.

And the sequence of the full moon.

O'er the next few days, both those cycles would join forces. The coincidental convergence would increase her desire for a man.

And not just any man would do her.

Lord Gralam. Now there be a man who would do her very well, indeed. The Norman would understand her base desires. No qualms about it, the swarthy-skinned, dark-haired, dark-eyed, overlord would ken how to satisfy her. His fleshy lips, carved for kisses, told her so.

Built on elegant lines, his muscles long and lean, rather than bulging and brawny, he possessed strength no less powerful for the refinement. Beneath his fine court manners, she sensed some wondrously base appetites. He would lock her in his arms, ply his open mouth to hers, ram his hard fingers up inside her, and stroke her 'till she ... 'till she ...

Her eyes fluttered upwards, her tendons tightened, a warm flush suffused her flesh. And in her belly, low in her belly, a clenched fist released.

With Gralam's arrogant face front and foremost in her mind, she screamed, a lusty explosion that rocked her preconception about one nobleman to the very core.

\* \* \* \* \*

From out of the late afternoon shadows stepped Julian, intercepting Gralam's route through the forest for the moors. "And here he is now, my favorite fellow countryman!"

Extending his vassal a small courtesy, he stepped aside to allow the lad some room to negotiate the narrow path.

After reaching the other side, Julian folded his arms across the breadth of his barrel chest. Gralam had always thought his lead hunter built much like a stone fortress -- wide atop for the battlements, a long-legged traverse to the ground.

His vassal cleared his throat, a habit of his ere speaking. "My lord, one of my men sighted a boar foraging along this trail today. Best take care."

"Discounting a humbling fall from a steed, I generally do."

Julian eyed Gralam's wooden companion, a crutch he never went far without these days. "How is the walking stick serving you, my lord?"

"Superbly!" In appreciation, Gralam smoothed a slow hand o'er the handle. "A great deal of yourself, lad, went into the carving. The craftsmanship is of the highest order."

Julian bowed. "Thank you, my lord. Pleasing you, pleases me."

The lead hunter's narrow face boasted large brown eyes, a smallish nose, and thin, nicely shaped dark brows. Long thick lashes batted, the fanning shadowing sculpted cheekbones, which stood out prominently under the vassal's tanned skin. Altogether, an attractive, albeit feminine, countenance.

Long ago, Gralam had surmised Julian preferred the lads to the lasses. So what and what of it? He gave the predilection no censure. After all, the disposition to favor one sex over the other was a trait bestowed at birth, an unalterable facet of a person, the same as height and coloring. Having led similarly disposed warriors into battle, Gralam could personally attest that those oriented to their own gender fought and bled and died, the same as other men. At times, they battled more fiercely and died more bravely, as if they sought to prove their virility and courage to the very end.

Julian had naught to prove to him.

"My lord -- if you will -- may I accompany you?"

"I would welcome the companionship."

They walked for a piece before Gralam offered conversationally, "Tell me, lad, do you miss Normandy?"

Julian smiled his pretty, wide smile. "Oft and always, my lord."

"As do I! For both our sakes, I hope this dreary place eventually grows on us." Where the trail veered off sharply, Gralam gave the lead hunter a commiserating pat on his sturdy shoulder. "Lad, I fear this is where our time together must end. I bid you farewell for now."

That said, and without a backward glance or an extra thought, Gralam left his vassal and continued along his journey.

What choice did he have save to follow the boggy trail to the moors?

A witch's cantrip had called him forth, a spell-cast summons he could hardly refuse.

\* \* \* \* \*

A long and grueling hike later, a trip that had depleted his physical stamina and tried his soul, and Gralam faced Avice the Enchantress.

A day's distance in no way reduced her impact upon him.

Her presence shook him, reduced him to a quivering mass of confusions. Unsure of himself and his view of the world, he could only stare silently at her.

Lame and struck mute -- certainly not the best of ways to present himself.

Weakness made for a feeble self-defense. But a *show* of weakness? Now, that was unforgivable. Confronting this witch with anything less than the strength of Christian conviction and lordly imperative would undermine his already tenuous position on the moors and thereby endanger the people he ruled.

In an effort to paint a mien of nonchalance, he smoothed a hand over the quality goods of his wool cloak.

He preferred a nondescript manner of dress. Why wear cheery colors when naught about life cheered him, particularly not of late? Of late, he had taken to grooming himself with a dark seriousness that reflected his dark state of thought. Although -- today, he *had* taken grave care over the selection of that dark wardrobe, picking every serious item of apparel to impress a certain witch.

Avice the Enchantress had taken no such similar pains over her own toilette.

Obviously, she considered him unworthy of impressing. Her shabby linen undertunica, indeterminate in color, the tone closer to mud than to the sky, fitted in the barbaric Anglo-Saxon style, with long sleeves that clung to the wrists. As if in afterthought, over this, she had pulled on a much-worse-for-wear gunna. The garment should have fitted closely, but alas hung so loose, her shape remained all but indecipherable. What was more, the sleeves flapped like the wings of a bird to her elbow. As was the custom, she had drawn the right side of her atrocious tunica up under a belt. Scratches and assorted scars confirmed the leather band at her tiny waist had seen better days. Thankfully, the cinch lacked the deplorable embroidered stitches with which women in this heathen country usually adorned

themselves. A starched headdress completed the standard peasant ensemble. Regretfully, the stiffened white linen piously hid her fair hair from view.

A pious witch, imagine that! Now, *there* was irony!

Interesting and telling, too, that she had worn no head covering the previous eve. Mayhap then, she had in mind seduction but had since given up on the enterprise?

No use second-guessing her motivation. Incongruous, to say the least, for a witch to bother with a coif at any time.

Gralam mentally slapped a palm to his forehead. Egad! But of course! To avoid detection as a witch, she doubtlessly followed certain prescribed rules of conformity, of propriety. To save her pretty skin from the fires, she would need to pass as a pious dameisele in the village. And, apparently, even here on these hideous moors.

A relief, these pagans not openly espousing witchcraft. A relief, the witch's nod to Christian conventionalism ...

Relief? Why should he feel relived? He was overlord here! These people did what he told them to do!

What, pray, should he tell them to do? Was he up to the task? What did a man of war know of peace?

*Agh!* Here he was again, full circle, back to a quivering mass of conflictions!

And that would never do.

He must deal with those he ruled from a position of unquestioned strength. No ambivalences. No ambiguities. No inner discord. A man with no self-doubt.

As soon as he determined how to achieve that end, he would be that man.

## Chapter Four

To lighten the strain on his useless leg, Gralam shifted his stance, a subtle rebalancing of weight from one hip to the other, the corners of his black cloak hiding his increasingly tight grip on the walking stick.

His injured knee throbbed like Hades.

Nevertheless, conscious the Enchantress would interpret any sign of fatigue as an inlet to control, he feigned a powerful bearing, the haughty manner an overlord would impose upon a truculent and subservient peasant audience.

Little good a mask of indifferent superiority did him! The brazen tart tilted her haughty chin up at him and stared him down, as if he were a crippled pauper, beggarly cup in hand.

“Here to pay me a visit, then?”

She asked the question as if he had a decision to make, as if this were a social call! What choice did he have, save to come to these damnable moors? Her spell had commandeered his presence!

He remained resolutely silent. This differed tremendously from her striking him mute. This time, he had consciously decided to employ a stratagem, and that stratagem consisted of ignoring a question posed by a person of inferior status. Thus, would he show her that answering her fell beneath him.

The witch rolled right along, anyway. “Gladdened I be to see ye, as I have an offer to make ye.”

“What sort of offer?”

“Oh! So ye can speak! I had begun to wonder.” She grinned hugely. “As to me offer -- ye shall soon see.”

Good Lord! He had jumped at her suggestion like a fish at the bait! Where was his lordly mien now?

Hanging onto the shards of his dignity, Gralam clenched his jaw against the relentless pain racing up and down the back of his leg. As an antidote, he braced his spine. "Regardless of the terms, I shan't accept any offer from you." Not even if the witch offered him an insight into future politics or a cure for his limp!

Only to get his mind off his discomfort, he stealthily contemplated her lips, full and rosy, and slightly parted. Situated within, flashed very nice, very even, very white teeth. She must use a hazel twig to clean them, he mused, as a means of diverting himself from the agony of a kneecap that refused to bend. How would those very nice, very even, very white, very clean teeth feel upon his flesh? Sunk into a shoulder, perhaps. Or, the inside of a thigh -

-

Or around his thick cock.

At the imagery, his staff burgeoned from the retracted foreskin, the head already dripping with seed. Would her wide rosy mouth accommodate his girth?

Only to distance himself from his wobbly stance, the instability of his posture due to his slightly lopsided carriage, which in turn was due to his increasingly withered limb, Gralam concentrated on the topic of fellatio.

Would she kiss him with those rosy lips? Run her agile tongue down his length? Would she suckle him? Softly? Strenuously? At resolution, would she swallow his cum?

No woman had ever swallowed his cum. Not even the whores he paid. Even doxies had qualms.

And sensitive gag reflexes.

When erect, his size measured large. Correspondingly, the receiving throat would have to measure long.

Avice the Enchantress possessed a swan-like throat, a lovely throat, a graceful throat, a pale throat in startling contrast to his own Norman warrior's darkness --

A hell of a L-O-N-G throat.

Only to deflect his attention from his knotted leg muscles, he speculated on the fit.

He would guess, because he had no true factual experience in the area, that outward appearances had very little to do with actual performance. He supposed the successful conclusion of the act would depend upon a female's scruples ...

And how desperately she needed the recompense. After all, what female went to her knees for the enjoyment of the view?

As a witch, Avice would own few scruples. Was she also poor enough of purse to countenance orally pleasuring a man of his daunting proportions?

Of course, all this speculation was purely hypothetical, a means to remove his attention from the unrelenting pain. In fear of dire consequences, naturally, he would never trust his cock between her clean, white, perfect ... *sharp* ... teeth. Witches had been known to drop all manner of strange items in their boiling cauldrons.

His lurid and grizzly reflections came to an abrupt end.

Avice had just taken a step in his direction. Not the fey footfall of a supernatural being. Nor the mincing gait of a noblewoman. Nor the lazy ambulation of a peasant. She had taken a singularly forceful stride, a step in startling divergence from her previous eventide's coy sensuality.

Her forthrightness brought them nose-to-nose. In that close positioning, she slipped her pale hand inside his dark cloak. Slender fingers landed on his chest, lifting and falling with the wild beating of his heart.

This was twice now she had touched him, freely touched him, without any reservation. Inappropriate in the extreme for a peasant to take such liberties with a nobleman's person!

Unprepared for the familiarity, an incredible rush of heat spilled o'er him and he staggered.

Thankfully, she took no note of his weakness, but only repeated her question of the last eventide. "Who be ye?"

He offered up his prepared response, the one he had mulled o'er the whole night through. "I am a Norman nobleman, and your overlord."

She laughed full out. "None of those superficial titles apply here on the moors. Here on the moors, ye be but a man." Her forehead puckered. "What kind of man, though?"

A man whom spies from the House of Wessex watched at every turn; their suspicious eyes bored holes in his back. One misstep and he was a man who would find himself sailing back to no place in particular, exiled due to politics. Either that, or a hunting accident -- a fatal error in a Bowman's aim -- would bury him here on this blighted foreign soil. In either event, he was a man lost.

Her lips found him. And her tongue, warm and welcoming, supple and sweet, led him into her mouth.

He plummeted into madness. Moaning, his control slipping, he raised his arms, as if to ward her off --

Instead, his fingers fixed on her thin shoulders, where they spastically clenched, a drowning man seeking purchase on anything afloat, including the very circumstance that had flung him in the water in the first place.

How had this happened? How was it that he would reach for her, would grab onto her, crunching her drab brown tunic between his fingers, when, if anything, the witch would sink him rather than lend him buoyancy?

No matter the hows and whys, he opened to her. Not only to her mouth, not only to her kiss. To her assertion. Following wherever she would take him. To exile, to death by arrow, to a little death -- *la petite mort* -- inside her woman's body.

Ere his accident, when he could still function as a man, could cock a woman well and truly, rarely did he give himself over to mindless orgasm. Unthinkable to let go.

With her, he did. He groaned, full out, naught suppressed.

"Mmm," she responded in kind.

Her soft appreciative murmurings bounced against his teeth and echoed against his throat. Giving him no opportunity whatsoever to digest what was happening, to dissect and analyze this improbable occurrence, she wrapped her slender arms about his neck and squeezed him tight. Her weight, as insignificant as a butterfly, nevertheless caused him significant distress. Her small pointed breasts first teased his chest, and then sealed to his chest, the dainty mounds flattening against his cloak. Had she no discretion whatsoever? And where had his own discretion gone?

Immediately, he imagined her breasts naked. Surely, because of the way they felt against him, her breasts would be conical in shape, the nipples high and hard, tight buds -- not small buds, *large* buds -- of a less than innocent hue. As to the rest of her --

Her overly large gunna hid much, not, however, her long torso and slim build. He suspected she possessed long, strong legs to match her long and forceful stride. He suspected her belly rose flat above a nest of flaxen curls, a thatch that would draw his eyes to the wetness within.

Gralam shook his head. What ailed him! Why wonder about such unseemly details? The time, the circumstances, the very law of this appalling land, would crush the passion from any interlude started here this night. And yet ... and yet ... the very precariousness of the situation sparked his desire.

Or, so he told himself.

In truth, he needed no additional spark. From their first encounter, she had lit his fire. He wanted her. Plain and simple, and as hot as a burning flame.

Dear Lord in Heaven! His carnal thoughts involved a female who had openly professed to sorcery. If he had not a care for himself, what of her?

As a by-blow of spying on him, should noble cutthroats happen upon Avice's witch activities, she would have no option of exile, no swift death at the end of an arrow. Slowly, agonizingly, she would burn for heresy o'er a bundle of sticks.

And not dry wood either. Green wood. Faggots that would smolder long ere igniting. A death that would take forever and last an eternity. If not for his sake, for her sake, he must end the embrace!

He tried to back up, tried to dislodge his lips from hers.

And failed. Miserably.



Naught new there. Apart from killing, he had always failed.

He brushed his killer's knuckles along the elegant line of her jaw. Roughened from the weather, coarsened from the daily -- not weekly -- scrapings of his sharp blade, his cheeks would surely scratch her silky textured skin --

He must needs take care, he thought, and kept kissing her. Sinking his mouth into her clean-scented mouth, he kissed her. Could not stop kissing her!

Why?

The cantrip again. Why else? A spell explained his inability to break free.

In the end, she, not he, broke their lips apart and stepped away. "Well, Gralam. *Ahem*. My, my, *my*."

The last, she purred like a cat, and just like a cat, her tongue came out and licked her upper lip. He tried to glance away. But that pink tongue of hers pulled his eyes back.

"What else do ye hide beneath that cool exterior of yers, Norman?"

Shaken, he spoke unguardedly. "I am poison to you."

"Witches have curative knowledge."

On his one good leg, he held firm. "Not from the vipers that slither about me."

She chuckled. "My bag of tricks contains an entire host of serums against snakes of every description, even royal venom." She leaned into him again, and her lips moistened his ear. "I say, we beat the tall grass with your walking stick and bring the fangs out into the open, so we might dispose of the pests!"

"Chop off one viper's head," he said dourly, "and a new head only replaces it."

"Eye of newt!" She shuddered. "What be all this talk of slithering snakes, anyway? One would think ye a wizard." She raised a jaunty brow. "Alas, though ye kiss like magic, ye be no mage -- I ken all the wizards on the moors."

"Who are these wizards? I command you, name names!"

"'Twas but a tease," she replied with a wide grin. "Surely ye must tease from time to time."

"Not of late," he grumbled. "For a Norman, this is a hazardous place and these are dire times."

"All the more need for jocularidad." She crossed her eyes, stuck her thumbs at the level of her linen-covered ears, and gave the remaining eight fingers a wiggle.

God help him, he guffawed.

The unexpectedness of the rumble shot his good leg out from out of him, leaving him to totter like a babe learning to walk.

She reached out to steady his wobble. "Allow me to help ye --"

He shook off her assistance. "Nay, Christ help me!" The irreverent oath -- the fervent prayer -- hung suspended between them. "I am a lord of Edward's court. More importantly, I am Christian."

"So? Keep to yer papist leanings." She bit his earlobe, and not at all gently, and his eyes closed -- better to savor her very nice, very even, very white, very clean, teeth. "All of us, from time to time, must lean on a crutch."

"Some more oft than others."

She gasped. "I meant naught untoward by that remark. I see only strength when I see ye, and I have been watching ye from afar for quite awhile now."

He pounced. "So you do admit to spying. Tell me, I command you, to whom do you report? The House of Wessex?"

She tssked. "A pig's arse, the House of Wessex! As if I would e'er besmirch meself with *their* ilk. Gralam, please to listen." She took a breath. "I admit to voyeurism, not spying. Carnality, not royal scheming, provokes my observation -- though, I can serve ye politically, as well." She winked. "At present, let us concentrate on the personal. Later, we take on the kingdom."

"Little heretic! What do you take me for -- a jackanapes? A traitor to the crown? Think you, a lord would accept political help from a pagan witch? Think you, a lord would consult a scheming sorceress to advance himself?"

"Aye to all counts -- if ye be a *wise* lord. Only a fool would turn down such an offer. Let us face realities. Like the circumstance or dislike the circumstance, ye need me. Heed me well here. Ye will not last on these shores all on yer own, not in yer desperate straits. Normans have fallen into mortal disfavor, and not only on the moors."

An understatement.

Her argument, one with which he could hardly disagree, shot his remaining leg out from under him. With naught left to stand on, he pitched forward.

After she righted him, he stumbled away.

The witch called gaily after him. "Until the morrow, then?"

She controlled his every move. Must she taunt him too?

Due to a cantrip, he had no choice *but* to make the long trip to the moors for a third eve in a row.

## Chapter Five

Avice had just hung the last bunch of chamomile to dry from the ceiling rafters when a knock resounded at her cottage portal.

"Elizabeth, do come in," she said, answering the summons, but quietly, so as not to jar the wincing patient. "The headache again?"

Hugh Bartlett's eldest daughter nodded. "Da sent me o'er for another fix."

"Is yer flux due, then?"

"Aye. Curse it for a bother!"

"Mark me words, someday, the curse will become a blessing."

Elizabeth rubbed her temples. "Ne'er! Each month I dread me woman's time, I do. This pain in me skull comes as regularly as the rag."

"Ah -- but no bloody visitor portends another visitor in nine full moons."

"What mean ye?"

"A babe," Avice explained.

When the motherless Elizabeth still looked at her blankly, Avice spelled out nature's consequences. "Opening yer legs to laughing Nill Elliott's swollen member might well produce a swollen belly."

Her patient blinked. "Go on with ye now! Open me legs! For Nill's *thing*? What do ye take me for -- a dullard? What maid would e'er want to do *that*?"

"Ye, when passion rules. Or when ye wed. Whichever comes first."

Elizabeth looked guiltily down at her hands. "I do love him so! But if we wed, where would we live? My father's house resembles a toadstool, as does the wee cottage Nill shares with his parents and nine younger brothers and sisters."

A typical story. One overlord after another had reaped the benefits of moor peat, whilst neglecting the basic needs of those who harvested the mosses for fuel and fertilizer. An oppressor was an oppressor, only the language differed from one to the other. None had cared enough about moor folk to see to their creature comforts, like having proper roofs o'er their bowed heads.

Avice refrained from offering sympathy in favoring of dispensing practical advice. "Just mind ye, keep laughing Nill from ye woman's passage, until such a time as ye can wed. And then, someday, when ye do find yerself in a family way, these fluxy headaches will disappear like magic. Until that day comes, take a leaf or two of these."

Avice reached to her sorting table and handed her patient a small bag of feverfew leaves picked fresh that morn ere the plant bloomed. "Though the plant boasts only a plain blossom, the foliage cures the megrims. As an added advantage, a leaf rubbed directly on exposed flesh will keep bees, and therefore beestings, away." She winked. "Too bad, the herb has no such impact on laughing men, eh? So -- this is what ye do. When Nill turns on the charm, use ye hand on him. Or yer mouth."

"And what of me? When I turn me charm on him, do I get a similar boon?"

No dullard, indeed, rather Elizabeth had a good head upon her shoulders, as well as a healthy respect for her own self worth. "Aye, that ye do. Demand Nill return the favor of his hand or mouth on ye."

After sending a much better informed Elizabeth on her way, the megrims cure in her pouch, Avice returned to her plant drying, done in preparation of dying cloth.

Though more difficult to accomplish, she favored dying wools and flax neutral tones rather than the more commonly used bright hues. As a witch who practiced healing and midwifery, she was oft times up to her elbows in blood and guts, and so preferred wearing cloth that better hid the grime of her profession. Also, bright colors had a marked tendency to agitate her patients when she wanted them soothed. Earth tones blended into the surroundings and ne'er jarred with nature. Blending into her surroundings came in handy whilst gathering unsanctioned witch herbs.

Gathering witch herbs. One of the many tasks she had left to accomplish ere Gram's visit that eventide.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gram arrived at his destination winded and sore.

Again.

When would he regain the strength in his leg? When would his stamina return?

Aggravated, due to his windedness and soreness, he immediately went on the attack. Like an arrow from a quiver, he launched his frustration at the witch. "I have made the trek to the moors thrice now, and you have yet to reveal where you live."

“And a good eventide to ye too,” Avice the Enchantress replied. “’Tis fine weather for a stroll.”

For a stroll, aye. But heedless of his infirmity, he had raced. His haste in journeying to the moors had taxed his limited endurance, leaving him admittedly cranky. “Do you, perchance, live under the roots of a tree?”

“That would be elves, Gralam. Without exception, witches prefer an aboveground abode.”

He lifted a brow. “And where would I find this aboveground abode?”

“Ah, what a cleverly put question! Though hardly fair.”

“How so?”

“Why should I answer ye when ye have yet to answer me?”

“What did you ask?” He shook his head. “I recall no question.”

“I asked after yer character.”

*Not that again!* “Your harping wears thin.”

“Oh, la! Three days courting, and already the bloom be off the rose of our romance.”

“We have no romance! I am not courting you.” The very idea of a lord courting a witch was utterly absurd. Completely preposterous. And in this particular instance, lethally dangerous to both parties concerned.

Her lush mouth tightened into a moue. “And what be that kiss all about, then, if not a respectable courtship?”

“A dreadful mistake.” Made as a direct result of her enchantment!

She sighed theatrically. “I tell ye, I be crushed! ’Twould appear yer leading me on. Dancing me straight down the primrose path. And here I thought yer intentions be honorable and aboveboard.”

“They are!”

“So ye do admit to calling on me?”

“How would I do so, when *I know not where you live*,” he growled tersely, giving in to his physical distress. “Whereas you know where I reside.”

“Difficult to miss yer pig-shit-high fortress, Gralam.”

Her language! Warriors used weapons that produced less filthy a cut. And yet, rather than put him off, her tongue drew him in.

As it had the previous eve. Her tongue had slid in and out of his mouth, the naughty tip deeply piercing the interior.

To counteract the memory -- he gave a stiff rebuke. “That fortress you disdain protects the populace of the moors.”

“Now there be a belly of pig-wind expulsion, if e’er I heard one. That fortress has subjugated moor folk for more years than I care to recall.” Her hands rode her hips. “If ye have come here to argue, piggin’ well turn yer noble arse about and return to yer royal pile of rocks and mud up on the hill.”

*Ha!* As if, she would allow him to leave! “A garderobe is cleaner than your words.”

“Truth is, Gralam, ye desire me, foul language and all. During our kiss, yer lips contained an inordinate amount of suction.”

Ridiculous assertion, that! Yes, the kiss had been somewhat eager -- he would make her no denial there. Naturally, as in any man who had just returned to potency, the kiss had triggered a stronger than usual physical reaction. He would admit to that much, and naught else. The kiss had certainly not contained an *inordinate* amount of suction!

And would she please, *please* kiss him again, just to confirm the impression?

Her nose twitched, her forehead squinched, her dark brows -- in striking contract to the remembered fairness of her tresses -- arched like twin church spires, the peaks pricking the bottom of her white linen coif. That damnable coif hid her starlit strands --

Only to satisfy a very mild curiosity, only to test his recall, only to see if the shade was as fair as he could not seem to forget, no matter how hard he tried, he rasped, “Your coif! Remove the linen at once!”

He regretted the harshly abrasive tone of the directive, which was due to his parched throat, his thirst due to his race to the moors, his impatience due to her cantrip summons. His coarse vocal cords had naught at all to do with his lancing cock.

“In a pig’s eye, I remove me coif! Yer no nobleman here on these moors. Ask me nice, ye insufferable pig bladder. We are piggin’ conducting a romance here, after all.”

“We are not conducting anything of the kind!” he shouted. He rarely raised his voice, rarely lost his equanimity. He always deported himself as a lord of the realm should! How was it she managed to get under his skin so quickly?

The cantrip again.

Taking back his courtesy, for manners were a sign of self-control, he bowed. “If you would please remove your head covering?”

“More piggin’ like it!”

After dispensing with the linen cap, the witch shook out her hair, which tumbled past her shoulders to artfully fan her back. The ends curled at the first swell of her round bottom, an *inordinately* round bottom, to be precise. At least, in comparison to the rest of her.

He sighed his pleasure.

Then frowned darkly. Such a slip of a female to have so much power o’er him!

“Bug up yer arse?”

Had she asked him to bugger her arse?

The thought of his cock going anywhere near her lushly rounded posterior sent him into a full-fledged erection. He could make her no answer.

“Well, Gralam, I would say ye do most assuredly have a bug up yer arse concerning the matter of me domicile!”

“Which is located where?” he countered, finally finding his voice.

She flapped her arms about like a bird. “I shall tell ye this piggin’ much and no more than this piggin’ much. I live where I can help those who require me help, and they find their way to me through word-of-mouth.”

She had actually answered a question! Now, they were getting somewhere! And he had more questions where that one came from, such as:

Did she perchance inspire others in treachery? Revolt? More importantly, did the House of Wessex employ her as a murderous ambassador? Just because she claimed she was no spy did not make it so ...

She must have some sinister reason for calling him to her, night after night! One slip of that barbed tongue of hers and he might learn the plot of his destruction, and thereby stay alive --

And remain here on the moors.

A ghastly thought, that!

Apart from death or an exile to God only knew where, what alternative did he have save to stay and try to make something of himself here on these blasted bogs?

No choice.

In light of his limited options, he would draw out the witch, as she drew him in. Tit for tat. He would appeal to her vanity. Denigrate her occupation, and she would jump to defend herself. Inadvertently, she might just reveal her ulterior motive behind her cantrip, which in turn would give him insight into how he might rid himself of her.

## Chapter Six

Despite the spike of agony pounding his leg, Gralam forced out a question. "What sort of help do you provide your witch's clientele?" He snickered. "Love potions?"

"For the most part, I deal in maladies. Bodily ailments and sick spirits, problems for which there be a solution. If a lovelorn person requests a potion to mend a broken heart or to force caring onto another, I explain no words or herbs will perform that service. That love be a magic unto itself."

Fine words. Even poetical words.

That told him naught substantial.

He needed to ferret out her involvement in the current political conspiracy afoot, a plan that called for the murder or exile of all Normans -- a lame Norman in particular.

"How interesting!" His enthusiasm, though disingenuous, contained an element of unabashed curiosity. "You must tell me more about those who seek you out."

Her green eyes sparkled. "Since you have asked so politely, I offer this up as an example: Whilst practicing midwifery, I have seen far too many unwanted babes brought into these moors, with no way to feed them, ne'er mind the luxury of loving them. Since couples cannot marry, not in the present conditions on the moors, I council them in means to avoid conception."

Oh, she was building herself a heretic's bonfire here. He would see if she would ignite the wood. "What ways, pray?"

"From male withdrawal to the part female cycles play in fertility to the use of herbs and other barrier methods to prevent a babe from taking root."

She straightened her shoulders, her pointed chin jutted. "Ye may add unnatural interference with birth to my tally of misdeeds. One alone would earn me a trip to the fire."



How true. But ah, she was a tricky one! No doubt, she thought an additional admittance of guilt would create a screen of smoke around her political activities. Too bad for her, he was onto her ruse! She had not allayed his suspicions, only deepened them.

In the same manner that a liar who told the truth some of the time was believed most of the time by the majority, so too was a man who spoke his mind some of the time, but not all of the time, believed by the majority.

He would dance around her as she had danced around him that first eventide. “Knowing I can order you a death sentence, why tell me aught about your misdeeds?”

“How better to prove me trust? By placing meself at the discretion of yer punishment, in yer hands, as ’twere, I prove me confidence in yer justice.”

He smiled coolly. “Not entirely in my hands, though, are you? For how would I find you without a location?” He snapped his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “*Tut, tut.* Your secrecy concerning your domicile shows a distinct lack of trust.”

“Secrecy is necessary to guard the safety and anonymity of those who use me services, not to protect meself.” She shook her head woefully. “Light the torch at me feet, if ye will. I shan’t run from ye, or from yer judgment.”

What was the damnable witch up to?

No way to know for sure. Not until she made her move against him. So -- he would bide his time, wait her out, *find her out*, ere the witch *sold him out* to his enemies.

Tension always intensified the throbbing in his leg muscles. Now proved no exception. The knot of agony had quickly approached the intolerable level.

Under cover of his cloak, Gralam began a discreet kneading of his wool-encased thigh, hoping to loosen the ache.

He should leave. Go off alone and, like a wounded animal, lick his injury in private --

At the thought of departing, an anguished groan escaped his clenched teeth.

“Is aught amiss?” she asked.

He responded grudgingly, “I am in pain.”

“A fine start.”

“To what, pray?”

“To answering me question as to the kind of man ye be. As ye appear used to suffering in silence, I would say ye be a stoical man.”

Some unidentifiable emotion crossed her features. The expression disappeared when she dropped to the moss at his feet. “Ye should have said something ere now.” She felt about his leg, her fingers searching. “Drop yer braies.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Braies -- drop them. Chausses too.”

“I most certainly shall not!”

“Continue to stand on yer arrogant conceit and ye will likely fall on yer self-important Norman arse!”

After this outburst, she looked up at him from under her lashes. “No call standing on ceremony with me. No call standing a’tall. Please to remove yer garb and lie on the ground.”

“Thank you, but I prefer to remain standing. And fully garbed.”

“Modest, eh? Well, let me assure ye,” she said, rubbing his leg, “I have seen a fair share of naked males in me time and, save for a few variations on the same theme, after seeing one pretty pillicock, ye have pretty much seen them all.”

“Spoken by one who has not had the pleasure of seeing *my* pretty ... er ... you know!” Years of inbred courtesy prohibited uncouth language. Such inhibitions were not easily dispensed, especially not when in the presence of a female. Though the witch was most certainly not a lady, strict standards of behavior must still be observed.

He smiled tightly. “And ere repeating yourself -- in this instance, my arrogant conceit is well deserved.”

Strange, how he enjoyed their repartee -- even in the face of pain.

After muttering *pig’s this or pig’s that* under her breath, the witch performed a graceful manipulation of his leg. Her fingers flexed and released with surprising strength and dexterity, considering the daintiness of her hand. In a trice, like damnable magic, the cramping in his leg subsided and then disappeared altogether.

With the absence of pain, his morose mood lifted, his thought processes cleared. He broached the worrisome topic of the unfathomable people he ruled. “You mentioned *present conditions on the moors* that would prevent a male and female from wedding -- What did you mean by that statement?”

“Ye really wish to hear?”

He bristled at her disbelieving tone. Who was she to fault his credence! That boot plainly belonged on *her* foot, not his. “Would I ask otherwise?”

She shrugged. “Some overlords might, to feign a show of interest where none existed.”

He cut her short. “For reasons I refuse to go into, I need you people as much, if not more, than you need me. I wish to succeed here on the moors.”

She slid back onto her shapely haunches, looked up at him without guile. “Do ye now?”

“Aye. I do. Now. No children anywhere should go to bed hungry. Neither should their parents, nor anyone else, for that matter. I mean to correct the situation. In fact, alleviating hunger is my first order of business here on the moors.”

She jilted her lovely jaw to profile and gazed off into the distant horizon.

Whilst she digested his response, he took the opportunity to stare.

At that long, pale throat poised in breathtaking relief against the bell-shaped, purple flowers of the heathers.

Her throat. Her throat. Her throat obsessed him.

He watched her swallowing with envy. Would that he had the same ability!

Eventually, she turned her attention back to him and launched into an explanation of his prior question. "Because fertile farming land be scarce," she began, "young couples on the moors cannot strike out on their own, but must need remain living with their parents and brothers and sisters under one roof, in severely crowded conditions. The prospect of too many mouths to feed and not enough food to go 'round and no privacy whatsoever dims many a marriage prospect. This leads to bastard children."

"Farming land scarce?" He digested her words. "But my holdings here are vast! There are thousands of arpents on which to farm."

"And those arpents be filled with forests and burnt down homesteads, and pastures too choked with weeds to till, whilst other plots be o'er-used and planted out."

"And the people?"

"Hopeless. Too despondent to think beyond the day in which they toil from sunup to sunset, with naught to show for it at the end, save an empty belly."

Gralam wrinkled his brow in thought. "I see --"

"I doubt it."

"I hear your anguish. Changes will be made! Or rather, *I* shall make changes."

"So ye say. So they all say. In the beginning. And then the overlords collect their tithes and turn their backs on us." She gave a bawdy wink, her hand hovering at the inseam of his braies. "Aught else I can do for ye whilst on me knees?"

Did she mean what he thought she meant?

She did! As a witch, by definition, she was a degenerate. His cock leapt at the form her degeneracy would take.

That he actually considered having her, a *witch*, perform such an act, had him stumbling weakly backwards.

He stared at her disproportionately round bottom, at her elegantly long throat, whilst acknowledging his former mistake: Her hair was almost transparent, highly unusual and far prettier than starlight.

That is, if one cared for that sort of thing.

He, himself, favored raven-haired beauties, with not much in the way of bottoms or throats. Good and decent Christian ladies who only sank to their knees to pray and would never suggest otherwise --

"I must go now," he muttered darkly.

"Until the morrow!" she called brightly as he fled.

## Chapter Seven

Swinging her milking pail, Avice set out to tend to her afternoon chores. The metal container in her hand clanged when she bumped into a rather large obstruction in her path.

Martin.

“Himself dropped by whilst I slopped hogs this morn,” the giant offered, propping a massive shoulder against the cottage’s exterior wall.

Eyeing the swaying house timbers, she asked, “*Himself?* Himself who?”

“The Norman you queried me about.”

To hide the fact that her mouth had gone to full gape ... and to hide her secret life from Martin ... Avice reached behind her and closed the open portal at her back. As a farmer and a devout Christian, her friend would recognize the assortment of herbs spread out on her trestle table and vex o’er why a healer would have need of witch’s plants.

What the giant knew naught about would keep him safe.

Even here on the moors, where all persuasions openly sought out her cunning folk skills, she followed a prudent course in regards to her craft. Why fuel a fire that would sear her flesh?

Giving no one reason to suspect her of supernatural activity protected her, the patient, and all the moors from the royal torch. Words held their own special brand of magic, and so she had ne’er named herself as a witch to anyone.

Save Gralam of Normandy.

Gralam had hit the nail squarely on the head about eyes watching his every move. By default, those spying eyes might see her, as well. Royal witch hunters from the House of Wessex and elsewhere would dearly love to get their hypocritical clutches into her! Good Christians from miles around would finger their rosary beads as she burned --

Martin was not like that; Martin lived what he preached. He had not a hypocritical bone in his huge body.

Portal firmly closed, her secret life tucked neatly away, Avice faced her best friend once more. "The Lord of Normandy?" she said, schooling her voice to show only a modicum of interest. "How did he find ye? And why seek ye out?"

"He found me through his belly. Up at the keep, who cooks for him everyday but me very own sister-in-law --"

Agnes. Of course! A woman generous with her advice ... whether asked for or not.

She rubbed her nape, willing the tension away.

"Hold on, Avice. Ye will get a kink in yer neck from straining to look up at me." That said, her caring ... and observant Martin ... took a giant step back. "As to the why -- when the lord inquired after farmers with new opinions about crops and such, Agnes volunteered me name. Posthaste, Lord Gralam's personal guards arrived at me brother's place and escorted me up to the keep, where the overlord, polite as can be, mind ye, listened to me rave on and on about the need to increase produce, the means of which I expounded upon o'er a fine tankard of mead." Martin gave her a self-satisfied grin. "What do ye have to say about *that*, Avice?"

"Depends on what ye told him."

"I told him amending soil with manure and peat was not nearly enough. That farmers needed to implement crop rotations and fields needed to go fallow for two or three growing seasons, so as not to further exhaust the land. And himself asked what else would help, to which I replied, that absolutely, clearing additional forested land would help, as would the building of more cottages and the renovation of existing homesteads."

"And --" she said, prodding the giant to proceed.

"And -- himself said he would order woodsmen to start felling trees and carpenters to start hammering, to which I replied something on the order of 'Praise Be' to which himself nodded his head in agreement."

*A pig's diddly!* She could not believe her ears! A Norman overlord actually listening to one of his slaves? An arrogant lord actually taking a serf's advice?

Gralam was turning out to be a man of vast contradictions. Reserved and cool, yet he kissed hot and freely; his tongue had voluptuously caressed her tongue --

And, when he thought she would fail to notice, he had stared at her throat.

Her arse too.

Whilst having full knowledge of what he desired, she also understood his desire was not predicated on a want of her, specifically, but on a want for general congress. Fair starved for carnality after his impotency, a loss of virility she had imposed, why the man would have rutted with a ... with a ...

Avice tilted her jaw, imagining the worst possible scenario.

And she had it! So starved for congress was Gralam, he would have rutted with a witch! Suddenly, Avice understood the form her recompense to the Norman must take.

Her mind made up, she smiled serenely at Martin. "I am so proud of ye."

The giant glowed with pride and excitement. All because of Gralam. Later, she would say an incantation that the Norman would not disappoint her folk --

Even if he did, she still meant to right the wrong she had done him. She would follow through regardless, for her debt to the overlord was unconditional.

"This new lord will make changes on the moors that will benefit one and all," Martin said with the conviction of the pure at heart.

Her heart was not as pure. "Well, my dear friend, we shall soon see if deed follows brag." Her milking pail swinging to-and-fro, Avice waved a farewell at the giant and then got on about her chores.

\* \* \* \* \*

Walking stick clutched in his hand, Gralam rounded the last grove of trees and entered the moors.

Upon seeing that the witch had already arrived, he closed the distance between them with undue haste, his hooded glance fixed on her beauty, significant despite another faded gunna, which hung like a sack on her thin shoulders. His misfortune that no atrocious garb could quell the piquant loveliness of her face, the comely features even now animated with lively interest. Why could a witch with a warty nose not have laid her enchantment on him? At least then, he might have had an easier time breaking the spell.

As he watched her, so too did she watch him, the wide green eyes holding his narrowed eyes, assessing him as he assessed her. She seemed to shadow his every thought, his every deed.

Did he measure up?

Ere his injury -- all his life -- he had never measured up. Not to his father's expectations. Not to his own aspirations. This Godforsaken boil on the realm's hindquarters was his last chance to make something of himself, to do something worthwhile with his life. Constant battling and unrelenting bloodletting had not satisfied his ambition for peace.

Did she find him accomplished, he wondered.

Damnation! Why should he care what she thought of him?

He was her lord and master, she his lowly peasant subject. Avice the Enchantress should endeavor to please him, not the other way 'round!

Unfortunately, she did please him. Too much so. Her narrow nose, haughtier than any queen, breathed the same peat and heather-scented air as he. No henbane this night, he

noticed, his nostrils flaring. No other witchy herb either could he detect lingering on the breeze. The night contained only the scent of Avice.

She tilted the stark line of her jaw, the graceful action lengthening her already long throat. A toss of her head released a tendril of fair hair from her coif. The strand skimmed her shoulders, windswept and wondrous. Oh, but her cantrip held him powerfully this eve!

Just as he had done in combat, he hiked his defenses.

The witch broke right through his raised shield. "Ye desire me, Gralam."

"How much do you charge?" he asked, coolly. These sorts of negotiations always came down to payment.

Her full lips puckered. "For a fuck, ye mean?"

He cringed. No lady of his acquaintance had ever used that term to describe fornication. Whores even endeavored to turn the bestial into the divine --

Not the witch. She referred to the act with no more sensitivity than any other bodily function.

"Exactly," he replied outwardly calm, inside a boiling cauldron.

"Not even a kingly fortune can buy me." Her lips plumped. "Ye, however, may have me for naught more than a wish."

Oh, she spouted grandiose nonsense about helping him. But why would a witch, a notoriously self-serving lot, show him benevolence, act altruistically ... give him what he needed free of charge?

Nay, she would not!

He knew a ruse when he heard one. So, he would pay for her body. No obligation. No pretense of affection. Naught to remind him of the harlot, save a somewhat lighter money pouch.

The Cyclops concurred with the fine idea.

Regardless of her words, he reached deep into his pouch, scooped out the precious metal. "I always pay prostitutes. What will that buy me?" He tossed her the piece of gold.

A few steps forward, and she was catching her purchase price mid-flight. A quick closing of her fingers, and she had tucked their transaction away inside a seam of her shabby attire. "The gold buys ye naught, however --" Another forward step taken by the forward wench, and she was squeezing a hand between the tight press of their bodies, her palm lightly playing o'er his engorged loins. "-- henceforth, ye may have everything ye wish and in every way."

A moment ago saw him floundering in murky waters. He swam in the clear sea of understanding now. As gold had passed from his hand to hers, magic had changed into mercenary.

"My, my, my! Yer wood be a veritable log!" She dropped her glance to the one-eyed Titan. Through the heated blaze of what should have been cold commerce, he heard her say, "If the cut of yer timber be any indication, ye wish an *enormous* amount from me."

"Nay, I shan't," he replied, heavy-tongued, the thickness of the lie mocking him even as the thickness of his monstrous erection mocked him. "All I require from you is penetration."

"Have it yer way!" She smirked. "No need to split piggin' hairs. Forsooth! I well understand." She kicked off her boots.

Absently, he noted that holes had purloined the leather from the soles. Due to his rising lust, he would have noted a hole in his head just as absently.

"Nice to be needed for something," she said.

Once again, he disagreed. He did *not* need her! Christ's bones and his hurting boner too, she had taken the wrong road to reach the right destination.

Aye, he needed a woman, *any* woman. Galling, a witch was the closest woman at hand. He could not have asked for a more disreputable bed companion had he gone a-whoring on the docks of Hell.

Still, with several issues to prove -- that he could get it up, keep it up, and lose a twelvemonth abstinence in the bargain -- he gave his paid doxie the prompt. "O'er there, against the rock. Tunica and gunna to the belly, thighs spread." He held his breath lest she refuse. "And remove the coif."

"Do ye take me from the front or from the back," she countered.

"That would depend upon your level of experience." There! His studied distancing matched her matter-of-fact frankness exactly.

Her voice turned cagey. "What matter experience?"

"Do you actually have the temerity to claim a maidenhead?" He sneered at the preposterous claim. "That you, a black arts practicing witch, are a ... a *virgin*?"



## Chapter Eight

The witch sent her head covering to the ground. Her glorious hair tumbled. "As born, so I remain."

More damnable riddles! Did she ne'er give a straight answer? "So, you *do* claim innocence."

"Nay. I claim intactness. The meanings differ. Though I shall lie with ye, I shan't lie to ye, not here on the moors. Now -- how do ye take virgins?"

Not at all was how he took them.

And no doubt, he would keep his record clean on that score. For, regardless of her oath of honesty, how could he believe an Enchantress?

She must have experience! Everyone knew witches were harlots, to a one.

"A front engagement." For some reason, the instruction came out as a croak. Had she toyed with his vocal cords? To humiliate him, had she made him sound like a frog?

She sidled to the rock and lifted her rough, peasant's hem. Lord! Her woman's scent, an earthy perfume reminiscent of sweet grass on a wet day, drifted up to his face and beckoned him forth.

Croak be hanged! What did he care if he sounded like a frog? So long as he could still perform, so long as his manhood could jump and leap -- and had not turned green and warty -- what did hoarse vocal cords matter?

From a hand-span away, he inhaled the promise of her.

Blessings! She had taken his voice but left his sense of smell alone.

Since a riding accident had rendered him useless, he had engaged in neither the penetration of a female, nor in the questionable solace of his own hand. Though, the urgency remained unaffected, his capacity to quench the urgency had left him. Thankfully, since her

first summoning, his once flaccid member had relearned how to swell. The Confessor, himself, could not have asked for a more majestic showing.

Now, if only his grandeur would not let him down at the crucial moment!

Near desperate to succeed, the idea of failure turned him cold and clammy. He must have release! Not only a release to appease his aching stones -- release from her spell. Surely, once sampled, he could break free of her charms, magical and otherwise.

Fingers superstitiously crossed, he reached for her.

Avice the Enchantress held him off, a hand pressed to his chest. "Wait --"

His heart stalled under her palm. Wait? When a thousand knives pricked his flesh and his prick knifed upwards, his potency a thousand-fold strong?

"A little tease adds to the excitement," she added.

This agony -- a tease?

"How would a virgin know of such things?" he asked scornfully.

"No need for sarcasm, Gralam. Ye have not caught me in an untruth. I do lack for experience. But as a natural woman, I be in tune with me natural inclinations."

Her natural inclinations must include a propensity for torture.

"I happen to enjoy teases, so why not play along?" Her nose wrinkled. "Unless -- be ye one of those wretches who have not a care for the requests of their bed partners?"

Is that how she perceived him? As a selfish wretch?

Unaccountably, her *disenchantment* wounded him. Unaccountably, her bad opinion of him mattered tremendously. Unaccountably, disappointing her in any way amounted to the very last thing he would ever willingly do.

Like a lamb to the slaughter, he waited.

Whilst she hiked her arms up o'er her head. Whilst she drew off the raggedy tunica and gunna, both accomplished with the slowness of dream sleep.

Tease be damned! He could wait no longer. And why should he? He owned her, by right of payment and noble privilege, and that gave him certain prerogatives. Besides, to wait longer risked bidding his erection adieu. Chronic impotency did that to a man, as did a father's rejection. Worthlessness made his cock shrink. "Make haste!"

To his consternation, she grinned, the little fiend. "Now, where was I?"

"Disrobing," he managed to gasp.

"Right ye be, Gralam. Right ye be."

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, she dispensed with her oversized, ugly garb.

His heart went from a stall to a cessation in beating altogether.

So lovely. Unfair that a witch should be so lovely. Where was the devil's mark on her?

Nowhere.

Reining in his delight, he surveyed the witch, as he would horse flesh, removed from the examination and keeping his bargaining wits intact.

First, her breasts. He had already speculated they ended in points, and they did, whilst boasting an appealing conical roundness everywhere else. Despite the enormity of their projection, the nipples were of an innocent pink cast -- he had made a mistake there.

Next, he surveyed her long and sleek legs, legs made for a lusty gallop. And then her trim waist -- only a blind man would overlook such a neat indenture -- that highlighted hips slightly fuller than he had anticipated.

He sank his sights low and behind, a round behind that served as a seductive asset in a wench of many such seductive embellishments.

Finally, he scooted his gaze around to her front again.

And concluded Avice well worth the price he had paid. Her fair bush glistened with receptivity. What man would not pay for that kind of unconditional welcome?

No further kisses, certainly no soft words shared. A paying nobleman never bothered with such niceties, especially not with a willing drab, particularly not with a whore-witch. He two-handed her bared hips, crushing the silk of her flesh between his bruising fingertips.

*So long, so long, so long since his last fornication.*

He went into her as hard as a ram, drove up as fierce as a bull. The tight clasp of her body hugged his make like a moist silk gauntlet tailored exclusively for him.

His jaw arched in pleasure. *Ah -- so good!*

Her sharp cry brought him up short.

A lifetime of battling had taught him about pain. His recent crippling fall from a steed had reinforced the lesson. 'Twas an apprenticeship he would spare her.

He yanked free of the engagement --

Correction. No need to *yank*. He fell out, a wrinkled worm from the robin's mouth. Her discomfort had dispatched his vigor posthaste.

Taking a folded square of linen from his cloak, he wiped the virgin blood from his shriveled member. To hide his failure from both their eyes, he put himself away.

"Forgive my precipitant and unconscionable behavior," he muttered with a stiff formality -- all that remained of his former rigidity.

"We shan't speak of forgiveness," she hissed. "Not now, and nor e'er more. This runs deeper than absolution between us."

"In that case ..." He reached into his pouch, tossed her another gold piece. "For the inconvenience."

She caught his belated conscience in her palm. Her green eyes narrowed. "No inconvenience. I liked ye inside me."

Only if she prized brutality could she possibly have liked him inside her.

"Hard inside me," she continued throatily. "Deep inside me. Yer mighty cock fair split me cunny in two."

His *mighty cock* jerked at her lowly language, preened at her exorbitant praise.

And Avice the Enchantress smiled and licked her rosy lips, which brought to mind those other lips, those pouty nether lips, rosy with her virgin blood.

He hardened outrageously all over again.

Sod it! This was not like him, not like him at all. He was no assaulter of females! Why had he once again turned to a bludgeon against her belly?

The cantrip! How else to explain his callousness?

"The damage is done, why not finish it?" she whispered.

How had it happened? Her breathy voice seduced him all o'er again!

"Though a witch," he pondered aloud, "your passage is of a regular make."

"Thrilled to hear ye approve."

"You are also ... er ..." He raised his gaze from the alluring triangle of fair curls at the apex of her body to the up-tilted crests of her breasts. "... quite regular in other respects, as well."

"Frankly, yer tardiness had me wondering. Not about yer virility -- I have no concerns regarding yer potency -- about yer noble eyesight."

He looked up and encountered her pursed lips, a petulant moue that only made her look more fetching.

"Ho-hum." Her sulking lips protruded in a full-fledged pout. "Thought ye would ne'er notice me womanly attributes."

He reigned in his *mighty cock* and narrowed his *noble eyesight* on her exceedingly *womanly attributes*. "You are not at all what I had expected in one of your kind."

"Forsooth! Kindly cease lumping us all together, like porridge!"

"P-pardon?" What had he said to offend her? He had meant to pay her a compliment!

"Gralam -- we witches be *not* all one of a kind. We come in all shades of skill and magic, the same as overlords come in various degrees of pomposity and arrogance."

His head had begun to spin. "Pardon?"

"I had hoped ye would find me moderately attractive --" She sighed in exaggerated wistfulness.

A battle begun against her incorrigible winsomeness was lost to her irrepressible charm. "No need to keep fishing," he said in melancholy defeat. "Consider one compliment caught and another one cast." He smiled wanly. "You are comely of face and shapely of form, and for both our sakes, everything I must avoid." Despite her beauty and desirability, and regular make, he must not lose sight that he dealt with a wily witch.

She palmed her gentle hillocks and rolling valleys, then slid her hand between her *very* open thighs. After catching his eye, she sank like a graceful reed to the mossy ground.

She reached both arms up to him. "Come into me, Gralam."

"I avoid virgins like the plague."

"Too late now. Consider yerself infected."

He stood o'er her, breathing hard, legs -- one crooked, one straight -- akimbo, and asked the dreaded question, the one he should have asked long ere now. "Using your craft, have you ever done hurt to another?"

She looked away. "Aye. Once, I did."

"Did you kill the victim of your craft?"

Her gaze turned back to him. "Nay, I maimed the victim of my craft. I thought the injury deserved, I thought to protect myself, but I thought wrong. I did a man a grievous injustice, and I swear ne'er to forgive myself. I intend to right the wrong in whatever manner he dictates, make him full restitution."

Spreading herself wide, she made a welcoming cradle for him between her sleek thighs. "Now cease stalling, Gralam, and get in here."

He took another breath, a freer breath, her confession of wrongdoing and acceptance of blame and responsibility buoying her in his esteem. In his life, he also had made mistakes.

Was this a mistake too?

Prior to the accident, he had never felt the urge to perform more than once an eve. Now he feared a single intercourse would never be enough. Not with her. "Like a blood-sucking insect, you leach me of my common sense."

"Oh, la! With compliments like that, who needs insults?" Lifting her shoulders up off the ground, she grabbed hold of his erection and squeezed. "I take back what I said -- pillicocks be not all alike. Yer pecker be of monolith proportions!" She laughed.

The sound, boisterous and unruly, and sweetly naughty, freed him of restraint. He joined in on the pre-coital bawdiness, laughing at himself as he had not laughed at anything in all his serious life.

"Egad! I would apologize for the bloodsucking remark," he said, still chuckling, "but having already tried and failed to apologize to you once already, I fear doing so again. I seem to fail quite oft of late. 'Tis the reason I am here on the moors. To start o'er again ..." His voice drifted off.

"Ne'er ye mind what came ere -- ye will not fail at me."

Unaccountably, he actually believed her. Believed he would succeed with her. And not only carnally. In ways, he had yet to learn.

Complicated witchcraft?

Or the simple wonder of her?

## Chapter Nine

*Ninny Norman nobleman!* Avice harrumphed to herself. Why did Gralam persist in standing there piggin' glowering at her? And when would he just get on with it and finish what he had started?

Call her a succubus if that had not been coitus interrupt-*erbus!*

The man took pomposity to absurdity. If not for his unfastened braies, Gralam might have attended council at Westminster Abbey. That was to say, if King Edward e'er finished the opulent palace and monastery.

Not a stitch of garb, not even his cloak, had Gralam removed. And here she be naked and spread!

Part of her recompense to the Norman called for lifting the curse of his impotency. The other part called for fixing his injury. For the second piece, she needed to examine his leg. Piggin' difficult, when the Norman refused to remove his braies and chausses.

Ah, well! The situation could be worse, she supposed. At least Gralam had not demanded the name of the man she had hexed. If asked outright, she would have had to deliver him the truth.

What a pot of boiling lard that would have landed her in! Upon learning he had been her victim, ne'er again would he have allowed her nigh to him. As things stood now, she remained in the tournament. Narrowly, aye, but in the game nonetheless. Entice him into another jousting go 'round, and she might yet get him to drop his wools and linens.

In persuasion, she arched her spine.

Though meager, her teats thrust rather nicely, an exaggerated tilt Gralam was quick to note.

“Er ... I ...” He looked away. “By Jove! I hear a stream on the other side of yonder bushes.” Fumbling about his garb, he brandished the bloodstained linen. “I should give this a rinse.” Off he trotted.

Avice’s mouth fell open. Squeamish prig! She had half a mind to rise up from her mossy mattress and leave the lord to his own noble devices! Completely at his disposal and what does he talk about? Her clean hair? Her sparkling teeth? Her spot-free complexion?

Nay. A thousand times nay! He discourses on his piggn’ laundry!

Hissing and spitting to herself, Avice followed Gralam’s progress to the stream.

His walk had slowed to a lopsided crab crawl. He not only favored his damaged leg, he dragged his damaged leg. That uneven gait explained why she would not show the Norman overlord her back.

Bother!

Her culpability nailing her to the ground, Avice awaited her reluctant suitor’s return.

Her mind a-whirl, her fingers started *rat-a-tat-tatting* the ground.

Truth could be a double-edged sword. Gralam presented a case in point. In order to prove she had given herself completely o’er to the Norman lord, that she had placed herself entirely at his disposal, she had revealed her occupation to him. However, her full and honest disclosure might have harmed his health.

His involvement with a witch went against his moral fabric. Spiritual disharmony could hinder physical healing. Had the truth deteriorated his condition? Is that why his limp seemed more pronounced?

Although he took piggin’ forever, Gralam eventually returned. His injured knee evidently not allowing for ease in bending, he threw himself to the ground. “This compress will feel somewhat cool, but should also soothe the hurt.”

After gently washing her virgin blood away, he tenderly applied the freshly washed cloth between her legs.

Her heart did a flip-flop. *Ohhhh* --

She, who had always seen to the hurts of others, suddenly found herself on the receiving end of the care. Took some getting used to.

“Well, then,” she started in briskly, unsentimentally -- this was about recompense not romance -- “now that ye have *soothed* me, what say we give it another go. Must earn me pay, and all that.”

In answer, he took up the compress, flipped it o’er, and returned the pad to the same location.

“Come on, Gralam,” she goaded. “Give o’er. Give us another try, would ye now?”

Suddenly, almost as if he could not help himself, he rounded o'er her. Drawing her pap into his mouth, he licked the nub. Suckled the nub. Gnawed the nub. Bit the nub! Pushed his nose, his mouth, his smooth cheeks back and forth against the nub.

*Bountiful earth mother!* She had expected a polite mating from the officious Norman. Not this starved devouring!

"*A-a-a-ahhhh*," she shouted shrilly, as he nuzzled her neck, partook of her mouth, sampled her tongue and gave her his own. Dizzy as can be, she searched out his man's flesh. Albeit, somewhat shakily, she plied her amends to what she had cursed.

Hand pumping and milking the length, she worked on him 'till semi-flaccid had firmed. Whilst she had him imprisoned within the span of her fingers, she whispered the words that would undo the damage she had wrought, a permanent lifting of impotence for every occasion, regardless of whom he bedded. Here on out, he could wench to his heart's content. He would return to the man he had been ere meeting up with her.

Here was the rub. The fly in the ointment. The piggin' piss in the drinking cistern. Would she return to the witch she had been ere meeting up with him?

Though she had no recollection of him doing so, caught up in their tongue-dance as she was, he must have removed the linen cloth from her loins. For when the kiss ended, she discerned a breeze blowing across her mons.

Only the night be still. Not a leaf stirred.

*Ohmeohmy!* Surely, the reticent overlord would not tickle her with a puff of his very own refined breath --?

Ere she could resolve the quandary, lips descended on a part of herself Avice thought ne'er to ken such intimacy.

Courtliness turned to cunnilingus, the overlord kissed her cleft.

"Mmmm," she murmured and dragged the owner of those sensual lips closer.

*Not nigh enough, not nigh enough, not nearly nigh enough ...*

She bent her legs, clamped her inner thighs to his ears, her muscles holding him fast as he mouthed her. After maddening her with crazed licks, he nibbled the sensitive nubbin at the top of her cunny.

Goddess be praised! Such pleasure to be had from a well-placed kiss and a rasp of teeth.

She yelped. So loud, she feared the man would race for his keep. Or, at least jump out of his skin. What the pig was he about?

Well, all right. She did understand what he was about. But what a surprise that he did too.

As a healer, as a witch, as a curious female who had upon occasion experimented with this and that, she enjoyed more than a typical shy virgin's acquaintance with carnality. But this, what he was doing to her, surpassed even her most fevered imaginings.



Try with all her might, she fought to distance herself, to maintain her neutrality  
An instant later, she realized the absurdness of that.

“*Yeeeeeee*,” she screamed, clawing at his cloaked back, her body tightening ere  
exploding in rapture.

She was still picking up the shattered pieces of herself when Gralam used his walking  
stick to regain his feet.

He raised a dark brow. “Until we meet again?”

Boneless with satiation, at a loss for words as well, she could only nod.

He bowed. Then, like a courtly knight, he lifted her limp hand and placed his lips to  
the underside of her wrist. “Next time, I should like to suckle your toes. If I may? I have a  
penchant for feet, and yours are quite delectable.”

She squeaked, “*As-ye-wish-Gggrralammmm*.”

“Let us be clear -- ’tis not a wish, but a request.” He released her hand.

Her palm fell like a stone onto her belly, fingers curled inward. The toes he had only  
just mentioned also curled. She had all to do to lick her lips, and give another nod.

Like a sick calf, she looked languidly after him as he walked away. She stayed that way,  
staring, breathing in shallow pants, until his black cloak blended with the darkness.

Making the Norman amends portended to be less an ordeal than she had anticipated.

And that acknowledgment made her feel --

Positively --

Wicked.

## Chapter Ten

Gralam tore his gaze away from the sky to spare his assistant-to-the-hunt a glance. "You have tested both my stamina and sighting skills this day, Julian. My thanks."

"You sound disappointed, my lord! Tell me, please, how I have erred so I might correct the mistake."

"You know me too well, Julian! I am disappointed. But not in you." Gralam narrowed his eyes to the sky once again. "I have seen quite a few soaring falcons within the preserve, all dark of wing. I had hoped to spy a white one this day --"

"Gyrfalcons nest just up ahead at the edge of a cliff. Does my lord care to view the newborns?"

"Lead on!" Leaning on his walking stick for balance, as well as an aid to ambulation, Gralam limped along the narrow trail with Julian.

At the base to a rocky summit, his guide pointed a gloved finger. "Yonder, my lord. See? The gyrfalcon nest!"

The nest, certainly. Unfortunately, within, was not the white falcon Gralam longed to see.

"Tis really quite amusing, my lord, to observe the mother bird feed her young. Watch how she carries a carcass to their beaks. If the kill is small, the babe devours the entire animal. Gobbles it right down with relish. If large, the mother rips off strips of flesh and patiently feeds the torn segments to her baby, one narrow piece at a time." Julian swept an arm across the skies. "Here comes the proud mama now. If you would like, I shall climb the rock and bring you back one of the fledglings. When the offspring reaches sufficient independence, training may begin. In no time at all, the falcon will perch on your wrist during the hunt."

Keeping a falcon on his wrist did hold a strange fascination --

So long as the falcon was not just any bird. Not any pair of wings would do him. Nay, he sought a particular falcon.

Gralam shook his head. "My thanks, but no fledgling birds. My interest is in finding a grown falcon, a female."

"White-feathered, my lord?"

"Aye." Since their first meeting, Gralam only saw his witch during the eventide. This meant he only came truly alive at moonglow. Late afternoon, with half a day stretched out ahead of him 'till he visited Avice again, he had called Julian to his solar. When the lad arrived, Gralam had demanded the apprentice lead him on a personal excursion to falcon habitats. Foolish to have done so. Dangerous too. Both signifying the horrible lengths he would go to because he *had* to see the Enchantress --

Even if she wore a white-feathered guise.

"My lord," Julian said on a hush. "Look there."

No need for the prompt. He had already begun to track a sleek female bird soaring high across the sky, her graceful wings spread wide. "That will be all for today. You may return to the keep," Gralam told Julian, dismissing the hunter without another thought.

Confident this was no ordinary gyrfalcon circling above his head, Gralam followed the white female to the moors, where, a bright glare blinding him, he lost her to the sun.

After that disappointment, weariness besieged him, and he collapsed. On a drift of heather, he closed his eyes. As per usual, a young peasant wench lurked behind his shut lids, her hate-filled expression accusing him of something.

What, pray tell, had he ever done to her, other than save her plump peasant posterior?

As solutions to the puzzle came and went, one stayed and lingered: Could the peasant wench have mistakenly thought him part of the hunting party that had given her chase a twelvemonth ago? Had she misinterpreted the gift of his fur cape as a warped idea of sport?

Though nonsensical, the explanation did account for her animosity.

Her misconceived, poorly advised, animosity!

As a Norman overlord in service to the king -- why would he stoop to rape? He could have any female he desired brought to his solar for bedding, including her. Say the word, and his guards would scour the countryside looking for just the right morsel to tempt his appetite. Mayhap a female with winter russet hair and an apple-round shape to match. Or a statuesque beauty with dark tresses like his own. Or some lowly peasant tart of the moors.

Had his nocturnal visitor no commonsense?

Ludicrous to believe he would chase after her! Undignified too. Unnecessary, as well. The wench was already his by right of ownership. Had these ignorant moor people no idea of proper protocol whatsoever?

As he drifted into a restless slumber, like a lightning bolt, another insight struck him. Dear Lord! He *did* hold responsibility in the peasant girl's near rape!

As his property, he had owed her sanctuary from harassment. Plenty enough *willing* whores to be had for a trinket or two without raping one so obviously opposed to the transaction.

He should have warned his guests, every member of that damnable hunting party he had been trying so ignobly to impress, not to accost his slaves. That he would not, under any circumstances, brook rape.

Because he had not spoken up on the issue, his laissez-faire attitude had given tacit approval to interference with the female peasant population.

Long and short, he had failed that female serf.

As Gram owned his neglect, the disapproving wench dissipated from his mind. For the first time in a twelvemonth, he abandoned himself to peaceful dreams.

Of Avice.

## Chapter Eleven

That eventide, Gralam faced the Enchantress across the heaths and heathers. "I saw you today."

The witch tilted her chin. "Do tell."

"Aye, I do tell. You make a spectacular falcon. I can well imagine you riding upon my wrist as I hunt -- if ever and anon I sit a horse."

He thought she would ask for specifics of his investigation. Interrogate him as to the how and whys and wherefores of his observation. Even accuse him of trying to locate her domicile through stealthy means. Had his life hung in a similar balance, he certainly would have grilled her the same.

But nay. She went off in a completely unexpected tangent. "Is that what ye wish? To ride again?"

One would think so. 'Twould make for a reasonably sound wish. Riding again would give him the choice of leaving these damp and dreary moors and returning to battle. Such a move would restore him to his father's good graces, a reconciliation that would lead to the restoration of his inheritance.

He weighed his answer, and its ramifications. "I should like to ride again, aye."

"And then, ye would cage me in a mew, train me with hoods, jesses, bells, and lures so that I might sit upon ye wrist in the hunt?"

Gralam shook his head. "If e'er I ride again, most probably I would return to Normandy. However, I would never transport a falcon, any falcon, so far."

"Returning to Normandy -- be that yer wish, then?"

He must learn to curb his tongue, lest the witch take his idle musings as a request for supernatural help! "I make no wishes."

“Very well. No wishes.” She shrugged. “Make me a command, instead.”

“Lay your hand on me,” he said weakly, no command at all.

She refrained from making him beg. Though, she could easily have done so, could easily have brought a pleading whine from his lips, could easily have made him name the location where he would like her hand placed, she generously allowed him to keep his already diminished pride intact. As if her own idea motivated the action, she reached inside his braies.

At that first touch, he groaned, his breathing gone shallow and harsh.

She refrained from making him suffer. Though, she could easily have done so, could easily have brought an anguished cry from his lips, could easily have tortured him with a lengthy wait, she generously allowed him to keep his already diminished dignity intact. Straightaway, as if she actually wanted to do so, she palmed the weight of his stones.

At that first cupping, his already weak knees turned to the consistency of gruel.

Her stroke fell short of both heaven and hell. A purgatory sort of stroke. An inquisitive digit surveyed the retracted foreskin, ere circling the bulbous head, now exposed and weeping pre-cum tears.

Sweet Jesu! Withdrawing her hand, she held the saturated fingertip to her lips. Without any outward sign of hesitation, she licked the glistening byproduct of his desire.

Though inwardly he quaked, he made no outward sound, but stood at stark attention, as stiff as a corpse, with such rigidity that a word from her lips would break him in two.

*Have pity! Spare me the final dishonor! Do not break me in two! Do not tell me “Nay.”*

But she said naught.

Her silence continued, as did her sampling of his essence. She kept licking her fingertips!

Erect, and in more ways than one, he imagined her pink, cat-like tongue licking his turgid man’s flesh instead.

“Mmm.” Her purr broke the heavy quiet.

’Twas too much! He blurted, “No more! You will undo me.”

Her green eyes bounced and twinkled, but she took no mean advantage of his disclosure of vulnerability. Accepting his weakness at face value, she merely whispered, “Best come inside me ere yer undoing happens.”

With a kick, she rid herself of her boots. Another kick slung her shapely leg around the back of his thighs. The heel of her bare foot hooked the base of his spine. How did she swing her leg so high?

She tilted her pelvis invitingly. “Please? According to minstrels, coupling provides a glimpse of paradise on earth. I would see if their songs contain the truth.”

“Coupling is no peephole into the celestial,” he said dourly. “Coupling only reinforces one’s own humanity.”

“Humanity, ye say? Well, seeing ye could use a large dose of the stuff, we best get started right quick.”

With a bawdy wink, she entwined him in her arms.

## Chapter Twelve

Avice could only grin at Gralam's frown of disapproval. Evidently, the tight-arsed nobleman did not think much of her wit.

Too bad about him! A daily tincture of mirth would still leave him too grave by far.

The prig shook his head. "Imp!"

No offence taken. It would take more than words to break her good humor.

She jollied him along. "Imp? Where do ye come by these mistaken impressions of me? I be a witch, not a small demon. And, in my craft, I ..." She stopped.

"Go on," he urged. "And, in your craft, you ... what?"

She had been about to say, in her craft, she served the power of good. But, after wantonly hurting him, she could no longer make that assertion.

Her good humor fled, driven away by her own misdeed.

Equally as serious as he now, she sank to the soft green moss, bringing him down with her. She tried pulling him atop her, but he deftly evaded her maneuvering. Instead, he knelt on the ground, took hold of her bare foot, and stuffed her naked toe in his mouth.

*Yuck!*

The goddess had given her birth-gifts aplenty. But forsooth! Feet were nowhere on the list.

His action should not have taken her by surprise. The last they met, he had made mention of wanting to suckle her toes, that he had a *penchant for feet*, and that hers looked *quite delectable*. Ne'er did she credit him for actually following through, however.

Showing himself to be a man of his word, Gralam rammed nearly her entire foot in his mouth.

She squealed in mortification. "Cease, do!"



Ignoring her protests, he kissed and suckled -- *why would he wish to do such a perverse thing?* -- each of her toes. An unconventional preoccupation in an otherwise straitlaced man!

As a witch, she entertained dark cravings. Uninhibited yearnings. Earthy desires. That this improbable nobleman possessed a similarly perverse carnality sent seven starbursts of rapture radiating inside her. Long after he had popped her toes from his mouth, she still tingled.

"Feet such as yours should be clad in slippers of the finest kid, not in those abominations." He reverently caressed her instep, lightly tickled the sole, tenderly kissed the ankle.

His actions made her cunny runneth o'er.

And here she had thought him too serious for endearing foibles! That pompousness had squeezed humanity from his temperament! Gralam's predilection for *feet*, of all body parts, endeared him to her. What other sorts of unorthodox behavior did the stuffy nobleman hide beneath his stiff cloak of courtesy?

She could hardly wait to find out!

Grabbing him 'round the waist, she dragged him to her woman's gate. "Make the push, or I return yer piggin' gold."

Still, he hung back.

"Gralam, ye already accomplished the bitter, now show me the sweet."

At the mention of her deflowering, his body tensed. "No lingering aftereffects of the bitter?"

"Not a one."

"Your pain --?"

"Forgotten, just like a toothache."

"Toothaches return," he grumbled.

"As a healer, I have pulled many a diseased molar, but every sufferer I e'er treated reported no memory of the pain upon eating their next full meal. The extraction of me maidenhead is but a distant recollection. Now, I be ravenous. Come, fill me up."

"Three gold pieces. For the inconvenience."

Payment! It all came down to the mercenary with him! How could anyone be so piggin' cold? He might just as well have slapped her across the face.

His offer of gold chilled the hot rush of her blood. Ice encapsulated her heart. As she willed herself not to smite him down for his arrogant presumption, the head of his tremendously hard, tremendously huge pillicock engaged her, sliding into her slickness with nary a tweak of discomfort.

He filled her completely, albeit carefully.

She thought for sure they would ne'er reach this point. But would he continue? He seemed less than wholly enthusiastic ...

She swatted his arse. "Move would ye, ere ye explode."

"Exploding is the general idea," he said hoarsely, and proceeded to do so, e'er so quietly --

After only a few cautious pushes up and several gentle slides back.

If the proof be in the pudding, for sure, this one be only half-baked.

Withdrawing, the nobleman surveyed her face. "Poetry?"

Avice smiled to herself.

Not even a verse.

For which she now rejoiced.

Gralam's calculated offer of payment reminded her why she detested all nobles. She best tread warily here. So long as she remained aloof from the act itself, she would keep both feet on the ground --

Even if she had both legs thrown up in the air.

But what to tell him?

Same as women, men had their conceits. The truth here would cause him injury. Having hurt Gralam once already, she resolved to bypass complete honesty.

Neither could she tell him an outright lie. Not on the moors, not even if the lie went toward making him amends.

She settled for tact. "Twas only our first attempt. Practice makes perfect."

Naught be duller than perfection. And naught would keep her wits about her more effectively.

Avice hopped to a stand, smoothed her hair to repair a few stray wisps, and then shook out her kirtle. "Until next eventide, then?"

Ere he could answer, she had rushed away.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following morn, Avice's small cottage trembled with the force of a tap.

Since only one person on all the moors was capable of shaking a building with a knuckle rap, Avice wiped her hands on a spare scrap of cloth, lifted the heavy bar against surprise intruders and flung open the portal. "Ye big dolt! Come in, come in!" She moved aside to allow him entry.

Martin blushed. "Indecent to barge in on a female."

"I be not just *any* mere female." Goddess, was that the truth!

Guileless blue eyes lit up; a soulful look tagged her squarely. "Ye mean a great deal to me, Avice. More than a friend."

Martin's mind was whip-cracking quick. But in matters of the heart, a tortoise would win the race.

She snorted. "Bout time ye admitted it too."

"I do admit to it, I do!"

"And well ye should. Why, everyone on these moors ken I be more like yer sister than any fly-by-night friend."

Martin's usually smiling mouth turned down at the corners; his chin fell to his massive chest. "Oh --"

*Now* what had she said?

Her invitation to enter her cottage, mayhap --?

Since her request had seemingly assigned sunny Martin to gloominess, Avice shooed the dispirited giant back outside with her drying cloth.

With propriety observed, she gave him a playful whack on the arm. "Well go on, go on! Tell me what be on yer mind."

"Only this -- himself has ordered the restoration of the old Mulberry farm," he said, not quite meeting her eyes. "Vines cut, fallen-down stone walls rebuilt, entrenched weeds tilled, new cottage wing put up. He appointed me overseer."

"No man better for the task than me own best friend," she said promptly.

Despite the wonderful news, Martin continued his listless narration. "Himself ordered a new barn constructed as well."

"Just what we need here on the moors -- another piggin' tithe barn!" She shook her head in disgust. "We give up one-tenth of the produce now. Tithe any more than wheat, oats, peas, beans, and barley, and hunger will escalate to starvation."

Finally, Martin's usual cheerful optimism returned. "Ye misunderstand, Avice!" he said excitedly. "Neither king nor Church will benefit from this barn. Surplus grains will be stored inside, from one year to the next. Imagine that, an overlord who thinks of the future! And the bellies of those he governs."

"We shall see about that! Promises are as easily broken as made."

"I believe him, Avice. And, glory be, he plans the establishment of new homesteads, all o'er the moors. Those who thought ne'er to wed and bed can now do both, and in that respectable order. Tree felling starts on the morrow." He raised a finger to his lips. "Shh! Tell no one. Those are the overlord's instructions."

She laughed. "But ye have just now told me."

A soft look curtained his features. "Owing to our closeness, ye be the only exception. I would trust ye with me life and me secrets, Avice."

No matter what, Martin always thought the best of her!

Alas, she was about to dearly disappoint him. "Giant, I too have some news, and I would have ye hear the tidings from me first --"

"I be all ears."

"Nay, ye be all height," she said with an evil snicker, only to immediately sober. "I have accepted gold pieces from the Norman overlord."

The giant blinked. "Why? If ye have need of aught, why I can ..."

She interrupted the gentle sincerity of his speech with the brutal honesty of hers. "I need naught. He gave me the gold for becoming his whore."

"Ye tease me!"

"No tease, not this time. I have started having carnal relations with Lord Gralam."

"He called in his droit du seigneur."

"Nay. He invoked no such deflowering rights."

"Then, he raped ye!"

"Hardly. 'Twas I, who made all the advances."

"How?" Martin wagged his head back and forth. "Why?"

How? By summoning the lord to her with a cantrip. Why? Because she owed him for falsely accusing him of a misdeed and then wantonly laming him.

Not that she could explain any of that to Martin. Her childhood friend had no idea she practiced the forbidden craft.

She offered him a safer, if not more palatable, explanation. "As ye say, the overlord from Normandy owns all us peasants. We be his slaves to do with as he pleases. Why not turn his ownership into my good fortune and take payment for the coupling --"

"Ye have prostituted yerself!"

"Aye."

"Go to the village priest, make yer confession, say a good Act of Contrition, and God will forgive yer sin."

"Nay, Martin, I shan't confess my transgressions to any priest. Indeed, I have erred, but the wrongdoing has naught to do with bedding Lord Gralam." She stepped back over the threshold and into her cottage.

She had made her bed with befouled straw, and now she must lie in it, regardless of the fleas. No heralding trumpets announced this shift in the course of her life, only a closed portal; a decisive slam of stout oak boards that left Martin on one side and herself on the other.

## Chapter Thirteen

Gralam arrived early for his nightly visit to the moors. Whilst waiting for the witch to arrive, he drifted off to sleep. During his slumbering, a hand combed through his hair. A small thing to dream about, aye, but he awakened with his braies tented. His arousal, no small thing, was all for Avice.

And there she was, looking down upon him.

The witch gave a merry grin. "Well, my, my, my. *Ahem!* Is that all for me?"

He quick pulled his cloak over his state of tumescence. "I only just awakened."

"So, I deduced. And with a splendid woody too. Dare I hope ye dreamt of me?"

When he said naught, she chuckled. "Fortunate, I arrived a wee bit early, eh? Now we can take full advantage of yer obvious devotion to me."

She made the remark so casually, as if there was naught untoward in their carnality, when there was everything untoward in their carnality. Their relationship was past improper into blasphemous.

And still he had to restrain himself from ordering her to strip off and straddle his face. He had so enjoyed the taste of her!

In an effort to distance himself from his unwholesome lust, he perused the dark sky. "Apparently, I slept the afternoon away."

"Apparently ye did, lazy lout."

"Lazy? Egad! I happen to do my finest work whilst in bed. Not that I have given you any reason to believe that statement is any more than a boast."

He held up his hand when she began to contradict him. "Make me no excuses. My premature finish yesternight left you without a rhyme."

Something flashed in her eyes and then disappeared. "Leave off yer discussion of poetry, and tell me instead why ye arrived early."

*You*, he thought unwisely *My impatience to see you*.

He reclined in a semi-prone position on the mossy ground, and from that prostrated position, substituted one truth for another. "I left my keep early, as I frequently lose my way."

Losing his way explained why he had come here to these Godforsaken moors.

Strangely, though, when he took a deep inhale of heather-scented air, some of his dislike for the moors slipped away. "'Tis peaceful here, what with the birds chirping."

"Ye like birds, then?"

He shrugged. "Well enough."

Awarding him the usual cheeky lack of respect, she said, "I like ye well enough as well."

He lifted his brows. "Oh, really?"

"Remove yer braies and chausses and breech cloth, and let me actions speak for themselves."

Of late, his useless appendage caused him much humiliation, the shame less to do with vanity over lax muscle and an ugly scar than with yet another recently learned, failing --

Owing to his neglect, his hunting guests had almost raped a young peasant wench. With the admittance, the nightmares had stopped plaguing him, but he would carry his disgrace, in the form of his injured leg, for the remainder of his days. Unbearable for her to witness his shame --

"Bashful? Tell ye what -- I shall go first." She began untying the laces at her neckline.

He should forestall her. Tell her certainly not to disrobe. But with his flesh weak and her cantrip strong, he lost his battle with carnality ere the fight began.

He fumbled a hand inside his cloak. "Buy yourself something pretty. A ribbon for your hair, mayhaps." Or shoes for her pretty feet. The hole in her boot soles seemed to expand with each visit.

He tossed her the gold piece, which she scornfully caught.

"Why the resentful look?" he asked. "You entrapped me. This seduction is at your discretion, not mine."

"If I trapped ye, why pay me?"

He eyed her patched sleeve, the darned hole at the shoulder. Poverty made for poor cloth. "Because I have wealth, and you have ... you have ..."

"An available cunny," she supplied.

He blew out a breath. "The point is -- we both need what the other has to offer."

“Ye claim bewitchment, and then present an argument predicated on yer ability to refuse me summons.” Turning about, she kicked off her too-large boots. “Ye cannot have the rutting both ways.”

“How disappointing. I rather hoped I might.” He leered at her heart-shaped bottom.

Witchcraft. Sorcery. The Black Arts. A cantrip. All explained why he felt more alive in her presence on these blasted moors than anywhere else.

Faced away, the witch proceeded to strip for him: hose, gunna, tunica. Even whores frowned upon complete nakedness, uncovering only the essentials necessary for the transaction.

Not Avise. She uncovered every pretty inch.

“Anything else I can do for ye, Gralam?” Rounding, she dropped the gold in the heel of her shoe.

At that rather unique perspective, a vague recollection of *something* flashed across his mind. “Do for me?”

“Aye. Do for ye.”

“Nay, there is naught you can do for me,” he blustered, still staring at her lush derriere. The two halves made for a seductive whole.

Or was that hole?

He not only wanted in her pretty mouth, in her pretty passage, he also wanted in her ... in her ... in her pretty ...

He cleared his throat. “Provocative view, by the way.”

Straightening up, she whipped 'round. “I forgot meself.”

“One can only hope your absentmindedness continues,” he said dryly.

Her nipples drew his attention now. Distended to enormous dimensions, the elongated tips spoke of her desires, as did her extremely damp pubic hair.

He crooked a finger. “Come here.”

She made the journey on tiptoe. Her small breasts shifted with her graceful steps, her narrow hips swayed, her long fair hair cascaded o'er her wide shoulders. In his imaginings, he pictured the tresses falling like pale water down her straight back to her fetching round bottom -- that oddly familiar round bottom.

He rearranged his trembling hand atop his lap. “Egad! But you are a beauty.”

Grinning, she fell to her knees, pushed aside his trembling hand, and undid his braies. Taking him out, she scrutinized him as one would scrutinize a treasure from the Orient. “Yer big, thick pecker be also a beauty.” Once again, she captured a droplet of pre-cum with her fingertip. Holding his man's anticipation to her lips, her tongue touched his essence. “Mmm.”

Breathing had suddenly become a Herculean task. “Perhaps,” he rasped, “you should take me.”

She licked her lips, gave a bawdy wink, and lowered her mouth.

“Nay!” This time, he would please her, not the other way ’round. “I mean, ride me. You on top,” he explained. “Mayhap if you took charge, you might enjoy the encounter more. I would like you to have your minstrel’s song.”

Her pointy chin wobbled.

Why -- was she about to cry?

On closer inspection he noted that, dear Lord, she *was* about to cry.

“Do not,” he pleaded. He hated seeing women weep. Especially, this woman. That her tears might amount to naught more than another wily witchcraft trap, he hated more.

Avice gave a less than genteel sniff. “I ne’er give way like this! But in yer company, I be constantly wet.”

He barked out a chuckle. “Good omen, that wetness! You may just get your poetry yet!”

She landed him a punch. “Not *that* kind of wet!” The tears streamed down her face. “Well, I suppose *that* kind of wet also.”

Sighing, he thumbed the puddles. “Tell me how to make it right.”

“Not yer place to make it right. But kiss me anyway.”

Bewitched as he was, how could he possibly refuse?



## Chapter Fourteen

They kissed. A meeting of mouths, a touching of tongues, a seduction of sighs.

But through it all, Avice's unquiet thoughts would not settle down.

Gralam and his piggin' offer to allow her the lead. How dare he show her piggin' consideration? He be the injured party here, not she! His generosity only made her feel worse. Selfish lout!

Somehow, without her exact knowledge or forethought, Avice repeated her actions of earlier that day whilst he slept. She combed her fingers into the richness of the Norman's thick hair, the darkness in startling contrast to her own much lighter locks.

Her wild hair rivaled the unmanageable swish of a horse's tail; the unruly length never stayed neatly put in a plait. Wholly unfair that a male owned such wondrously soft and agreeable hair! The strands defied even her ruffling, falling right back neatly into place after she had finished messing them.

And his build! Though tall and slender, no puny court weakling be he. Built on aristocratic lines, his frame more elegant than massive, Gralam possessed a wiry strength and a keen agility. His masculine power proclaimed itself in the embrace, in the solid arms that held her. This be a warrior used to hefting a broadsword and shield, a warlord who could defend himself and lead others into bloody battle.

He held her lightly though, not crushing her to him. His piggin' consideration again.

Their lips sealed tighter, the kiss deepened.

She must not succumb to their man/woman forces, opposite, yet complementary and at the same time. Whilst sucking strenuously on his mouth, she fitfully reminded herself that this, that kissing him, went to repayment of her debt to him, and naught else.

To bring their mouths closer, Avice angled her jaw. So as not to break their connection, she scooted onto her knees. An appropriate accommodation considering what she had done.

Her arms encircling his neck, she slid o'er his lap and pushed out her small teats. The hardened tips skimmed the uncured leather of his mantle. The abrasive hide felt satisfyingly rough on her sensitized flesh. Satisfyingly punitive too.

*Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me.*

No witch's incantation. Only her woman's remorseful heart crying out for an absolution she could ne'er request.

She had told Gralam this thing between them went much deeper than any pardon. And so it did. But, still, she longed to confess her misdeed, to throw herself at him and plead for the balm of his mercy, to beg for his understanding. A twelvemonth ago, in her anger, in her fear, in her loss of pride, she had struck out at him. Regardless of the circumstances, 'twas wrong, so very wrong, to do what she had done --

And too much to hope, that a Norman nobleman like Gralam would grant her, an Anglo-Saxon peasant, the boon of absolution.

Ambitious men do not give forgiveness; ambitious men only take punitive measures. Warriors do not turn the other cheek and let bygones be bygones; warriors retaliate. Admit her culpability and the overlord would see her burned at the stake. How would she help him then?

According to Martin, the Norman lord had grand plans for the moors and its folk. Selfishly she would see those plans come to fruition. She would aid him in those plans --

Unless, the nobleman be all talk and no substance. Unless, he left for Normandy ere contributing aught in return for the peat he would harvest. Lords with similar grandiose visions had come and gone with marked regularity, fleeing as soon as the going got rough.

The going always got rough on the moors.

A remote corner of the realm, barely civilized, with a scattered populace making up of a hodgepodge of different tribes, some clans from far off places with different culture and language, the moors would test any man. Could Gralam tolerate the hardships? Could he bring some semblance of order to the proud and independent ... and starving folk ... whose emaciated bodies she tended? Would he stay around long enough to try?

She struggled to stay all of one piece, to remain removed from the kiss. But Gralam could do this dastardly thing with his tongue. Then, his dexterous hands started to roam. Teats. Belly. Between her open thighs. Petting her. Stroking her. His caresses melted her like tallow.

She must reject her growing excitement! Clamp a lid right down on it. Banish carnal delight straight from her mind. This be not about her enjoyment -- this be about reparation.

*Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me.*

Her guilt weighed her down, strangled her like a boulder wrapped 'round her neck. In her need for exculpation, she ripped their lips apart. Holding back sensation, she turned away, locking herself up inside with her culpability.

Gralam lifted her chin onto his thumb, which forced their eyes to meet. "Twould pleasure me to pleasure you."

"Pardon me?" Just saying the words lifted her spirits.

He thumbed the seam between her lips. "I would like to make you happy. I failed last time. I would prefer to succeed this time."

And Avice would prefer, for her own sake, for him to fail again.

Why could he not simply use her body for *his* pleasure, allowing her to remain distant from the proceedings?

But nay. Beneath his fine manners lay a steely resolve. 'Twas clear, Gralam would allow her no escape into the private recesses of her mind. Insisting upon more than cooperation, he demanded her full participation.

Oh, aye. The overlord masked a dominant streak behind his polite bows and mannerly kisses! She too masked a part of herself, a secret part of herself, a part that craved letting go. Of her guilt, of her responsibilities, of her independent nature. She longed for someone else to take charge for a change!

When Gralam took her nipple into his mouth, Avice could no longer resist his allure, but gave herself o'er to the surge of want. Arching her back, she held onto his shoulders with both hands, clutching the refined muscles under the firm underlay of flesh. The terrible torment of *feeling* began to win, the encroachment of pleasure brutalizing her more than any punishment he meted out would have done.

"Harder," she commanded, demanding he hurt her as she had hurt him.

The Norman nuzzled her, a soft butterfly stroke.

"Sink yer teeth into the skin," she bade him as she hovered above his loins, her opening aligned to his lancing cock. "Hurt me."

He let go her teat, his face fierce and strained, harsh even under the softening moonlight. "Nay."

"Ye say ye wish to make me happy. Well, my carnal happiness comes on the receiving end of the stick." Self-reproach ate her up inside. Guilt devoured her. And only the man she had wronged could save her. Would he?

"Hurting a woman is not my way," he said softly.

She boosted herself upward to leave.

"Stay." He grunted. "If you require more, I can give you more."

*Punish me, punish me, punish me ...*

"I-require-more," she ground out.

His hand came down on the fullness of a buttock.

Nearly swooning from the bright sting, she grated out greedily, "More, more, piggin' more."

He smacked her arse a second, a third time.

“More! Leave yer mark on me. Brand me as yers.”

Suddenly, a change came o’er his face. His features altered. Praise the goddess! She had hit a nerve! Territoriality sparked his heavily lidded eyes.

And then, just as quickly, that territorial spark disappeared. Gralam fought the dominant aspects of his nature.

She put forth her ultimatum. “Do it, or I leave.”

Finally, when she thought she could no longer stand the delay, his teeth clamped down on the end of her teat. Just as a shamed Samurai warrior falls on his weapon, she dropped down onto the bludgeoning head of his cock. Without a thought to discomfort, she took the instrument of her self-inflicted punishment into her tight passage. Time and time again, she rose up, dropped down. Sheathing herself on him, impaling herself on him, she frantically sought justice from his hard man’s flesh.

*Hurt me!*

At her wince, the purveyor of her penalty commenced to diddle her, at that spot she ken so well.

Nay, nay, nay! This could not be happening!

But alas, with all his fingering, her formerly tight passage stretched and wept. Her bottom now bumping and grinding, her cunny blissfully accommodating him, she felt pleasure swell. A few up and downs later, and she had slumped onto his chest, smiling and replete, the echo of her boisterous scream proving her amends-making had been no punishment at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gralam brooded on the witch. She lay slumbering in post-coital exhaustion at his side on the moonlit heath.

Just his misfortune to derive solace from a woman who required pain from him!

Though the whys and wherefores of her need remained an unsolved mystery, her requirement was very real. And so he had reluctantly complied with her request. He would do anything to please Avice ...

Gralam backed up from that last admittance.

Would he really do *anything* to please her?

Dangerous thinking, that.

No accounting for why he then proceeded to palm the glowing pink flesh of her derriere.

“Oh, aye, Gralam,” she said hotly.

He schooled his tone to coolness. "You make for an exceedingly obliging whore." Undoing the sack around his middle, he settled the leather on the ground within grasping distance of her hand. "The gold contained within the pouch belongs to you. What you have not earned already this eve, you will ere dawn arrives."

There! That put their *liaison* in its proper perspective. Gold legitimized the nature of their exchange. Not even a spy from the House of Wessex would find cause for concern here!

With the threat of danger decreased, he mouthed her lower back, his hand traversing her womanly hips, the opulence of which dispelled the myth that witches came in only stringy shapes.

He had developed a near fanatical fixation for Avice's bottom. With so many other fascinating places to peruse -- like her lovely, high-arched feet, for instance -- he always returned to her hindquarters, a plump fruit ripe for the plucking.

Pursing his lips on a full cheek, he kissed the bruises he had made, and then rubbed his jaw o'er both hillocks. When a deep-seated moan departed her lips, he licked the amazingly lush swell, an intimacy she showed her appreciation of with a lusty sigh and a roll up onto her hands and knees.

"This time, like so," she instructed.

He fell back, stunned. Thus far, she had met him equally in passion, taking and giving ... and wringing him dry ... with each new carnal foray. Now this! Even when paying, he held back from certain prurient activities. Such as, taking a woman from the back approach.

Impossible to hold back with Avice, not when the witch urged him forward --

Onto his knees behind her, a suppliant at the altar of her body, praying for deliverance from her bewitchment as he reached beneath her and cupped a bobbing breast. Squeezing the small apple possessively, ere kneading her belly, he eased two fingers up inside her female slit.

Christ, so wet! She dripped with readiness.

For him!

She accepted him, welcomed him. Blame his intemperance on her incantation, blame his gluttony on his recent accident-induced abstinence, he no longer cared what held the key to his appetite. He drove into her from the rear flank, ramming her with his breadth and length.

*Ahhh ...*

Holy communion. Spiritual connection. Sacred union.

In the high holiest of churches, such a benediction had always eluded him. How odd that fornication brought him such blessedness, such surprising reprieve from all his cares and woes -- and how very strange, indeed, to receive the succor of that inner peace from a heathen witch of all people!

## Chapter Fifteen

Ending the latest siege, Gralam swallowed the wildness of his climax and took his leave, reluctantly withdrawing from the folds of the witch's succulent passage. His cock wet and dripping, and still hard, despite the madness of the engagement, his gaze followed the rivulet of his spent seed, dribbling down the inside of Avice's splayed thighs.

No sooner out, and he wanted back in her again.

Her cantrip provoked his potency. But what of her? Why did Avice stay expectantly on all fours? Since he could not stop this excess, why did she not put herself away from him? Why stay, when she grew more agitated with each of her orgasms?

In truth, her pleasure had increased in direct proportion to her agitation. Why? None of this made any sense!

In his imaginings, all of this made perfectly sound sense. Of course, in his imaginings, she bowed her head low in submissiveness. Her fair hair, darkened to a metallic silver with the sheen of her perspiration, hung limply across her face, the tresses covering her features. No matter. For in his imaginings, one sweep of his hand pushed her hair back to reveal her mouth, swollen with the savagery of his kisses. The lips of that swollen mouth gaped ever so slightly as she panted in and out in carnal extremity. Her green eyes begged him to cease this folly, for in his imaginings, he held the upper hand.

*Ha!* The upper hand!

In reality, his upper hand, his lower hand ... his cock too -- were Avice's to command.

"Deeper this time," the witch demanded.

Like a knight with his queen, Gralam knelt to do her bidding. Ready to mount her again, ready to pleasure her again, ready to vex her again. He possessed no authority here whatsoever.

"You wish an immediate fornication?" he asked helplessly.

She delivered him a puckish grin around her shoulder. "Perhaps you wish to fornicate, I wish to fuck."

Unlike his proper word for the endeavor, a description of a lukewarm activity at best, her vulgar rendering evoked an image of heavenly bliss. Enchanted, he slipped his thumb into the deep demarcation between her buttocks, an eminently provocative region.

She sighed. "I do so crave buggery."

"Because the Church forbids the congress, no doubt," he dryly rejoined.

"Why are some acts forbidden, when all forms of intercourse serve to bring a man and woman together?"

His cock heartily concurred with her logic.

"I shall give you a little something extra for it." Gold, the only power he exercised.

Showing none of his inner torment, he circled her back portal, a single finger courting the anal ring, very dainty and pretty, as was every part of her. "You have only to name your price."

"Remove yer garb. Please, Gralam? That be my price. I would feel the slide of yer skin on mine as ye enter me."

"I think not. Far too familiar to disrobe."

She pounded the ground. "Wretched royal lackey! Continuing to protect yer piggin' pompous dignity when I have worn naught but skin all eventide!" Crunching green moss between her fingers, she lifted her chin and stuck out her tongue at him.

"Catching flies, Enchantress?"

"On the moors, we be equal, and that goes for shedding our respective wardrobes."

"Ah, but unlike me, nudity becomes you. And just so you know, I am no royal lackey. I came by my inheritance through blood, not through political favor. Furthermore, the king is not my friend. Far from it."

Dropping his hands from her body, he yawned, and then stretched, all for show. "Since you have such a poor opinion of me, why not wave me adieu? I shall remove myself from your sights and return to the keep."

"Not yet," she cried. "Have me again first."

"No more, Avice," he finally found the wherewithal to say. "You will be too sore to walk home, wherever that destination might be."

"I like the soreness, the soreness pleasures me. Ye do wish to pleasure me, do ye not, Gralam?"

"Aye," he said somberly.

"And now that we have named our pleasure, why not indulge it, hmmm?"

He felt himself weaken. Again.

A thought occurred to him. "You came to me untouched. A beauty like you must have had a sweeting ... ?"

"The best part of meself, I gave to another whilst I be still a child. I shall always love him."

"You love another, yet sold yourself to me? Why?" His throat closed tight in anger, in jealousy, her admittance of a fond regard for another bringing all his inner turmoil to a head. Despite the debauchery of this eve, he had failed her! She found him lacking.

An ominous black pall, deeper than any of his previous melancholy episodes, fell o'er him. The witch had used him for her own nefarious purposes, which were ...

He had no idea. But he meant to find out.

"What made you summon me to the moors?" he snarled. "To rule me, to politically destroy me? You say you are no spy for the House of Wessex, but how can I believe you?"

"A pig's snit, I sold myself to ye. I willingly give ye my body. And as I detest everything noble, why would I help the House of Wessex send ye away? The moors' only hope of fair governance rests with ye! As to the other -- I love the man purely. Ne'er was he a sweeting."

He refused to take her at her word. "You keep secrets!"

Without any notice whatsoever, she jumped to her feet. "What secret could possibly place my occupation as a witch in the shade?"

"I wished to Christ you had kept me in the shade! Nay, in the dark!" He stumbled clumsily to his feet. "Why tell me your occupation at all?"

"As a pledge of trust, fool man. I gave ye me bond along with me body."

Preposterous! Witches were incapable of trust, of creating a lasting bond of lov-

He dare not think the word. That word in no way applied to them, to what they had just done to one another. Love was gentle and kind, not animalistic and greedy. Regardless of how much he enjoyed partaking of her unquestionable delights, he must not deceive himself into believing their coming together had deeper ramifications. 'Twas magic and no more than magic.

Gralam raked Avice's body with a narrowed gaze. The blood-red nipples, the straining tendons in her thighs, the creamy droplets of cum pearling her slit -- her own unabashed passion. Her cantrip called him to the moors each night but 'twas her passion that imprisoned him as surely as the bars of a donjon!

In his despair, he lashed out. "Do you think of your *pure love* when you serve me like the lowliest of whores?"

"Nay," she answered, "I think only of ye. In my mind, I say only yer name. The other man plays no part in this --"

Unwilling to listen to any more of her lies, he broke into her avowal of steadfastness with a vow of his own, made only to himself: Here, this eventide, *right now* amidst the damp



heaths and dewy heathers, he would douse the fire in his loins for the witch. He must end this unwholesome conflagration this eventide, ere the flames burnt them both to ashes!

She never gave him the chance.

Moving in on him, she kissed him sweetly upon the lips, then gave him a push. "Go now."

The thudding in his chest stopped. "Are you saying -- do you mean to release me?"

In one graceful move, she picked up her peasant's garb. "'Tis not a question of releasing ye."

"Ha! You have bewitched me --"

"No more than any woman bewitches any man."

"But your cantrip --"

"Began and ended the night we met. Ye visit me here on the moors of yer own free will. But with all yer tree felling and such to accomplish this coming day, ye need yer sleep. So go, seek yer bed." She smiled. "The oaks timbers will make a fine barn." Her hand lifted in a wave. "Until next we meet again."

He blinked. Only once. And in a trice, she had disappeared. Into thin air, evidently, as naught save a few rocks obscured his view of the moors. Nevertheless, mouth slack, he stood there staring at where she *should* have been, trying as best he could to absorb her disclosure.

She held no power o'er him?

*She held no power o'er him!*

Avice said she would never lie to him, not here on the moors. Without that reassurance, her words still rang true. Aye, she had called him to her that first eve. Self-delusion had led him to believe she had summoned him the nights thereafter. In actuality, 'twas he who could not stay away!

What need had she for burning henbane seeds, when those full lips, slightly parted, worked their magic on him more seductively than any witch's spell?

For both their sakes, he must sever his compulsion for her. And as fortune had finally smiled upon him, he now had the means.

And the name.

Gralam had told only one person of his plans to build a communal barn --

Martin.

In return, his cook's brother-in-law had promised not to tell anyone else ... save the nameless woman he intended to wed.

Avice the Enchantress.

Martin intended to wed the woman ... the *witch* ... whom Gralam had bedded on the moors. Ironical, that in these politically precarious times, a peasant farmer could keep Avice safe, whilst a Norman overlord would only bring her doom.

Fine! So be it! Gralam would give Avice to Martin. After the couple united in matrimony, honor would dictate he stay away. Honor would dictate he resist touching her again.

He lived and died by honor.

And yet, after deciding to wed her to another, his nostrils dishonorably flared at the lingering trace of Avice's earthy perfume.

# Book II

~In which the virago vigorously tutors the virgin~

## Chapter Sixteen

On hands and knees, Martin crept forward along the forest floor.

God's hooks! But he hoped the dense foliage would muffle his approach. If his big feet betrayed him, for sure he would end up in a fine kettle of giant stew.

Behind the rotted trunk of an old oak, Martin eventually crouched low.

Well, as low as he could get, anyway.

By the Body of Christ! 'Twas no easy feat tucking in his enormous body! Though the top of his head skimmed the tree branches, ne'ertheless, he did manage to roll up his o'ersized frame, all nice and neat without too much sticking out. Then, he pulled his dirk and went to work, slashing at the tangle of brambles and nettles, and thorny vines that obscured his view.

Of Avice.

The beauty he had caught in the middle of bathing.

Like a woodland nymph, she rose from the crystalline pool. Nude, save for a leather dagger sheath strapped to her upper thigh, she splashed the clear waters up and o'er her pale breasts, the glistening tips pointing upwards, two red berries ripe for the plucking.

God help him, but the spit in Martin's mouth dried up, leaving his Adam's apple stuck in his throat.

Avice ... Avice ...

How in Heaven's name would he e'er please his affianced on the furs if simple functions like swallowing in her presence proved well beyond his reach?

Even as a little one, she had drawn him. Oh, she ne'er meant to, but there 'twas, she had. Owing to the moth-to-flame attraction, he had put aside his seminarian's robes, and chosen Avice o'er and above his Maker --

At that last admittance, Martin slanted his gaze to the Heavens.

When no lightning bolt struck him dead, he returned both eyeballs to Avice, where they rightly belonged.

The lass held his heart and mind, and now his future as well.

When Lord Gralam made him a proposition too good to refuse, Martin had readily agreed to take Avice as his betrothed. Hardly a burden, that agreement, for he had always loved Avice, loved her from the top of his thick skull to his aching stones ...

Speaking of which, he redistributed the protesting lads, and naturally made a mess of things. The sword at his side clanged, the longbow slung o'er his shoulder clattered, the metal-tipped arrows in his quiver knocked together and clunked.

Martin shook his head. Could he make any more noise?

He could, indeed. His headshake had knocked the branch hanging above him, the abrupt move causing the old wood to splinter and fall.

With a loud *plunk*, the limb bounced off his skull. "Quinsy cocksucker!"

The fiery epithet exploded in the quiet of the forest, the heated shout surely singeing the tail-feathers on the birds winging o'erhead.

Martin crossed himself. "Forgive me, Heavenly Father, for I have sinned. Next time, I bite off me tongue ere uttering such filth."

Like a hound on the hunt, he pointed his nose toward the woodland pool. "Oh, and one more thing, Almighty, whilst I have yer attention. Just so ye understand the severity of me situation -- should Avice discover me here hiding in the bushes, spying on her yet again, surer than a man pisses standing up, the lass will lop off me bollocks and roast 'em o'er the spit. No furrowing the field for me then. No sowing any seed either, not without a good strong plow."

He offered a man-to-God wink up to the skies. "Makes no sense, does it now, Lord, to go through all the bother of leaving the seminary ere me ordination and then lose the ability to beget offspring?" He added sheepishly, "Not that I would presume to question what ye have in mind for me next, Holy One, but if ye would be so kind -- spare me manhood and block yonder handmaiden's ears, if only for the next few moments or so."

When his sultry betrothed raised both arms above her head in a sensuous stretch that lifted her erect nipples and accentuated her tapered waist, Martin breathed a sigh of thanksgiving: Despite his outburst, his betrothed remained blissfully unaware of his presence.

God, in His infinite mercy, had answered his prayers! As to the tricky business of doing penance for gawking and cursing, and all the rest of it -- Martin suspected his perpetually blue stones must qualify. He suffered his sins of the flesh something fierce. Lust-filled images gave him no peace during the days and disturbed his slumber during the nights too.

Ere taking his leave of the monastery, he had slept the placid sleep of an innocent babe; now, he tossed and turned abed, dreaming about a hot mouth crushed under his. Full lips opened in sweet invitation. Rapacious tongues entwined. Awakened in a sweat, Martin would find he had erupted, his seminal humor spent on the bedding --

But his male hunger left unappeased.

Carnality mortified him all of the time. Female flesh, creamy white and smooth. Silky suppleness, meeting and melding to his masculine hardness. His big hands traversing rolling curves and hillocks, his gasping mouth savoring each crest and hollow.

Ugh! Lust made him near crazed! How much longer could he stand temptation ere giving into the hot urgency of his loins?

To award Avice some semblance of privacy and himself a small measure of relief, Martin supposed, he might have turned his back. Surveyed the wooded glen. Directed his gaze elsewhere ... *anywhere* ... whilst his betrothed conducted the more intimate details of her ablutions --

Save even a scant instant of negligence would break his solemn vow sworn to Lord Gram of Normandy.

Martin had knelt at the overlord's feet and pledged to keep both eyes on Avice at all times, to protect her with his very life, if need be, for political intrigue placed her in certain danger here on the moors.

He would gladly protect Avice. Gladly wed her, too. Still and all, a bit complicated, that vow.

Avice had once bedded the Norman. To throw another axe in the works, the stubborn woman in question refused to acknowledge her betrothal to Martin.

His betrothed would come around. Eventually. She loved him, the same as he loved her. Apart from that, neither of them had any say in the matter. Slaves had no choice in who they wed. Gram of Normandy had set things up, and that was that!

Martin clutched at his throbbing loins. All for the best that he'd taken his leave of a religious vocation -- obviously, he was unsuited for the wearing of priestly cloth.

Jealousy. Envy. Resentment. Lust. Each blameworthy desire puckered his mouth. He coveted the waters that playfully teased the notch between Avice's shapely thighs. That lapped at her succulent folds like a lover's tongue. At times, like now, he could kill Lord Gram for bedding the woman he loved. At other times, Martin could strangle his betrothed for embroiling him in this messy fix.

And there she was now, his recalcitrant affianced, oblivious to his inner turmoil, mindlessly frolicking about in the water.

Martin ripped open the front placket on his braies.

His manhood lanced and thrust. Reared up like a wild moors stallion, the blood-suffused head dripping sticky anticipation onto the ground.

The Church forbad self-gratification. Every other form of bodily pleasure as well. Save for procreation, village priests instructed their parishioners to live chaste lives in the service of God and king. True believers lifted their eyes to Heaven, and directed their hands to the performance of good deeds on Earth!

Holding to that ecclesiastical tenet, Martin lifted his eyes to the indentation between Avice's thighs -- Heaven in and of itself -- and fisted his turgid member, his hands performing a good deed, if e'er there was one on this green Earth.

*Dear Lord, deliver me!*

Not from temptation. Too late for that now. But from the knot twisting his gut.

When Avice left the waters and made her way to the fern-covered shore, her hips swaying gently from side to side, Martin matched the tempo of his fist to her slow undulation. When she gathered up her wet hair and started wringing out the thick length, he wrung out his thick length, too. When she faced him and her legs drifted languidly open, the graceful parting revealing the mysterious inlet to her mating passage, his ham-sized fist frantically moved up and down, pumping and flexing like bellows.

Aye, aye, aye, Avice. Stay. Just. Like. That.

Did all females look the same *there*? Would he e'er learn how to satisfy her *there*? Or, on the marriage bed, would inexperience render him clumsy? Would curiosity turn him shallow? Would his excitement lead to selfishness? Would his probing leave his bride unmoved? Or, God forbid, even repulsed?

The prospect of making a mistake left Martin frozen.

Save for his whacking hand. His big fingers moved along at a fine clip.

Until a bright snap -- a broken twig or such -- ended his frenzied self-flagellation.

## Chapter Seventeen

Julian moved in behind her quarry. "Secure your hands and come to a stand."

"Indecent! At the moment, me hands are --"

She snickered. "I bloody well know the current placement of your hands."

His eyes also. Whilst jerking off on the ground, her prey had his gaze sealed to Lord Gralam's naked whore. "Now, get up slowly. And do not turn."

Good! He could follow instructions. Both hands clamped on his testicles, he regained his feet. Once straightened, though, his hips swiveled, as if to face her.

Julian tickled the point of her dagger between his shoulder blades. "Defy me, and I skewer you. In the space of a heartbeat, I will have you eviscerated and thrown in a pot to boil."

He harrumphed. "A fine fix -- me in a kettle of giant stew. But no less than I suspected how this day would end."

She frowned at his meaning. "Eh?"

He sighed. "Are ye an assassin?"

"A killer, aye. But of the four-legged variety, not the two. In that regard, you are safe, Martin the monk"

"Ye ken me name!"

"And more. I know Gralam took you under his wing and granted you, a mere serf, a chance to improve your lot by marrying up."

"In his generosity, the overlord bestowed on me the position of steward. And, mayhap, someday, God willing, Lord Gralam might grant me a freeman's rights. But I would have wed Avice without any of those boons."

"So you say."



His voice rose. "As steward, 'tis me responsibility to take poachers like yerself to his lordship for judgment."

"A poacher? Me?" Julian rolled her eyes. Never had she heard such sanctimonious tripe! "What need have I for stealing game?" She puffed out her chest. "I will have you know, I am an apprentice to the hunt, both here and in Normandy, and have been since the age of seven."

Though not divulging her true status wounded her vanity, she refrained from telling Martin the truth: She had already risen along the ranks to the position of *lead* hunter. Alas, the boast would reveal her identity -- Lord Gralam kept but one lead hunter. But amongst the six dozen or so apprentice hunters, Martin the monk would never single out one.

"A groom," he scoffed. "Ye? A female --?"

Her dagger tickling changed to a dagger poke. "Kindly note which of us holds the knife here. Even without the accoutrement of your gender, I can prick you right quick enough." In emphasis, she sent the tip of her blade through the coarse peasant cloth of his outer and inner tunic, until the point jabbed skin. "Bloody misogynist."

"Me, a woman hater? Nay! A thousand times nay! Why, I revere the Blessed Virgin Mary."

"I am outclassed there. No virgin am I. Nor saintly mother, neither. But mark you my words, I shall rise to hunting Master. Someday, I shall ride with my very own trained falcon perched upon my wrist."

"I believe ye. Now kindly lift up on yer blade. Severing me head from me shoulders will hardly prove yer argument."

"And pray, what argument is that?"

"For starters, about yer not being an assassin."

A headless corpse would serve her no purpose. And she did have a purpose for Martin the monk, a grand purpose.

Julian lessened the pressure on her dirk.

"Me thanks." Martin rolled his shoulders.

Broad and muscled shoulders they were, too, she noted, her mouth watering. She did so admire a male of breadth and substance. "If you saw me in full gear, you would know the truth of my occupation. Leather leggings and green jacket in summer for hunting stag, fur jacket in winter for hunting the wild boar -- whatever the surroundings, I blend into the scenery, even an entirely male scenery. And just like my male counterparts, I wear a horn around my neck to call the hounds, a sword for the killing, and a dagger at my belt for skinning the animal. No one would ever guess my true gender."

Her follow-up dagger jab cut short Martin's second attempt to look behind him.

"Easy," her quarry said. "I meant only to verify yer accounting. No doubt, ye make a better man than I."

Behind Martin's big back, Julian gave a little swagger. She liked a man who knew his lowly place!

"Still and all," he piped up, "ye sound like what ye are, which, is to say, a female."

At his dogmatism, Julian blew out a breath, the impatient huff ruffling his hair.

Nice. Golden and thick, the neat cap looked boyishly soft.

Only Martin the monk was no boy. Thirty, if a day, he stood tall and bulky. His much larger dimensions made her feel positively dainty. And Julian never felt dainty, not when she towered o'er most men by several hands.

"When I first set myself the challenge of passing as a scout," Julian began, itching to entangle her fingers in that bowl of soft golden hair, "I artificially induced a male mode of speech. With pebbles lodged in my mouth, I practiced my oration 'till I could imitate a man's vocal cords without any aid whatsoever." She paused, cleared her throat, spoke. "Tell you my true gender now?"

"Aye." He leaned back against her prominent chest. "But not owing to yer vocal cords."

Julian gave a bawdy chuckle that belied the luscious tingle that had sped from the tips of her hardened nipples to her woman's place, which had gone molten in excitement, a full spate of desire she had not expected. Hopefully, as an innocent, Martin the monk would fail to recognize the signs of her intense arousal.

As if pained, the monk groaned -- a fine compliment paid to her attributes, but one that shot down her hope.

Though, when all was said and done, that he liked what he felt, suited her purpose, and so she poked him again. Double-poked him, to be precise. "Ordinarily, I bind my breasts to create a flat chest and stuff my braies to create a false sac. Alas and alack, my masquerade now adorns yonder bush, the lord's whore having beat me to my bath."

"Avice is not the Norman's whore!" In his championship of the whore, the monk forgot himself, and his fist jerked up, then down his accoutrement, a trip of perhaps a foot in length.

"La!" She marveled and licked the drool from her lips. "Watch what you do there! With such a ruthless caress as that, you will wilt in agony ere finishing. Then, where will you be?" She laughed. "Flopping about like a limp fish out of water is where. Here -- allow me to show you how 'tis properly done." She cast her reach around him, made to hook him in.

"Nay -- do not!" He moved to the side, beyond the extension of her hand.

"Because you are sworn to wed the one o'er whom you drool?" She snorted. "Faugh! A virgin like you will never satisfy that whore."

"Virgin?" He hooted like an owl. "Me?"

"'Tis as apparent as the cudgel clubbing the air. Apart from that hale and hearty evidence, your ears are tinged virgin red."

Martin the monk dropped his chin to his chest. "Not all bashful males are virgin!"

"Anticipate the wedding night, did you? Seal the betrothal with a hop on the furs?" She twittered. "I am hardly impressed. Once is little more than an introductory handshake. But," she added, "you can get it up, and that is a wonder after living in such frigid clime as this. Your king should take Holy Orders and leave ruling Britain to men with hot blood, not ice water, coursing through their veins."

"As a married man, The Confessor cannot enter a seminary."

"Married!" She tssked. "Edward The Confessor lives with his wife Edith as a brother and sister do. No connubial exchange of bodily fluids whatsoever."

"What of it?"

"*What of it?*" She gasped. "But how exceedingly dull! Whatever do they do for entertainment? I really do fear that abstinence may become the latest rage in this sterile country. Tell me, do you plan to live with yonder whore as a spouse in name only?"

"Avice is no whore, and I am a virgin, not a celibate."

"So you admit to never having done the deed!"

"I admit naught."

"If you ask me," she continued, twirling her blade, "male virginity is a crime against all females. Let loose upon the populace, inexperience first maims, then kills pleasure. As luck would have it, the offense is easily corrected."

That disclosure had definitely grabbed the virgin's attention!

"How so?" he asked eagerly.

"Hands-on-training. Bed a wench who knows what she is about, and you will learn what pleases us all. I generously volunteer myself as your mentor."

"And what will ye gain from me education?"

"Suspicious, eh? I like that in a virgin," she said cheerfully.

"Answer me! What gain ye from the teaching?"

So -- the obedient pup had a bit of the fierce wolf in him. Good! She appreciated a challenge! She could handle any canine in the manger --

At the thought of handling this large dog, a precursor of mating dribbled down her thigh; her pubic hair glistened with the stuff.

She rubbed her slippery legs together. "Apart from removing one more baffled male from the selection of mating partners, I will *gain*, for a period of specified duration, a grateful lover who knows what I like in bed. But I race ahead of myself -- first things first. You will never learn how to please the whore if you cannot please yourself."

"How many times must I say it? Avice whores for Gralam no longer!"

She knocked his fingers aside. "But she did once, correct?"

“What happened in the past stays in the past.” Like a priest preaching brimstone from the pulpit, his voice hiked.

Whew! That had certainly gotten a quick rise out of the monk. How would his ready passion translate on the furs? Rather than simmer and stew, he would boil and bubble --

Like a giant stew, she mused, recalling the monk’s prior reference.

A self-effacing sense of humor, shiny golden hair, enough height to make her feel dainty, a serene face that truly did belong on a monk, pretty, pretty blue eyes that she had admired from afar, and a huge member she now admired up close -- the prospect of despoiling Martin the monk was rife with decadent possibilities. And not only that -- the monk’s protectiveness toward the whore of the moors proved him capable of soft feelings. Time would tell if she could put his weakness to her own nefarious use.

Julian allowed her wet pubic hair to glaze the monk’s finely toned buttocks.

Hmm. What a rare surprise! The sensation stirred her.

“Hush!” she whispered throatily. “Would you have the whore hear us?”

“Avice is my betrothed, not a whor --”

“Spare me any further protests of indignation. I know the tale, monk.”

Julian had gleaned the details from the source.

Despite that Avice had bedded him, Gralam had forced Martin to plight the whore his troth. A pledge extracted to protect the Anglo-Saxon wench from consorting with a Norman, an unfavorable alignment given the animosity of the House of Wessex toward Normandy.

To counteract The Confessor’s favoring -- even fawning -- of Normans, Earl Godwin, the king’s influential and powerful father-in-law, had demanded the ousting of all Norman nobles from Britain. An exile, Lord Gralam had, thus far, only narrowly avoided.

The overlord walked on shifting political sands. To put a fine point on it, he lived in England on borrowed time. If Gralam were deported, Avice would find herself in a precarious position here on the moors. Tainted by her carnal association to a Norman, she would end up either an outcast or dead.

Unless -- respectability cloaked her illicit relationship with Lord Gralam.

Wedded to a fellow Anglo-Saxon, Avice might escape the wrath of Wessex.

Enter Martin the monk.

An intelligent man, a natural leader -- which went to explain his draw to the priesthood, where a simple peasant might rise to a position of authority -- the resourceful Martin had foregone the seminary in favor of wedding Avice.

From where she stood, the sacrifice hardly weighted.

This observation denigrated neither Martin’s piety nor faith. But his calling *had* after all offered him a way out of slavery.

His decision made perfectly reasonable sense to her. Who could blame a slave for wanting more out of life? Ultimately, one must look out for oneself. Wedding the Lord of Normandy's cast-off whore advanced the monk's ambitions.

To further her own ambitions, Julian intended to push along the nuptials.

Julian slid her sturdy arms about the monk's hips. "All right, student, heed what I do, how I make you feel, and someday you will return the favor. Learn the ins and outs of foreplay and, guaranteed, you will make Avice a happy bride."

Flanking him, she deliberately melded her loins to his hard posterior, noting with pleasure how her naked closeness made the innocent Martin jump. "By the way, whereas the whore's breasts show only a bud's promise, mine are ripe. Raise your tunic and feel their fullness against your feverish skin. Your flesh really has begun to burn, you know. I do that to you. Say a nice thank you, monk."

"Ye stand too near," he said instead.

"Only to reward this remarkable achievement."

When she fingered his *remarkable achievement*, he raised his tunic with astonishing speed.

And groaned.

Really, why would he not? She had told him no lie. The sight of her breasts, past plump into mountainous, brought on convulsions in most men. Their touch had them foaming at the mouth.

"You like them. You like my big breasts."

"Nay!"

"Merde! Such vehemence! The strength of your denial only tells me how much you do like them. Now quell that voice of sanctimony, and enjoy them for enjoyment's sake."

"Enjoyment of any corporal act is a venal sin."

"I am stunned! And here I thought myself worthy of a mortal offence." She laughed. "Imagine how my big breasts will feel in your hands, in your mouth. I would allow it, Martin the monk. I do so admire ambition. I admire a thick rod almost as much."

She stroked his engorgement, and her interior muscles clenched. "*Mon Dieu!* To think you might have wasted this bounty behind the walls of a monastery! Now *that* would have been a heinous sin for sure!"

## Chapter Eighteen

Martin came on a violent upheaval, half the seed spilled on the ground, half against the fingers of the apprentice hunter. Excruciatingly conscious of Avice drying off at the edge of the pond nearest the woodlands, Martin had stifled his pleasure in a grunt. Even so, his affianced stopped moving her linen drying cloth and surveyed the trees, a hand shielding her eyes against the sun's glare.

His betrothed had just heard him climax under another woman's pumping hand!

Noisy licks and slurps rose from behind him. "You taste of clover, monk. The next we meet, you will not squander your clover-flavored cum upon the ground. Next time, I swallow your essence."

A strangled cry tore from his throat. "I am no monk! Cease," he hissed, "calling me so."

"Abhor the name? Lose the condition that merits the appellation."

"You must leave," he told the female who had gratified him. "Right now!"

Using an alternative trail, he would circle back 'round and wait for his betrothed, meeting up with her further along the trail, as if by accident. He would then escort Avice the remainder of the way back to her cottage without her suspecting aught amiss.

"Very well," the female hunter replied and moved away.

But when the loss of her heat left him cold, he called after her. "Wait! Where and when do we meet again?"

"When ready, I shall find you."

For an instant, Martin let go of Avice in his sights and turned to look behind him.

Alas, no sign of the gender-crossing hunter remained.

And when he returned his sights to where they rightly belonged, Avice had disappeared, too, as if into thin air.

\* \* \* \* \*

A strange noise emanating from deep within the dense cover of trees had Avice pulling the dagger Gralam insisted she carry against her thigh. Luckily, she had already raised her skirts to her belly so she unsheathed the weapon with lightning swiftness. "Who goes there?"

"Martin."

So much for giving her friend the slip!

Avice replaced her blade in the tooled leather pouch. "Well, do not stand there, Giant! Come out where I may see ye."

Once, owing to propriety, Martin had refused to enter her cottage. Now, owing to a Norman's inference in her life, her childhood companion had become her constant shadow. Unless she put her foot down, her guard might just catch an eyeful.

Even a witch had needs, and since Gralam had loosed her a fortnight earlier, those needs had gone unmet --

Martin had come *this close* to catching her with a hand in the honey pot!

As her sentry came crashing through the bushes, she began a vigorous defense of what he had *almost* witnessed. "Whilst not the best outlet for carnal expression, self-pleasuring will not contribute to hairy palms."

The giant examined his hands, anyway.

Avice doubted the need. She suspected her childhood friend continued to abstain from all carnal pleasures, including the pleasures of his own hand, which told her the giant had grave reservations about leaving the monastery, even after agreeing to marry her.

As good an opportunity as any, she delicately broached the subject. "This silly betrothal places ye in an untenable position."

"Our impending nuptials are not silly. I love ye, Avice." The steward shook his shiny bowl of hair that priests in training wore.

Telling, how he had yet to forsake the hairstyle. Might his commitment to their betrothal be less than he professed?

"I love ye, too," she acknowledged once again. "As a sister. The Norman forced this wedding on ye."

Martin said mulishly, "I agreed to wed ye of me own free choice. His lordship did no arm-twisting."

*Nay, the Norman had applied pressure of another kind ...*

Martin possessed a heart as large as his stature. Gralam had most likely appealed to the giant's goodness, most likely setting forth an argument for their marriage based on her well-being. Her friend had felt compelled to protect her by giving her his name -- *out of kindness*.

Kindness differed from love. What they felt for one another was pure affection, not base lust. Having some acquaintance with the latter, Avise understood the difference.

Her time spent with the Norman -- now there was raw passion. Even so, without a qualm of remorse, the overlord had given her to Martin, pushed her straight into the giant's arms.

Well, almost.

Martin's arms hung limp at his sides, his faith not allowing for pre-marital touches. Though his keen blue eyes watched her every move, no betraying bulge in his braies confirmed his physical devotion.

Just as well. Carnality would only ruin the beauty of what they shared.

"I shall escort ye back to yer cottage now, Avise."

"What need I a guard whilst the sun shines?"

"Day or eventide, the possibility of violence is always afoot." Martin took a robust breath. "Ye can not continue to live alone. We wed at next full moon. 'Tis imperative ye have a husband's protection, especially considering what happened this morn."

Her brow puckered. "What happened this morn?"

"A messenger from the House of Wessex delivered a missive to the keep."

Her worried frown spread to the rest of her features; she could actually feel her face wince in expectation of disaster. "What says this missive?"

"According to Agnes, who received the information straight from a lower sentry, who swore he overheard a conversation between --"

In exasperation, Avise threw her arms up in the air. "Would ye get on with it, Giant. Just spit out the gist of it!"

"The missive warned the Lord of Normandy against implementing his proposed tithe reduction."

Her mouth gaped. Serfs on the moors, as well as serfs everywhere else, had no rights. Bound to the land, their only recourse from slavery was servitude to the Church.

Or escape.

If a slave remained loose for a year and a day, they earned the rights of freemen. With a reduction in tithe, Gralam would give the people of the moors the opportunity of advancement right here in the village. With extra food in their belly and extra produce to barter, they would have the means to learn a craft or become traders or merchants *without needing to escape*, thus keeping them and losing them, and at the same time. Ingenious!

But dangerous. Gralam must have known what his decision would cost him, both financially and politically, and he had gone ahead anyway and done the right thing. The ramifications were huge, with repercussions that stretched far and wide. "I must have an audience with the Norman lord, and try to ... try to ..."



What?

"I must try to keep the piggin' fool alive," she spoke her thoughts aloud as she picked up the skirts of her kirtle and raced for the keep.

The giant called after her. "If ye think to find Lord Gram at the motte-and-bailey, think again."

Her racing boots screeched to a halt. "What mean ye?"

"Upon reading the missive, the Norman took off, with the admonishment to his guards not to expect him back 'till the day after the morrow."

"Very well. I shall speak to him then." With Martin dogging her heels, Avice headed in the opposite direction, back to her cottage.

She would bite her lips to a bloody pulp there in her homestead 'till Gram returned.

\* \* \* \* \*

The battleaxe went into the animal slow, a two-handed blow that sank the weapon's chiseled head deep into shoulder musculature, and came out fast, dripping of blood and marrow. After wiping the blade clean on a tuft of grass, Julian turned to her archer and horn blower. "Sound the mort."

The death note trilled, and she gave a nod of affirmation. "A good kill, lads. And our last. We are finished here this eve."

The same as she had done at their ages, the young hunters slept in the kennels, where they oversaw the care of the team of hounds. Rising at dawn, they fed and watered the animals, and then mucked out the straw bedding. The lads could not only name each dog, they could vouch for their temperaments. Part of their training, as hers had been too, involved learning how to track. The sleuth-bloodhounds came into play here, as did the eyes, noses and intelligence of each individual hunter. Some signs were vague, such as analyzing hoofprints and dung to tell if the beasts were on the prowl or on the move; some readily apparent, such as direct observation of a herd; some involved the instinct that only came with experience, such as singling out the weakest quarry in a group for the kill. The young hunters would either learn quick or die quicker, gored by an antler or kicked by a hoof or stomped on and eaten whole.

Despite her female gender -- or mayhap because of it -- she made a hard taskmaster. Still and all, five carcasses equaled a respectable take for any one eventide. With fresh deer aplenty to supplement the domesticated livestock of cattle and swine, she saw no reason to exhaust the already tired lads. On the morrow, after a good night's sleep, they would return to this area and hunt again.

She hand-signaled a directive and two brawny apprentice hunters stepped forward and hung the game upside down from a stout wooden pole. Excess blood would drain out of the animal on the return journey back to the keep. On the morrow, cooks would roast the slab of

meat on a spit in the courtyard. Whether tender on the trencher or stringy-tough on the palate, the venison would not go to waste. Even the bones would be used, doled out to serfs for soup. On the moors, empty bellies cried out for sustenance, and Lord Gralam would see hunger pangs assigned to the past. As his loyal vassal, she would implement her overlord's bidding -- despite her loathing of this cold land and its thickheaded people.

"You --" Julian pointed to the shaggy-haired brothers. "Ralf and Rulf --"

The dim-witted pair locked eyeballs with one to the other, and then turned their joint regard to her.

"Aye, you two," she snapped at the peasants. "Stop standing about like twin warts on a boar's hindquarters and carry this load between you."

The strapping Moor lads upended the stripped wooden pole, hefted the burden onto their wide shoulders and scurried away.

"Do you return with us?" asked Peter, a senior member of her Norman-born troop. "Bound to be an extra pair of lips available 'round the fire." He winked.

Julian drank stiff brew from a shared horn with the lads, laughed at the same vulgar jokes too, but not owning the proper appendage, drew the line at wenching. "Nay. Not this eve."

"Avoid tarrying," Little William told her, tugging at the horsehair rope attached to his team of hounds. "Anglo-Saxon nobles are stirring up trouble amongst our kindred and kind. We Normans are not welcome here on the moors."

Julian guffawed, a belly laugh as masculine as if stones hung under her belt. "Think me a female to rape?"

"I meant no insult --"

"None taken. Enjoy those lips. As for me, I intend to enjoy my tick." A bed not within the keep's guarded stronghold, where a woeful lack of privacy ... and boisterous male camaraderie ... would jeopardize her masquerade, but located within some long-dead hermit's hovel, a miserly hut buried deep in the forest.

Swinging her battleaxe, she left immediately for her domicile, with a chorus of "Until the morrow, lead hunter Julian!" following on her heels.

*Lead hunter Julian ...*

Her name held a common place amongst Normans. Used by both genders, only the spelling differed, not the saying, and so keeping *Julian* had presented no problem for a female passing as a male.

Her buxom form proved more problematic.

Even with a judicious use of binding, she was still full-figured. But owing to the dominant traits she possessed, no one had ever questioned her barrel-chested shape. A good thing, for she had been born to hunt, an occupation forbidden to females.

Horrible to consider what would happen if someone brought her real identity to light, for the same alpha streak that stood her in good stead in male pursuits made her unsuitable for all feminine pastimes.

Save, one --

Coupling.

Aye, she enjoyed a good rut every now and again. In between times, too, if the truth be known. Though, there also, she applied the same wariness as she did during the hunt. So as not to give her identity away, she took specific measures against exposure. One such precaution precluded bedding a lover more than one night. To be on the safe side, she blindfolded her paramours. Bound them as well, if the situation warranted. For pleasure's sake, she habitually seized the top position. To her mind, the view from above always outranked the one from below. Not one lover had ever complained about her unorthodox practices --

Save, she released them too soon.

When done, she was done. Finished for good. No sacrifice to give each a boot at the portal at dawn, as her interest in any one lover waned come morning light.

But all left with a lopsided smile on their faces and a similarly lopsided gait to their walk, a bruised member causing both.

How would Martin the monk stand up to the rigors of her carnal tutoring?

Not very well, she suspected. But no matter. One reason and one reason alone had compelled her to take him on for private instruction.

Lord Gralam of Normandy.

She had set her sights on the overlord long ere journeying to this heathen place on the moors. Since learning what mating entailed, across two shores and a score of lovers, she had lusted for Lord Gralam. Owing to the difference in their rank and circumstance, naturally 'twas an impossible pursuit --

Though, not necessarily, an unconsummated one.

Since the beginning of time, men had gone after what they wanted -- why not she? She lived as a man, worked as a man, had the same wants as a man, why act the passive maiden in lust?

That whey-faced whore of the moors was but a passing fancy, brought on by Lord Gralam's loneliness for his ancestral land and rightful leadership position in military campaigns. One way or the other, the overlord would return to Normandy. Then, everything would return to the old way -- only better.

Julian gave a self-satisfied smile. Indeed, she had it all worked out. During the day, she would serve as Gralam's "man-at-arms" just as she had always done on the battlefield, but come night, she would serve him in a different capacity.

As the warlord's bedmate.

## Chapter Nineteen

Looking up from his sloped desk, Gralam cast his weary eyes through the narrow arrow loop, lamenting the part of himself he had misplaced.

Gralam rethought that last. As a cautious man and a military strategist, he did that quite a bit. And eventually, he decided, “misplaced” incorrectly described the event that had transpired, since he knew exactly where he had lost this vital piece of himself, an organ to be precise.

On the dratted moors.

Thus far, he had refused the call to go back and retrieve the missing organ, though he could easily narrow its location by following a certain telltale beating.

Not visiting Avice had lost him his heart.

But if the blood hammering in his ears was any indication, a reunification of his body parts was in the offing.

The Enchantress was coming to him.

Below in the courtyard, she raced toward the keep. A corresponding lifting of his pervasive melancholy swiftly followed his sighting.

Soon, he would hear her light footsteps skipping down the halls. Next, the guard posted outside his solar would announce her arrival.

His quill and inkhorn dropped from his hand. His precious parchment leaf fell to the floor. Who cared? His journalized reflections on tenant farming would wait for later. Above all else, Avice took precedence.

That the witch had left the moors and crossed the moat into Norman territory could mean but one thing: As receptive as a female animal in heat, she sought him out. Oh, she

would carry with her some pretext or other, but whatever her justification, carnal hunger prompted this visit, naught else.

A fortnight since their last fornication, the witch needed release.

Which differed tremendously from needing *him*.

Gralam would not fool himself. To Avice, he amounted to more than a means to an end. Right now, that end involved her carnal satisfaction. And foolishly, beyond all common sense, he would do what he could to assuage her appetites.

Pathetically, her visit made his spirits soar.

He had suffered his self-enforced isolation from the witch. So much so, that, nearing the end of his endurance, he knew one touch of her silky skin would lose him the will to go on without her.

Simple solution: He must not touch her.

Impossible solution: He must not touch her.

Gralam paced the perimeter of his lonely cell, resigned to his chronic frustration.

*Her* frustration was something else again.

A hot little piece like Avice would wear abstinence like a tunic woven of hair. Naught less than a hard penetration would do her. How to ameliorate her need and still keep his distance?

With torturous difficulty, he concluded. Picturing the sum and substance of Avice's carnal resolution stirred more than his imagination.

He considered himself a man of moderation, harsher than some, gentler than many. Pain and he had an intimate acquaintance, both on the giving and receiving ends of the spectrum. And though preferring peace, he was no stranger to conflict. That admitted, his past encounters with Avice had scathed him. Far from offer a complaint, he had treasured the hot passion of their congress, both in and out of their mossy bed. Still, after such a brief interlude, he had assumed the parting would cause him only a slight twinge of remorse.

Ha! He had underestimated his assumption. The pain of his shattered leg paled in comparison to the pain of her absence; her absence had shattered him more than any amount of broken bones. That she was well and alive served as his only solace. At all costs, he intended she remain the same.

Which meant, freeing her from the taint of association with him -- ere the current anti-Norman unrest brewed to a boil within the realm.

Which meant, cloaking her affiliation to witchcraft.

Vouchsafing her to a pious man, one whom Avice had known since childhood, sufficed on both fronts.

Wed to the moralistic, former monk, Martin, no one would suspect her of witchcraft. And, should anyone learn of her past relationship with a Norman overlord, the sanctity of marriage would buffer her against political disfavor.

Jaw locked, Gralam stopped his frantic pacing to pound a fist against the wall.

“Sacks of excrement! Night soil blatherers!”

Political opportunists were an odious lot. Should a House of Wessex spy attempt to hurt Avice, Gralam swore to God, he would cut out the bastard’s bloated bowels and cast his wind-stink into the sea --

The portal slammed in, the rusty hinges sparking with the force of the visitor’s entry. Ready to do battle, Avice marched across the threshold of his solar.

In the current political state of affairs, amusement was as hard to come by as tolerance. So, when the diminutive Avice faced him, slight shoulders squared, her combativeness tugged his lips into a mirthful smile.

“Ye piggin’ idiot,” she raged, “ye reduced the serfs’ tithe.”

“I did.” He raised his heavy lids to her wide furious stare. “What of it?”

“’Twas a righteous and just, even noble, act! Why would a Norman nobleman such as yerself do such an uncharacteristically generous thing?”

Gralam shrugged off both the compliment and the underlying insult. “In case I should meet with an untimely end, I wished the people of my fiefdom to have something put aside for a rainy day.” He glanced out the arrow loop at the o’ercast skies. “An occurrence that grows more likely with each passing hour.”

“Do not speak so!”

“Venturing a guess about the clime offends you in some way?”

“’Tis not the blasted rain clouds of which you speak. Why not allow me to help ye --?”

“I have told you many, many times already, as overlord of these moors and as a Christian too, I cannot condone witchcraft. I command you, cease all incantations!”

Clamping her hands on her hips -- better there than around his throat -- she counterattacked with a change of subject. “You assigned me the protection of a guard. Why?”

In a show of feigned indifference at her first volley, Gralam flicked a bit of nonexistent fluff from his lordly apparel, whilst inside, he trembled and shook.

With gratitude.

Avice had called Martin her *guard*. Not her sweeting. Not her heart swoon. Not her *pure love*.

“Where is your intended, anyway?” he asked, his coolly put question masking his relief.

Her hot reply hid none of her distress. “I cannot escape him! Even as we speak, my friend awaits me outside the portal.”

*Friend*, eh?

At best, a tepid description of their relationship. Dared he believe Avice had voided her bladder of romantic tripe about Martin?

Like poetry, courtly love was all well and good, and did have its place, but what he had shared with Avice on the moors -- the sweaty heat, the unpretty cries, the earthy aromas -- now *that* was the stuff of real romance. The former seminarian, Martin, would never understand the wants and desires ... the demands ... of a female such as Avice. With her carnal appetites, she would eat the pious steward alive during the mating act.

Gralam let his jealousy go. Martin's very goodness would keep Avice safe from harm. And for that favor, he owed his new steward a debt of gratitude and more.

"Call Martin off me arse!" Avice stamped her deplorably shod foot. "His constant presence is an invasion, an out and out trespass!"

His brows shot upwards. "Of that same body region, I presume?"

She nodded vigorously. "Exactly."

"How very odd, for as I recall, you invited *my* invasion of that particular region. In fact, you encouraged *my* trespass there."

In a reflexive move, Gralam caught Avice's palm ere the digits flattened upon his cheekbone.

His nostrils flared at her scent, the fragrance more intoxicating than any elixir, more spellbinding than any witch's potion. His rigidly held control teetered and slipped.

Confound it! Rather than trust his will power, he should have let her strike him!

Cursing his stupidity, Gralam released her palm.

As her arm fell back down to her side, she shouted, "Norman interloper!"

"I answer to Norman, but not to interloper." He took a raspy breath, fought for calm in the middle of the storm. "Though sired of Norman blood, my mother was born on this shore. For that reason, I have as much right to live in this country, as do you. Furthermore, despite what you may think, I am no marauding invader, no favorite of the king. I made no cadger to The Confessor for this land. I came here looking to live in peace on holdings my mother bequeathed to me."

Peace. An expendable luxury in these turbulent political times, and one extravagance he might need to drop in favor of survival.

A Norman invasion lay ahead. Not this year, or the one after, but soon. Change hung suspended in the air. Should he outlast the present turmoil, he would still need to choose sides ... and loyalties ... later on down the road.

Avice tilted her jaw. "Martin insists we wed on the next full moon."

"So?" he said, teeth clenched against the pain that statement inspired. "What of it? Say your church vows."

"Ninny! What church? What vows?"

*Ninny* exchanged for *Norman* ... An elevation in her poor opinion of him.

He played the fool, just to hear her speak. "You witches do not wed in church?"

"We may hand-fast, but that is as far as the pomp and circumstance goes. Who needs vows to legalize love?"

"So -- go jump the broomstick. That is what witches do during a hand-fasting -- correct?"

Shooting him a look to kill, she let that last sarcasm go and crossed her arms below her pert breasts. "Martin remains in the dark concerning my sorcery."

"I see," he answered softly. She had told him, a Norman overlord, of her witchcraft, but had not similarly informed Martin. Much could he deduce from that lack of forthrightness. "Well, if Martin *remains in the dark* all the more reason to stop practicing your craft."

She glared at him. "I shan't wed him. And do not attempt to force the issue."

Gralam stood legs authoritatively akimbo, a stance that spelled out his command of her. Too bad, even without the cantrip, she still ruled him completely.

For her sake, he must put on a show. "Need I remind you, we are not on the moors? In this solar, you are my subject and I am your lord. Drop to the rushes at my feet, and offer me my just respect." For lauding his power o'er her, surely she would hate him now.

All for the best if she did.

She took her time landing at his boots, but smirked up at him fast enough when she arrived. "So sorry, m'lord. No disrespect intended."

Though laughter bubbled up within him at that last ridiculous assertion -- Avice always *intended* her disrespect -- Gralam stayed the serious course. "Your so-called repentance leaves me unconvinced."

"Oh, coo, m'lord! Do ye mean to spank the irreverence out of me, then?" Greed lit her green eyes -- Avice did so enjoy her punishment! On the moors, his hand had oft times started out on her rump only to end up between her eager thighs.

He endured her winsome allure. No more touches! "Spanking will not be necessary. But here in my domain, I demand that which is my due. That entails your full reconciliation to my authority."

"Oh, I am reconciled to ye authority, all right. See, how subject I am to ye --" Licking her lush lips, she inched her gown up from the floor.

Slowly. Slowly. Maddening him with the slowness, she revealed knees, thighs ...

Gralam anchored his sights at the level of her tiny waist. Only when he could no longer stand the delay did he drop his gaze lower, to feast on the inlet ... the pubis ... the genitalia.

In his thoughts, he called that place something else --

His delight.



A tender sentiment he had thus far withstood speaking aloud.

Avice played a game with him, but 'twas no coy maidenly contest of hide and seek. Tossing her fair hair, she boldly opened her thighs. Wide. Wider still.

The outer lips of her passage pouted. Haloed with the moisture of her secretions, the canal looked blood-engorged, blood excited ... bloody beautiful.

“As ye can plainly see, m’lord, I am fully subjected to ye.”

That reed-thread declaration undid him. When she began to disrobe, he could find no words to stop her. Spellcasting or not, she bewitched him still.

## Chapter Twenty

Buzzing inside like a hive of randy bees, Avice unsheathed the dagger strapped to her thigh. She removed her garb quickly, throwing and tossing each piece haphazardly, 'till she had bared herself.

*Make yer piggin' move, Norman!*

A lengthy time coming.

As be she. How much longer would he make her wait for assuagement?

*Charge me like a warrior, Gralam! Allow lust to boil yer blood, no thought of consequences.*

Her wish remained unfulfilled.

As did she.

At a full military stance, he solemnly surveyed her, doubtlessly plotting out the course for each eventuality, whilst silently staring at her nipples.

On the moors, he had suckled her nipples. Memories washed o'er her, the recollections flooding her in liquid fire.

*Oh-me-oh-my! Hurry, Gralam, do hurry!*

"Damnation!" he exploded. "I should have taken your suggestion and practiced unnatural intercourse." He harrumphed. "Sodomy -- an act that goes counter to every Church teaching and which has at its core unnaturalness, disharmony, lack of community ... witchcraft. All things considered, the position would have been apropos."

"All things considered, we would have both enjoyed it. But why mention sodomy now?" She hiked a brow in challenge. "Unless -- would you like to give the practice a go?"

“Certainly not! I only mention the unnatural activity because ... because ... I see proof of my irresponsibility toward you. Had I taken you *that* way, you would have avoided your present predicament.”

The man vexed her mightily. He ne’er simply spoke what was on his mind, but talked ’round and ’round the subject, ’till finally, out of sheer aggravation, his evasiveness would force her to ask. “What mean ye?”

He cleared his throat. “If you carry my babe, I shall pay Martin extra gold for the additional inconvenience.”

At the mention of payment, Avice sagged as though hit by a volley of arrows.

So, he thought she had quickened, did he?

Jumping to the wrong conclusion explained his long stare. Norman arrogance explained the gold. Why he saw carrying his babe as an *inconvenience* defied all manner of explanation.

Her temper catapulted. “Save yer piggin’ magnanimous gestures. Yer bairn took no root in me belly.”

Did he look relieved or disappointed at the telling?

Hard to decipher when he kept his true nature hidden.

“But your breasts ... your breasts are fuller,” he insisted.

Save his obstinacy -- now, that characteristic she deciphered right quick enough. “Oh, well, feel free to blame yerself there.”

“P-pardon?”

“Oh, ease up, would ye! And cease hunting down excuses to palm me off on Martin. He played no part in this, as we have yet to couple.”

For a moment, his dark eyes widened, then lidded again. The shuttering and opening happened so quickly, the action gave her no insight into his thinking -- or feelings, if he had any of those. His neutral response of “I see” also told her naught.

Maddened no end, she pushed to get a reaction from him. “Martin says he will get me with child on the wedding night. I say, we shall ne’er have one of those.”

“Intercourse serves more than one purpose. One might engage in the activity without necessarily giving a thought to procreation,” he said dryly.

“What ye allude to is pleasure, and pleasure goes against Church canon, which Martin follows to the letter.”

Two deep furrows cut into Gralam’s forehead. “If you carry neither my child, nor Martin’s, pray tell me how I am to blame for your new fulsomeness?”

“Yer reduction of grain tithes has caused everyone on the moors to gain weight. Three meals a day explains me recent blossoming.”

By coming to her rescue against a pack of would-be rapists, Gralam had shown himself to be a cut above the usual negligent overlord. His recent dealings with hunger on the moors had also hiked him up in her estimation. But the man was far from perfect. His arrogance went past the pale. His cool distancing set her teeth on edge.

Neither was she perfect. She sought punishment for her grievous mistake against him, and then polluted her repentance by enjoying what he did.

Could making amends get any more complicated? She wondered, gliding back on her haunches, scooting her arms behind for balance, and opening her thighs.

Mayhap, her boldness would give him reason to discipline her.

Her mouth watered in expectancy.

Of a sudden, Gralam walked away from her -- not the action she had hoped to achieve. "Are ye leaving me?"

"Nay."

"Then, where do ye go?"

"My riding chest."

He returned holding a leather flogger.

Odes to discipline dancing in her head, she rode up on her knees and presented him with her backside.

"Pretty rose, puckered bud," he whispered.

The sheer poetry of the softly uttered words melted her. "I be ready for ye to whip me."

"Whip you! How could you think such a thing?"

"Wishful thinking, I suppose."

Laughter burst forth behind her. "The hilt of the flogger goes inside you and acts as a phallus. You do know what that is, do you not?"

"Initiated witches have used dildos for centuries. Short-handled broom sticks, mostly. All things being equal, I would prefer the genuine article, m'lord."

"All things are not equal and your preferences, witch, matter naught. Now turn 'round and face me again."

So much for him admiring her fuller bottom ...

She met him with a pout.

Not that he noticed. His glance had gone elsewhere. "Come up into a crouch, legs spread again. Hold naught back."

How dare he accuse her of keeping her body in abeyance! Unlike *him*, she kept naught in check, particularly not her lust, specifically not her enjoyment. Those she had surrendered to him their last eve on the moors.

She squatted as open as a woman might get for a man. Without touching her in any way, he inserted the uppermost vanguard of the whip's soft leather hilt into the notch between her legs. Owing to her sopping wetness, she took the initial penetration with relative ease --

But bucked when he deepened the breech. A fortnight doing without makes for a long carnal break.

Dropping to his haunches, he eyed the opening to her belly. "Steady."

She fluttered her lashes. "Will it all fit, m'lord? The handle is *sooo* long."

"Only as long as my cock and not nearly as thick. I did mention all things were not equal. As to accepting it -- you will, Avice. You will take it, and plead for more. Your passage was made for congress."

Her fluttering lashes stilled and dropped. She said sweetly, "Nay, m'lord, me passage be made for ye."

Onto her ploy, he would have none of her seduction, not this time. "Avice --"

"Oh, very well," she snapped at his warning tone and bore down like a woman about to give birth. "Teats heavy with milk, belly great and round, heaving and panting and pushing, so does a woman summon forth a new life."

"Accept the suit of your Martin," he suddenly roared.

My, my. What had she said?

"Wed him," he continued, "take him to your bed, present him with many witchy-twitchy babes. Past time you became someone else's burden!"

Gralam's referring to her as a "burden" wounded her to the very core.

She owned the hurt. No looking back, no jumping ship at the first sign of rough seas, she had committed herself to sticking with the Lord of Normandy. And rising to the bait and arguing would do no good, not with him.

Since their first mating under the moon and stars, Gralam had attempted to rid himself of her. A great deal of persistence would be required to wear him down, to get him to trust her and her motivations. Unburdening himself conflicted with Gralam's reticent style. Closed-mouth, he would shoulder his responsibilities all by himself -- 'till the king exiled him, or nobles lurking in the trees ran him through with their broadswords, whichever came first.

Whether he agreed or not, she would help him, for her witch's duty compelled her to right her wrong.

As to bearing Martin's bairns -- phooey to that! In her mind's eye, she saw not Martin, but Gralam pacing the rushes as she labored. Gralam rubbing her lower back, her distended belly, fingering the birthing canal for the descending head, doing what he could, *all* he could, to relieve the birthing pangs.

"Fondle your nipple," he said, breaking into her fantasizing, destroying the illusion of a future between them.

A tear draining down her face for what could ne'er be, she did as told. How foolish! A witch and a Norman overlord could ne'er enter into a pair bonding that would result in a child.

"Now pull on the tip. Hard," he specified and pushed the hilt all the way up and into her cunny.

"Oh, aye, aye, aye," she chanted in a frenzy, dew dribbling from between her lewdly split pubic lips, her hips moving, her thighs going taut, her fingers pulling on her elongated nipples.

He masturbated her in soft leather strokes, the whip's black tassels sweeping the floor between her parted thighs, until her screams of completion reached the vaulted ceiling of his solar.

Her cries still echoed when he said with stiff formality, "You may rise."

Already lonely from her solitary climax, his impersonal tone further crushed her. Looking for comfort, she rubbed the side of her face against her raised shoulder, as a cat might do, and then reached out to him. "Please?"

He stood and moved away. "You may rise."

She ken the true meaning of punishment then -- not pain, but apathy. "What of the flogger?"

"The flogger stays in place."

Heavy with defeat, she kneed the rushes and lumbered to her feet, as well. Thighs splayed to accommodate the hilt of the crop, she took a step.

And gasped. "When I move, the hilt ... the hilt makes me ... provokes me ... ."

"I understand."

Understood, mayhap, but would the wretch answer her need or turn away in disgust?

His action spoke for itself. The blunt end of the flogger began thrusting up inside her again.

How wanton she must look! Naked, her thighs spread, her cunny wet, her pubic hair saturated with arousal, her pointed teats bobbing, then bouncing -- how very, very ugl --

"Beautiful. So beautiful," he declared.

She arched, pre-climactic tension pulling her inside herself. Craving him like some crave the smoke of henbane, she screamed out another lonely climax. Then, went limp and spent.

"I agree with Martin's assessment," he crooned softly. "You can no longer live alone in a secluded cottage. Henceforth, you will stay here inside the keep, where I may keep my eye on you."

Avice pulled herself together. She had a duty to perform.

“Aye,” she answered, readily agreeing, as his plan suited her plan well indeed. With Gralam’s reduced tariff, her gut told her brewing political trouble amongst Norman-hating noblemen would soon spill o’er. To protect Gralam, she would need *to keep an eye on him*.

The overlord nodded, everything decided. “Starting right now, Martin will no longer serve as your guard. However, as your betrothed, he may come and go to your bedchamber. I shan’t interfere in the courtship.”

Nay, just the opposite! Gralam would encourage the courtship. Force it, if need be. At the first opportunity, the Norman overlord would wash his hands of his witch burden.

His indifference burned her worse than a thousand witchhunter’s flames would have done.

## Chapter Twenty-one

Up ahead, Martin strolled along the path, whistling, as though he had not a care in the world.

Ducking further into the camouflaging shadows, Julian allowed the lapsed monk to pass her by.

Amusing, how her quarry came to within a flea's itch of her and suspected naught amiss. Odd, how her bad mood improved upon sighting the innocent virgin.

Martin took a few more steps, and she jumped out from her hiding place. Pinning him from behind, she reached around and pointed her sword at his gullet. "Here!" She tossed him a narrow strip of leather. "Cover your eyes, then turn."

He caught the blindfold with a quickness that surprised her. Usually, big men moved oxen-slow.

"Aha! An ambush! But 'tis dark out," he argued. "Even if ye think to keep yer identity a secret, what need I for a blindfold when I can barely see the hand afore me own face?"

His logic trumped her order. Still and all, Julian had not avoided exposure of her gender all these years by taking foolish chances. And not only that, if she allowed him to best her in any way, even in logic, he would see that as a victory. That victory would cost her the edge in this competition. As a female who made her way in an exclusively male-world, losing her edge would spell her eventual subordination --

No boot-wipe was she, no minion either, not for any man! "Stop your prating and do as told!" She pressed her argument persuasively to his jugular. No better logic than a sharp blade!

"Anything ye say," he meekly rejoined.



With the upperhand hers, she allowed her voice to soften to hushed benevolence, the condescending tone one might use with a pampered pet. "Come nightfall, the likes of you should leave the forest to those who know their way around a weapon."

"Quinsy cocksucker! I am not as green as all that. Me dirk has blood on it."

"Nick yourself whilst shaving, did you?"

A firm believer in knowing one's quarry, both the good and bad features of his temperament, Julian stepped to one side to read Martin's expression under the moonlight. Had her sarcasm angered him?

To her utter amazement, the monk's fine features showed jocularity. His intelligent eyes twinkled, their blue luster lighting up the bleakness of the surrounding woods.

He had yet to don the blindfold.

Still making no move to cover his eyes, he wagged the golden bowl of his head. "A fine jest, female," he said guffawing.

Well, good! The monk could laugh at himself, even if a female poked fun at him. Mayhap they would share a chuckle or two between bouts of rutting. But for now, she must keep him in his place. Laugh with him too soon, and he would take advantage of her. "Never again call me *female*," she chastised him. "Quit your chortling, and tell me why you are here wandering the woods at night."

"As I recall," he answered good-naturedly, "ye said you would find me. I merely simplified your search."

"*You* simplified *my* search?" Her turn now to guffaw. In a still pool, the virgin would need directions to find his own handsome reflection. A scout he was not. Absurd to think he could find her, an experienced hunter, in the twists and turns of this wooded glen, particularly once eventide had fallen!

"Not difficult at all to trace ye," he continued. "Generally speaking, your gender carries less weight on smaller feet, so I merely looked for a tiny and shallow set of prints amongst the larger, deeper indentations."

"In the dark!" She scoffed.

"Me night vision is excellent. I ne'er require a torch to make me way. I shall tell ye a little secret -- in the monastery, oft did I read the Good Word in me cell long after the call for snuffing out the torch. Moon and stars are bright enough for me. And, naturally, I did start tracking ye earlier, ere the sun faded. Broken twigs and branches, and sundry snapped vines, helped tremendously." He sighed. "I tell ye, 'twas child's play. Much akin to following a course of bread crumbs. If ye like, I shall teach ye the rudiments."

Stepping to the rear again, Julian glared at the back of Martin's golden head. "I need not the help of a ... of a ... peasant farmer to trail a quarry," she ground out. "I cut my hunter's teeth on such pursuit."

“And very nice teeth they must be too, particularly when ye snarl like that. A shame I have n’er actually seen them.”

The monk secured the strip atop his nose, and then swished his palms about in an exaggerated fashion. “There. Blinded, both by yer engaging personality and the leather. Oh! And ere I forget, please to note, my occupation on the moors be that of steward, not peasant farmer. Which, as it so happens, places me in a superior position o’er yerself as an apprentice hunter.”

“Think again. I am still not your underling, because --” She bit her tongue against the boast. Tell him she was *lead* hunter, not apprentice hunter, and she would court discovery.

He quirked a fair brow. “Because why --?”

“Because ... because ...” She quickly thought up a paltry excuse to hide her blunder. “*Because* as a Norman, in a Norman holding, my country’s rules apply here, not yours.”

“I would have considered hierarchy is hierarchy, regardless of the country.” He shrugged. “But have it your own way,” he said agreeably.

His graciousness turned acknowledgment into favor, making her token proclamation of superiority not worth spit.

She scowled behind his back.

“I should tell ye, Norman,” he said airily, “I very much liked what ye showed me the first we met. I tried the stroke on meself several times since, and with a great success.”

“In that case, you are ready for your next lesson. But not here. Too dangerous,” she hissed, looking about.

“Thieves?”

“Their sort of danger I can deflect.” Taking a breath, she told him what she had only told Gralam. “There are doings afoot here, a presence. I have sighted goings-on. *Rich* goings-on.”

“I too have seen them. Off in a distance, they be, creeping about.” He spoke on a hush. “Spies from The Confessor’s court?”

She scanned the branches. “House of Wessex. Common sentiment dictates hating Normans. Do you hate us as well, monk?”

Blindfold in place, he turned. “Blood might be thicker than water, but actions speak louder than words. Lord Gralam might be Normandy-born, but he be trying to do right by this land and its folk.”

“I question whether the House of Wessex makes such distinctions, monk.”

“There be good and bad in every peck of potatoes. Most sacks contain a little of both. And ’twould please me no end if ye could refrain from calling me *monk*. I took no ordination vows and that misnomer belies the purpose of this tryst. Foils the mood. too, would ye not agree?”

Tact dripped from the steward's chiseled lips. His middle-of-the-road thinking made her fume. "Must you see both sides of every rock?"

"I try doubly to, aye. Unless the rock be three-sided. Then, I try thrice as hard."

His tolerance tried her patience! Blowing out an abrupt breath between her tight lips, she gave him a non-tactful push down the trail. When they came to her abode, Julian directed him inside.

Closing the portal after him, she came straight to the point.

"Everything off, monk. I would relieve you of your virginity now."

## Chapter Twenty-two

Mirth shook Martin. Save for finding a boot directed at his hindquarters, he might have doubled o'er in a fit of laughter.

What a strange tryst!

His mentor thought him an effete and spineless male, easily subordinate to her every whim. Obviously, she had mistaken a lack of experience for an absence of virility. Whilst admitting he had much to learn as far as practice went, he had ne'er lacked for vigor. Should he play along with the hunter's underestimation of him, allow her to assume the lead, or should he explain that, just like she, he differed from what he seemed on the outside?

Rather than rush headlong into an answer he might later regret, he did what he always did when faced with a quandary.

He deliberated.

Spontaneity did have its place. The unexpected livened up the dullness of day-in and day-out activities. Plodding the course had its merits also. Routines removed the discomfort of surprise.

Employing both points of view, Martin weighed the pros and cons of his dilemma. What would subordination gain him? Lose him? What would submission now mean later? And how might his decision best achieve his dual objective -- ending his virginity and accumulating a store of carnal knowledge to please Avice in bed?

Upon weighing both advantages and disadvantages, he decided not to hasten the former objective to the detriment of the latter. Lovemaking was not a race to the finish line. And pretending to allow this female to ride roughshod o'er him, when he was neither submissive nor dominant, but a little of both, was the sort of dishonesty he had always detested. Here on out, he would simply be himself.

"Do your ears lap o'er, monk? I ordered you to remove your garb!"

“What? No wooing first?”

“You are here to get laid, steward, not romanced.”

She had called him *steward*, not *monk*! A step in the right direction.

Still, like a rain cloud blocking the sun, disappointment hung darkly o’er him. On the road to bed, surely romance would only improve the journey.

As a restive boot tapped behind his back, Martin set forth his argument. “Ye must stop and pick a wildflower now and again whilst off on the kill, correct?”

“Never. If a flower gets in my way, I stomp on the blossom.”

“But the floral perfume must draw ye --”

“The scent of fresh dung draws me. A steaming pile tells me I grow close to my quarry.”

Beneath the blindfold, his eyes crinkled; below the blindfold, his lips lifted. “Now I know what to bring ye for a gift.”

“Say what you will, grin like a witless knave too, but flowers will not fill an empty belly. The overlord depends upon me for fresh meat. In the woods, I hunt, not pick posies.”

“Yer devotion to Lord Gralam takes me breath away.”

“So will this.” A blade impressed his throat, its sharp point etching his flesh.

What had he said to warrant such engraving? Obviously, she had taken offence. Obviously, he had stepped out of bounds. But o’er what?

*Aha!* Could it be that the rough-living hunter hid more than her gender? Could it be, she hid a tender regard for the Norman overlord?

Having for years carried a similar tenderness for Avice, he well understood her plight. Even when she tersely ordered, “Drop your braies” he sympathized.

But understanding differed from obedience. And he never allowed sympathy to sway him.

He sighed. A pity, she insisted upon a single route to a multi-charted destination. A pity, her one-track mindset excluded romance. His nature required both sentiment and physicality; he would not settle for one without the other.

A sidestep and a lunge dislodged the weapon at his throat. A twist later, and he had locked the hunter against him, her back to his front. Her blade fell, the point buried in the packed dirt floor. Using a gentle restraint, he subdued her thrashing. “Be still now.”

“Why enter a seminary when you would make a warrior nonpareil, a fighter of the first order? Combined with your size, you could strike a man dead with a single blow!”

Saints be praised! A grudging homage had replaced the hunter’s previous contempt-colored remarks, all because he had bested her at her own game! He could see he would need to teach her that fists and swords do not courage make. Different types of courage existed, different forms of bravery, different methods of showing fortitude: Heedless violence only

begat more of the same. For that reason and then some, he held monks in the highest regard, for they gave up everything in service to God. Now that took a raw force of will!

But like lovemaking, that lesson made for a better showing than telling.

He would have his frolic first. "Do I detect a reluctant admiration in yer sweet voice?"

She cawed. "You have me mistaken for some dewy milkmaid. Naught *sweet* about me, in my vocal cords or in my disposition. And quit sugar tonguing me -- I have already agreed to let you into my braies."

"But ye do admire me --"

"All I admire is your ability to stand whilst pissing. I merely stated a fact regarding your killing abilities." She endeavored to elbow him in the gut.

To prevent her from hurting herself, he pinned her arms behind her back, done with care, so as not to cause her undue distress. "The lady doth protest too much. Come, admit the truth."

"And, pray, what truth is that?"

"Ye have developed a fond regard of me already. I do grow on folks --"

Dipping her chin, she made to sink her teeth into his hand. Though blindfolded, he could feel her moist breath on his palm as she honed in on him. Ere she took a bite, he retracted his arm. A loosened tooth would mar her smile, a grin he waited anxiously to see. Plus, such a bite would severely limit his playing abilities. What would the woman straining in his arms say if she learned of his pastime?

Best get the confession out of the way, ere beginning their lessons. "No bites on the hands, woman! I need both to play me instrument."

"A two-handed man, are you?"

"Not *that* instrument! I play the lute," he grumbled. Now she would look at him askance for enjoying a less than masculine pursuit. "I enjoy plucking the strings." He braced himself for her laughter.

"So? I enjoy the kill," she growled, trying to stamp on his foot.

Dodging the trod, he moved his legs to the outside, trapping her heavy hunting boots within.

"Release me, you cur."

"Temper, temper. A kiss will gain yer freedom. Naught less will do me."

A gusty breeze lifted the hair on his forehead. Presumably, she was vigorously shaking her head. "I dislike kissing. Kissing serves no purpose. Kissing rightly belongs to babes in nurseries."

"So -- ye like bairns? So do I. Someday, I should like to beget many children." Regardless of their gender, he would teach them all to play the lute.

She tssked. "What knowledge does a virgin have of making babes?"

“Naught. But ye have but to kiss this virgin to taste his knowledge of romance.”

“Cloying sentimentality! What is the meaning of romance? I know its name not.”

He smiled his complacency. “This virgin knows its name well.” He rubbed his mouth atop her ear, relishing her scent, which he appreciated all the more now that a blindfold had deprived him of his sight. Without any visual distractions, her musky perfume beckoned him, aroused him, drove him instinctively to mate.

And yet, in his need for romance, he held back.

“Come,” he coaxed, “a kiss. I very much like kissing.”

“And who have you ever kissed?”

“Avice. ’Twas most pleasant.”

“Rutting is more pleasant. Loose me, and I shall show you how.”

“Not rutting! I would learn how to make love. And making love involves kissing.”

“Blech! Two mouths sucking on one another, sharing the same spit! Kissing is unnecessary to the act. Remove your braies for your first lesson. And, as I have other tasks to accomplish ere nightfall, make haste.”

*Make haste?*

He frowned. “The moon is already hanging in the sky. Full nightfall will be upon us in a trice.”

“And a trice is all we need for rutting.”

His mouth hung open. This fierce female might know the mechanics of intercourse, but certainly not the pleasures of lovemaking.

Without question, he admitted to a virgin’s inexperience, but he suspected that a slow courting made the joining all that much more enjoyable. He also suspected ensuring his mate’s satisfaction would enhance his own reward.

But no reward came without skill. And no skill came without effort. And no effort came without an investment of time. And so he would require more than *a trice* to learn the ins and outs of pleasing a female.

He took a deep breath. “Ere proceeding, we must get a few things straight. I be your student, not yer lackey, nor, for that matter, anyone else’s lackey.” He took her by the shoulders, his bead on her positioning true despite the blindfold. “I have much to learn from ye, and ye may be surprised to learn something from me, as well.”

“What would I possibly learn from a know-naught virgin like you?”

Bending his jaw to her jaw, Martin proceeded to show her.

## Chapter Twenty-three

At first, Julian fought the virgin's embrace. Then, upon realizing Martin's kiss contained no threat, that he kept his touch light and considerate, not demanding and rough, she went from combative to cooperative.

His lips. Their softness took her unawares. She never kissed her lovers, never submitted any part of herself to any of her partners, and so this compliant succor of mouths unmanned her. Her last lucid insight was this: Surrender played no part in this bonding of lips, this mutual meeting of tongues, this joint giving and receiving.

They moaned simultaneously, each into the other's mouth. She, from the unexpectedness of this novel wet sensation and he, from ...

What?

As Martin's tongue danced with her tongue, undulating, entwining, caressing, she finally put his moan down to his own simple explanation: '*Twas pleasant*.'

Save -- this kiss felt more than simply pleasant.

She angled her head, and Martin did the same. When he reached for her, she reached too, her fingers in perfect accord with his.

A shiver of apprehension scuttled up her spine. She, who had always taken charge of whatever the situation, did not lead here and, in actuality, did not follow either; in the melding of lips, each had the same value, each moved in perfect unison.

Equality left her floundering in uncharted waters. Directionless, without obvious dry land nearby, she knew not which way to swim for safety!

After the violent deaths of both her parents -- gored by a stag's antler -- a grizzly old hunter had come upon her in the Normandy woods, where she had been aimlessly wondering about. Toddling about, really, as she had been little more than a babe. The hunter turned out to be a recluse, a bit queer in the head, but kind, in a muddled sort of way. He



took her home with him, raising her as the son he had never had. She grew up wearing a lad's garb, boasting and fighting, and swaggering, and aye, killing, just as any lad might do. Save for owning the wrong reproductive organs, she *was* a lad. And like a lad in his first flush of hot blood, when the time came to mate, she went for the loins, bypassing the art of the courtship dance. Romance would have only gotten in the way.

This kiss changed her thinking. The kiss was tritely romantic, and yet powerfully real too. Who was she now that she enjoyed a sentimental activity like kissing?

Her question went unanswered.

In a panic, she pushed away from the blindfolded Martin.

He made no move to grab her back; he merely extended his arm, his palm up, as open as his manner. "Hold me hand?"

First a kiss, now handholding -- what would come next? Rutting by torchlight?

She knocked his hand aside. Swiveling, she raced through the portal.

He called after her. "Tell me yer name!"

She opened her kiss-bruised mouth to tell him, only to clamp her lips firmly together again.

Trust this Norman steward with information she had never told anyone else? Take him into her confidence?

Impossible! She was here to rut on a well-endowed lover, not to share personal intimacies! She would tell him naught!

Tearing for the woods, Julian kept touching her face, fingering her features, raking her nails through her short brown hair. Coming to a standstill, she clasped her squashed breasts. The loose tunic did much to hide her true gender, but if not for the tight bindings wrapped about her chest, her ample bosom would have given her away years ago. In the most lurid of irony, though she lived as a male, thought as a male, hunted as a male, her body rivaled that of a fertility goddess --

Or, so a libidinous swain had once remarked.

Then again, after whipping him into a pre-orgasmic frenzy, he would have said anything just to climax.

Her palms went to her hindquarters.

Many a blindfolded lover had cupped a buttock, and fallen immediately in love.

That is -- they *called* it love. Julian called it something else again.

She handpicked hardy specimens for rutting, first taking the candidate into her mouth to gauge his control. Spurt straight away and she threw him back into the sea like a puny fish on the hook. Only the cream of the crop, the most self-disciplined, those potential lovers with the self-control to withdraw ere spewing their seed, received the privilege of entering her female passage.

A protocol she always strictly observed. A big belly would be a hard to explain, considering her male masquerade.

One taste of Martin had weakened her strict protocol. The steward's romantic notions had undermined a lifetime of caution. His give-and-take kiss had almost succeeded where hard rutting had failed.

She had come within a breath of revealing her identity!

And keeping her identity a secret meant staying by Gralam's side, and staying by Gralam's side meant much more than her ambitions.

Staying by Gralam's side meant everything.

\* \* \* \* \*

Martin gave the huntress a few minutes alone to collect herself. Then, he went after her into the trees.

Rather than track her down, which would more than likely increase her upset, he waited patiently for a sign. He trusted she would send him one, for if e'er a body needed the balm of comfort, 'twas she.

In the middle of an elm grove, he came to a complete standstill. No rushing her, no backing her into any corners, just waiting.

A few moments later, she rewarded his forbearance. "Where is your blindfold?" she yelled to him from some hidden vantage point.

"In yer cottage. How could I find ye without eyes to see?"

"Why look for me at all?"

"To see if ye were all right."

A long pause. Then, "Close your eyes, steward, then walk forward."

His lids lowered. "How many paces forward?"

"Paces?"

"Heel-to-toe footsteps," he explained. "From the distance of yer voice, I would guess thirty, at the very least."

"Fine. Take the thirty paces but you are not to open your eyes."

*So be it!* Compliance cost him little in this situation and allowed her to save face.

And feel safe.

He suspected some fear prompted her insistence on dominance in all arenas, and a vein bled for her. Fear must be a horrible cross to bear! Trusting in the good Lord's protective graces, he had ne'er known fear, himself. After all, God would not send him into harm's way unless he could find a way out. Or, 'twas his time to time to die, anyway. In that case, why waste precious time fearing death's inevitability?

Martin counted one pace, two paces ...

At twenty-nine, lips pressed to his ear, a warm and moist breath tickled the lobe. So as not to scare off the mouth's owner, he hung his hands at his sides.

"The other day, I saw you pacing about in an abandoned field, much the same as you did just now," she offered.

He nodded. Telling her no more than asked, he might draw her deeper into conversation. Mayhap if she lost herself in the give and take of words, she might lose her fear of him.

She did fear him. But only him? Or did she fear all males?

The answer to that question would tell him how to proceed.

Noticeably curious, she asked, "Why count your footsteps in an abandoned field?"

"So that I might drive equally distanced stakes at each outside corner."

"Must I ask each of my questions separately?" Her voice contained a snarl. "Will you volunteer naught?"

"Unlike *some* folk, I have no secrets to hide. Tell me what ye wish to learn and I shall volunteer it."

"For what reason, pray, do you stake off the ground?" she spat.

He took no offense at her foul mood. Fear could irritate a body. "I stake off the ground to measure equal plots of land to farm."

A hand drifted to the front placket on his braies. "Oh?" She milked his turgid member atop the cloth. "Tell me more about your stewarding duties!"

His mouth dried. "What more?"

"How you do resist me! Lusting, but at the same time, stuck in your moralistic rigidity."

"I am not rigid!"

She squeezed his erection through his braies. "You feel rigid to me."

At her suggestive remark, he grew more so.

To cover his inflexibility, Martin forgot all about his former plan to draw her out and launched into a lecture. "'Tis my charge as steward to organize the farm work, accounts, and see to the day-to-day running of the keep in the lord's absence, including the hiring of day laborers and skilled tradesmen."

She cupped his heavy sac. "The lord has entrusted you with much authority, eh?"

"Enough."

She had offered him her tutelage. In reciprocation, he would offer her his companionship. The huntress seemed quite lonely, as well as fearful. Keeping secrets did that to folk. "On the morrow" he began slowly, "I start delineating land and huts in chart form."

"Interesting. Go on --"

“Because of shifting rivers and swampy floods within the moors, recording land changes has long been part of a steward’s tradition.”

“Fascinating!”

She might have been sincere. Then again, facetiousness laced her tone. At any rate, he made a proposal. “Come with me during my next survey.”

“Mayhap. For now, continue to tell me of your interests.”

Usually, he vastly enjoyed intellectual discourses. Of particular interest was his vision for the moors. But quinsy cocksucker! A man could put aside his natural inclinations only so long. When she stroked his stones, his train of thought fled.

“Hmm?” she murmured.

Her palm made the most miraculous motions on his manhood, which now jutted like a sword. He shuddered once, and then concentrated with all his might. She would lose all respect for him if he turned to sticky dough in her hands. “Upon me marriage to Avice, Lord Gram intends to grant me ten arpents of land to till and plant. My choice of plot, so I paced and counted in the neglected homestead that had once belonged to an old Dane. Soon, ’twill be my pleasure to own those caved-in walls and rat-infested thatched roof.”

“How many chambers?”

“Five in all,” he panted. “After speaking the vows, I should like to start filling those empty chambers with children. I should like to give Avice a bairn as soon as possible. So, with that in mind, we shall conduct marital relations on a regular basis. Once every month should do the trick.”

A whoop rose up from behind him. “*Once every month* -- for the newly wedded? That totals twelve times a year.”

“Too frequently?” He turned about.

And caught sight of her face.

“Magnificent,” he said in both wonder and confusion. “Truly magnificent --”

He had not yet done speaking, when she drew her dagger and lunged.

He deflected the move with a parry, ere pulling her against his chest. Applying only enough pressure to persuade her to drop her weapon, he kept her hand imprisoned even after her blade bounced in the dirt.

God must have gifted man with woman, for her fingers felt divine. “How could anyone mistake you for a male? Ye are *so* magnificent,” he repeated, only more fervently, this the third time ’round.

“And you, steward, are *so* full of excrement. And now that ye have seen me, I shall need to kill you.”

“Just for seeing yer face?” His muscles tightening, he searched that magnificent face for denial.

“Mayhap not.”

His muscles relaxed.

She tilted her head coquettishly. “Mayhap I shall merely cut out your tongue. Or --” She dropped her gaze. “-- direct my sights lower.”

“Oh, not the testicles!” He clutched the lads. “Please, spare them. Now that I have a vague understanding of how to use them, ’twould be a shame to hack them away.”

“Not only are you devoid of experience, virgin, you lack commonsense. You court danger here!”

He moved his hands up to roam her magnificent face. “I swear yer secret stays safe with me.”

Though decidedly strong of character and unquestionably devoid of demureness, the face he explored possessed no coarseness, no masculinity. Her straightforward features projected a fierce independence, whilst contrarily provoking within his chest a fierce desire to protect.

An absurd desire really, as no female required coddling less than the prickly huntress --

But wait. Prickly barbs kept predators away. Had the huntress a just cause for her spiked armor? Had someone hurt her?

He dropped his arms to his side. His hands fisted. No one would hurt the huntress again, of that he would make sure.

A derisive snort pulled him out of the disquiet of his dark thoughts. “*Carnal relations once every month*, indeed!”

He said sheepishly, “Twelve times per annum does seem excessive, but ’tis for a good purpose. Avic longs for motherhood, ye see.”

The huntress rolled her dark eyes so far back in her head, only the whites showed. “Put your haunches up on yonder rock, five spades to the right.”

Another order! This one directed to his haunches. Why did she persist in these arbitrary commands?

She need not take on male characteristics to gain his esteem. But that too was something he must show her, not tell her. To that end, he made another overture of friendship. “If I do what ye say, will ye take off? I should loathe to see ye go. Please stay with me awhile.”

She gave a begrudging nod. “I stay.”

“For the purpose of doing me bodily harm?”

Her serviceable black lashes beat her cheekbones. “Even after besting me, you think me capable of inflicting an injury on you?”

“I would n’er doubt yer ability to geld me.”

A soft look stole across her features. "What a sweet thing to say."

Apparently, bloodletting brought out the sentimentalist in her.

With a smile, he found his way to the boulder.

But when he finished spreading his haunches on top, she had disappeared. Summoning up all his fortitude, he resisted his first impulse, which involved jumping from his boulder perch and frantically racing after her.

"Another fine jest!" he shouted out, instead. "Now, where did ye go?"

"Behind you."

No knife pierced his throat, a blessing. "I miss yer magnificent face. Why not come around front where I might see you?"

No answer.

She had kept to the letter of her word, if not the spirit, by staying, though only briefly.

Martin conceded little understanding of the ways of women, but he understood enough not to follow.

## Chapter Twenty-four

A day begun cool and murky had grown increasingly warm and clear as the sun moved higher in the sky. After shrugging out of his fur-lined cape, Gralam wiped the sweat from his brow, and resumed training the wild steed he had captured.

In preparation of breaking the wild moor stallion to the saddle, he had ordered the construction of a round pen made of stout branches hammered into the ground, an enclosure similar to the one he had used as a lad in Normandy. To one strong limb placed in the middle, he had anchored a chain, attaching the snorting steed to the free end.

Gralam approached the center with a rope in hand.

Kicking up a cloud of dust, the destrier-in-training shied away.

A disappointing start, boding ill for an easy negotiation.

Determined to win the horse's confidence, he continued the approach.

"M'lord! Wait!" Lifting her malt-toned skirts, Avice sped toward him at a fine clip. Climbing the fence he had told her not to breach, she moved to the middle of the pen he had told her not to enter.

"Come to me, Equus." She held out a treat taken from the pouch on her belt.

Inquisitive, the stallion moved close for a sniff.

Without so much as a "May I?" Avice tugged the rope from his grip and slipped the looped end 'round the steed's neck. Making sure she met the stallion's eyes, not his hind legs -- a kick from those hooves could fell a large man and kill a small woman -- she patted the animal on the shoulder.

"Good," she whispered, "Good." Her manner subdued, she rubbed the animal from side to hip.

Gralam found himself wishing the witch would stroke him the same.

In his jealousy of an animal, he slouched in despondency. For a fortnight, he had followed much the same course as Avice did now and had made no inroad whatsoever with the ferocious animal. Now, the stead quit his snorting and quieted; his eyes lost their apprehensive look. Easily measuring sixteen hands at the highest point on the withers, his restiveness a thing of the past, the animal stayed perfectly still whilst the enchantress fed him the treat from her hand.

She patted his knotted mane. "So handsome."

"I meant to make him a warhorse, not a palfrey gentle enough to squire children."

"Beneath his angry façade beats a loyal heart. This animal will carry you on his back unto his own death -- if ye treat him gently."

"I never use cruelty in my mastery!"

She smiled wickedly. "Oh, I can attest to that."

Despite himself, he chuckled. Naught new there, she always managed to make him laugh, despite himself. No matter how dire the situation portended to be, she made it at least *seem* less serious, less ominous, just by virtue of her presence. "Do you bewitch animals, as well as men?"

"This has naught to do with witchcraft. I use no trick to waylay fear but only talk quietly, until the beast understands I mean him no harm. And aye, the same knack does apply to men. Particularly, to suspicious and wary men."

Avice persisted with her taming, always speaking quietly, making no sudden moves. And the destrier responded in kind. Rather than bolt, the skittish animal continued to hold steady -- the first sign of a tenuous trust.

"Do as I do," she said, finally sparing him a glance.

Working in tandem, Gralam stroked the animal's head and neck, whilst Avice continued to feed him the treat. After the animal had wolfed down the last bit -- a common apple not some mysterious magical potion -- he dropped back and she led the stallion around by the nose, much the same as she did with him.

"I no longer sense fear in the animal," she said softly. "Go to the center post and release the chain. Then try your mount."

Indecision clutched him at the throat. Since his accident, he had not sat a steed. Would he make a fool of himself? Fail, in front of Avice?

"Go on with ye," she encouraged.

With a shuffle, a tottering jump and a clumsy leap, he straddled the animal, bareback. Not exactly grace in motion, nevertheless, he had conquered his fear and accomplished the task.

"Good," Gralam praised when the animal refrained from bucking him off. "Good," he said again as he rode the destrier-in-training 'round the pen.



Avice piped up. "Ye did it, m'lord!"

Nay, she had done it, his heart's delight. Her hair, beautiful and wild, blew across her lively face. Her presence lit him up, warmed him up, more than a hundred suns. How easily she had calmed the fears in both man and beast!

Sick with wanting her, Gralam uttered two simple words and let those two simple words speak for all the rest of the words he would never be able to speak. "My thanks."

And then, because these were perilous times, he dismissed his longing in favor of her safety. Pulling up on the rope wound around the steed's neck, he maintained his distance. "No closer. With my lame leg, I cannot completely control the courser --"

She waved his admonishment aside. "Psshaw! I be safe and sound."

His gaze fixed on her lush lips, his cock spiking against the supple flesh of the animal, Gralam raised an unsteady hand and unsteady voice. "Stay back!"

At his shout, the unnerved animal reared up on his hind legs.

Christ, nay! The hooves, within a hair of where Avice stood, threatened to crush her.

Gralam unfurled his riding crop and flicked the tip against the animal's bucking haunches. Once, twice, thrice. Until the frantic beast settled. Subdued, the steed hung his head low.

Avice hung her head low, too.

His mind awlirl, one thought repeated above the rest: Thank God, the steed had left her unharmed.

Gralam blew out a breath, a windy, rough sound of gratitude.

Though animal and witch appeared unhurt, the latter's disobedience had cost him the confidence of the former, not to mention upsetting the shaky state of his own peace of mind.

If he could not keep the witch safe from harm here at the keep, within the confines of a penned riding area, how could he hope to keep her safe elsewhere?

Stumbling to the ground, Gralam re-chained the animal to the post and then went to collect Avice. He reached for her elbow --

Only to draw back again.

No control of a horse, of his body, of his destiny, he certainly lacked the required control to touch her.

Gralam held his arms rigidly at his sides. "You are coming with me, back to the keep." He opened the gate, motioned her through, started back to the motte-and-bailey.

After a fortnight without her, two weeks fraught with worry about Avice staying alone on the moors with only a guard to protect her, he had ordered the recalcitrant witch behind the gates of his fortress. This current incident only went to prove he had made the correct decision. Left to her own devices, she would unquestionably bring trouble down on her head.

Gralam had come to uneasy terms with having Avice close by. He had reconciled himself to the continual frustration her proximity provoked. He tolerated the discomfort in an effort to keep her safe.

The House of Wessex still concerned him, however.

Providing for a beautiful young peasant woman in his private apartments *should* raise no eyebrows. All overlords conducted themselves similarly. Viewed as a whore, as a slut who serviced him at his discretion, Avice *should* suffer little repercussions from the relationship. As overlords routinely gave cast-off paramours to their vassals after such a liaison ran its course, this too *should* spark no more than the typical gossip, a veritable sport at court. But give Norman-haters reason to suspect something else brewed here, give them just cause to look deeper, and additional spies would descend like locusts on the moors.

Both in public and in private, he must take great care to reinforce the witch's lack of influence in his life. Fine to let spies and others believe he had bedded her and mayhap still did bed her, but not fine to confide in her, not fine to feel anything genuine for her.

Avice had her part to play as well. She could not go about ignoring his dictates, doing whatever the hell she bloody well wished to do. She must do as told! This included abstaining from practicing her witchcraft!

A short leash would go far in keeping her safe. Keeping them *all* safe, he corrected. If found out, her avocation would get the entire village burnt to the ground.

He cleared all emotion from his tone. "Owing to your disobedience, you ... I mean to say, my *mount* ... was very nearly injured."

Her face took on a pained expression. "Not in any way would I have wished that proud animal harmed. Then, again, ye should not have raised yer piggin' voice." Her chin dipped. "Still in all, m'lord, I should have done what ye requested."

"'Twas not a request, but an order, which you disobeyed. Taking only your own selfish wishes into account, you behaved recklessly. As a result, I took my whip to a blameless animal, when I should rightly have taken my whip to you! Unlike the courser, you are not without fault. Punishment, in your case, is richly deserved." *And would be, most likely, thoroughly enjoyed.*

Her flushed face and parted lips only confirmed his supposition.

"M'lord, naught happened to the animal. Or to me." Her eyes twinkled mischievously. "But feel free to take yer hand to me arse in recompense. Ye have me permission."

"Permission!" He exploded. "I am lord here. Your permission or lack thereof has no significance." The heat of his anger already subsiding, he muttered, "Inconsiderate wench. When will your antics end?"

"Bosh! As I recall, ye liked me antics well enough on the moors."

His mouth opened, then snapped shut. He kept walking -- a limping stomp, actually -- through the courtyard. With Avice racing along beside him to keep up, he entered the keep.

"Verily, m'lord, I deserve any punishment ye feel necessary to mete out."

He gave a hoot. "You lost me at verily."

"No lie, m'lord!"

"Mayhap on the moors you refrain from telling untruths, but we are not on the moors now."

"More is the pity. I miss ye most sorely between me thighs, m'lord. Take me to the moors now."

"Avice --" he warned.

"Unlike yerself, I be only human."

"Unlike myself, you are a witch."

"There be that, too, aye." She grinned jauntily. "So, go on then, punish me for practicing the craft. Clamp me in chains, throw me into the dungeon, feed me to the firedrakes --"

"Dragons do not exist," he grumbled.

"A lot ye ken."

She preceded him into the bedchamber, her white-sleeved arms flapping. A certain falcon, gliding free in the skies o'erhead, came immediately to mind. Avice was beautiful, even garbed in feathers. "How does spreading your wings and taking flight feel?"

"Flying feels much akin to being with ye." She backed up to the bed, held out her hands to him, palms up in supplication. "When ye come into me, the earth gives way under me feet. Come into me now, m'lord. Make me soar."

"I dare not!" He shook his head violently. He was divulging too much, giving her insight into his inner torment, a weakness for her she might later use against him.

"Ye worry for me, I ken that ye do, and yer fretting touches me. But there be no need for concern! That first eve we met, ye asked if I be cunning folk -- and to escape persecution, I do call meself so. No one, save ye, knows the truth about me! Only ye could expose me."

"Your actions expose you!"

"Aye, that they do. But not as a witch. As a woman. I lie awake of an eve and remember how 'twas between us. I miss ye here." Her hands spanned her lower belly. "Just the thinking of it, of having ye inside me, deep inside me, and me cunny fair drips."

"Avice," he rasped. "Cease! This does neither of us any good."

Her tongue ran the course of her lower lip. "Many a time on the moors, ye teased me. Substituted yer mouth, yer lips, for yer proud lance. Fingers on me cunny, clenched on me cunny, ye once even sent your exhale inside me, deep inside me, 'till I screamed in mortal agony for the want of more than yer breath. I want ye past desperation --"

"You little witch," he growled.

"Aye." Her eyes blazed in triumph.

She understood full well what her words did to him, understood how she got to him, understood he was weakening.

He tightened his grip on his flagging control. "Remove your garb." He added coolly, "Unless you demand payment first."

Now, her eyes narrowed. "The exchange of gold may wait. I trust *ye*."

That stressed last word accused him.

But why the hell should he trust her? He hardly trusted himself these days.

Naught dignified about his hunger for this witch. Naught noble about wanting her, every moment of every day. Regardless of where he was or whom he was with, she alone held his attention. So -- he would pay to see her bare and she would freely see his naked longing. He would say she came out ahead in the exchange.

"Coif first," he ordered.

Reaching up, she removed her tight-fitting cap.

The fall of her beautiful fair tresses produced a lump in his throat and a tear in his eye. In a gulping blur, he watched the remainder of her garb settle on the rushes.

He sorted through words to tell her what he wanted, demanded, had to have, lest he die. Not pious phrases like her betrothed, Martin, would have pronounced, not quotes from scriptures that would support his spiritual need for her, but an expression of physical longing that sprang forth from his loins and exited his mouth. "Loosen your legs." He qualified this statement. "Until I can plainly see it."

She split her legs and he split in two. Once again, the exchange left him at a loss.

"That last eve on the moors, m'lord, ye mated me like a mare."

Her bluntness stabbed him in the heart.

"Me backside to yer front, ye drove into me from the rear whilst I was positioned on all fours. So hard ye drove up into me, then."

She ground the heel of her palm into her belly, lowered her hand to the opening, made him wish for things that could never be.

"'Tis slick I be, m'lord, just for the recollecting. See how slick --?"

Two limping steps brought him closer, not touching her, but sharing the same air. "I see." He made no conscious decision to do so, but somehow his hand made its way to his braies.

When he loosened the placket, the green gaze holding his turned victorious.

"When you entered me, fast and hard, ye just 'bout touched me womb."

He reached in and released his cock. His fist pumped up and down the turgid length.

"Other times," she murmured, "ye took yer own sweet piggin' time. Me bare buttocks resting on the moss, ye went at me nigh onto dawn, slowly, gently, until I screamed to the stars at your slow gentleness."

“Have pity, wench,” he groaned in mortal agony, past the point of caring about a silly extravagance like pride. Did a dying man consider conceit as he gasped his last choppy breath?

“Ye talk of pity? Then, for pity’s sake, m’lord, if ye will not take me naturally, send yer seed to the back of me throat. I swear to swallow it down and lick me lips afterwards for the last lingering taste of ye.”

“And risk you gelding me? I think not!”

After that, she gave up the battle.

But, oh, Christ, he was the one who had surrendered the fight.

She flew the sky, whilst he stayed stuck on the ground. She soared. He crawled. Two distinct individuals spiraling toward a separate climax.

As a final indictment, he came prematurely. In truth, at the very first surge. Coming apart, he collapsed on the rushes.

Alone.

Without her, he would always be alone.

## Chapter Twenty-five

Martin tracked Julian into the woods.

Following at a discreet distance, he watched as the huntress snared game. A silent watch, so as not to disturb her concentration. When the sun began to go down and she had finished her blood-kill for the day, he allowed her to find him.

She tapped his shoulder. "Follow me, steward."

Without protest, he did, back to her isolated hut.

Upon heeding the Call, he had joined the contemplative order of Carthusian monks. Keeping to the Rule, he had retreated to the confines of high monastic walls. The sect kept to absolute silence, but he had not felt for a loss of fellowship. The Brothers shared a sense of common purpose, even within their own quiet and solitary cells. And though poverty ruled the community, homespun goods lent his new home beauty and warmth.

Unlike the four spartan walls that surrounded him now.

As Martin bounced his eyes about, seeking some hint as to her likes and dislikes, his belly took a disappointed dip.

Quinsy cocksucker! The hut was bleak and barren. Anonymous, just like the huntress, herself. Her living space told him naught about her.

"Look at me, covered with the bone and blood, and guts of the hunt. I must bathe." She ladled water from a wood reservoir into a shallow metal basin.

To his ears, the splashes sounded thunderous. Then again, his own heart sounded frighteningly loud too, the beat so heavy, he swore she must hear the thumping way over there, across the empty space that separated them.

He had watched her all the day long. Fascinated, if a bit deafened, he watched her still, as she rolled up the sleeves of her outer tunic. Refusing to blink, lest he miss something of

importance, something that would hint of her inner most self, he took in each move she made, absorbing even the tiniest detail.

First, she splashed her face. Next, she washed her hands.

He grinned. Why, she washed the same as he!

Her fingers flexed on her collar. "After butchering animals all the day, I stink of entrails."

He tried not to breathe, so he need not lie. "Nay, nay! Not so. I only detect yer own sweet perfume --"

She guffawed. "Oh, please! I smell to high Heavens."

So she did, but he could see his remark had pleased her. And her reference to Heaven pleased him as well. Nice that she believed in Heaven the same as he. And he very much approved of her honesty. Her happiness well compensated for his own tiny lapse with the truth.

From somewhere, he found the courage to say, "I long to undress ye."

She laughed 'till tears streamed down her chin and plopped to the floor.

Her merriment chastised him. Not easy admitting his virginity, his lack of experience, his clumsiness, but he had thought by opening himself up to her, she might in turn open up to him. He had thought to make a gift of his vulnerability! Disappointing to have his request found humorous.

He reflected on this a moment.

On second consideration, he discerned no meanness in her mirth. Something else drove her belly whoops. Uncertainty?

"I should like to bathe ye also," he said with even more conviction. He ken what he wanted, even if she did not, and so assumed the lead. "From head to foot," he added decisively. "Particularly, between the legs. 'Tis a most mysterious place, the female passage."

He closed the distance between them, reached for the top fastener on her tunic. "If I may?"

Ere receiving permission, he raced to undo her.

Once, Martin had considered himself above such base impatience. Now, he accepted his urges. Now, his mating instinct felt sacred, not profane.

He freed her from the tunic, one sleeve, the other sleeve. Dropping her masquerade on the floor, he sighed in awe.

The huntress possessed shapely arms, defined muscles, a long and graceful carriage. Her shoulders, square and unbowed, reflected the strength her occupation required. He would dearly love to describe her breasts, but several rounds of bindings hid their attributes, flattening what should have been round.

"Level yer arms at the shoulders," he ordered, surprising himself at the succinctness of the directive.

She surprised him in return by doing as he told her to do.

Whilst she waved at the ceiling, her strong fingers reaching to the rafters over their heads, he detached the tucked-in edge of the binding from under her arms. He unwound the narrow cloth, and she spun like a dancer.

For him.

More than likely, the huntress could out distance him with a slingshot, with a bow and arrow too. As to the sword, ne'er would he willingly choose to find himself at the tip of her blade. When it came to brute strength, he would most likely best her, though 'twas not a competition he would voluntarily seek. Her prowess on the furs? Hands down, she far surpassed him there. And yet, she unraveled for him like a meek virginal maiden.

Would that his own unraveling contradict the truth as greatly!

At that first glimpse of her unwrapped breasts, his back went up in anger. He, who prided himself on diplomacy, felt an undiplomatic need to mete out a mighty vengeance. No circumstances, regardless of how dire, should have prompted such a harsh disguise!

Her flesh. Her poor flesh!

After stripping the tight bindings away, angry red crisscrosses remained, marring the smooth skin of her breasts, enflaming the nipples.

"If you must hide your gender," he shouted, "find some other method to avoid detection. Ne'er again hide your femininity in this manner."

She touched a flattened tip. "The soreness leaves after a time."

"Not in my mind. Those red marks are forever emblazoned."

"Nay," she said softly. "You will soon forget, for we shan't stay together long enough for you to remember. You will go to your Avice, and I shall move onto someone else."

He held firm. "No bindings. Or, we finish ere we begin."

"Agreed," she relented. "No bindings. Henceforth, I shall hunt alone, as I did this day, thereby avoiding risk of discovery. I shall do this only whilst we remain lovers."

*Whilst we remain lovers ...*

A compromise of a sort, which both saddened and relieved him. In a practical and unemotional way, she had set limits on their coming together. Their union would eventually end, and they would both go forward. Not together, but apart, on their respective, albeit, singular way.

Though cold to plan an end to a romance that had yet to begin, he nodded an agreement. To hide his smarting eyes, Martin bent, unlaced, and then removed her boots.

Straightening up, he slipped his hand inside the waistband of her braies, between warm female flesh and blood-soaked hide.



"You are the first to remove my garb," she whispered.

"I am gladdened, nay, *honored*, to be the first." Easing the garment to her waist, he briefly admired the dimpled indentation at her mid-section. His excitement prohibiting a lengthy pondering of its winsome design, he pushed the hide braies o'er her prominent hipbones to her loins --

Where his sure and steady downward progress came to an abrupt halt.

Male external reproductive organs called for coddling. Given the huntress's masquerade as a man, her protective loincloth left him unsurprised. However, the huge bulge contained within the wraps gave Martin a long moment of pause.

"A fine set of testicles ye have there." He looked down at himself, and then up at her. "I suffer the comparison."

She traced the magnitude of her falsehood. "You are sufficient."

A spare compliment, if praise at all. "Is that what ye thought upon first seeing me -- I was sufficient?"

"Nay, I thought how good you would feel inside me."

No longer damned by faint praise, he flushed.

At his blush, she twittered, which caused her shoulders to shake, which set her breasts to swaying.

A mouthwatering sight. He could hardly wait to taste, tongue, suckle ... worship at her bounty. But mostly, he longed to kiss those hurtful red marks away. The fiery indentations must sting!

His eyes stung much the same. Not only smarted now, but watered.

Too intent on cupping her artificial appendage, she missed his tears.

Under the guise of pushing his hair from his eyes, he thumbed the moisture away. "If 'tis of any consolation, though not nigh as large as your exaggeration, mine stays up a goodly length of time."

She grinned. "I do hope so! I have a yen for an all night rut."

His former misgivings grew to a cup runneth o'er. If he managed once and pleased her somewhat, he would die happy.

"No untoward pressure, you understand," she added and gave him a salacious wink.

The wink dispelled his apprehensions. She had jested about the *all night rut*.

Once again, he lost himself in baring the truth beneath her disguise. As he pulled at the swaddling, she twirled, and her loincloth came away.

Her bush resembled a thicket. The abundance of black curls compelled him to take a longer look. A deeper look. A closer look. At her womanly mysteries.

Swallowing with difficulty -- he ken what he wanted, but this was all new terrain -- he cradled the wondrous place, his palm cupping. "This passage is as fertile as the fields, as

earthy as the land that nurtures a seed 'till it sprouts." Above her laughter, he added solemnly, reverently, "I should like to taste ye here."

Her guffawing ended on a breathless gasp.

His hand fell away. Now, he had gone and done it! Overstepped the bounds of common decency, he had.

Humiliated, he said contritely, "I have caused ye offense."

"Nay!" She gasped some more. "You have not!"

"Disgusted ye, then. You found the suggestion repugnant."

"I found the suggestion ... er ... stimulating. In the ... uh ... extreme. Even now, I grow -" She stopped, turned scarlet.

"Say it!"

She seized his wrists. "Do not think to order me about."

Showing no outward concern, he awaited her next move.

The huntress wasted no time. As though he were naught but a slab of meat on the carrying pole, she trussed his hands behind his back, tied them together with hunting jute. Curious as to her intent *this time*, he allowed her to take the lead.

Coming around front again, she knelt on the floor at his feet and released his manhood from confinement.

Sweet Jesu! She tongued him down the length.

The first they met, she had mentioned doing such a thing, but he thought she used him as a brunt of her jests, as an object with which to toy. He thought she had been making a fool of him!

He looked down upon the top of her lad's short hair. "Does this activity have merit?"

No help there -- her mouth was too full to answer.

And so he remained unconvinced as to the benefits. But rather than condemn the oral stimulation out-of-hand or call the one-sided congress useless or silly, he kept an open mind. No harm taking a wait and see approach. Lodged within her face, he would simply take the odd activity at ... well ... face value.

*Quinsy cocksucker!*

As the top of his head threatened to explode, his favorite epithet took on an entirely new meaning. Shivering and shaking, he nigh on came apart.

Hold back. Not. Yet!

But the sight of her there between his legs, her full attention raptly given o'er to her task, interfered with his usually excellent powers of concentration --

Her mouth. Molten and moist. Her lips. Lush and lusty. Her tongue. Tickling and torturing.

Martin started praying. Feverishly. Praying like he had not prayed in years. And not by mindless rote either, but praying with the pure focus of a child.

*Our Father who art in Heaven --*

*Please Lord, if yer listening -- keep me from spewing!*

## Chapter Twenty-six

If not for needing to gauge potential stamina, Julian would never volunteer to orally-please a mate. Apart from the gratification derived from exerting control o'er a man, what was in it for her?

And so, here she found herself again, on the floor, judging how well the virgin could hold back his seed -- a prerequisite to getting inside her.

On such an occasion as this, she would put on a grand performance. Make an embellished show of capturing a droplet of pre-cum with her tongue -- the sight made males crazed. As did a slow lap along the length. She always followed this up with blowing little puffs of breath against the moistened flesh. Naturally, she made a big to-do of squeezing the cock betwixt her lips, grunting and groaning, as if frantically trying to accommodate the girth.

With Martin, she had no need to pretend. Lost to her own enjoyment, she virtually gobbled him up! No finesse. No performance. No gauging his endurance. Forgetting all about testing his staying power, she gave herself o'er to him.

Shocking, how much his obvious pleasure pleased her. Shocking, her own pleasure, in and of, itself. Listening to his heavy breathing, inhaling the scent of his musk, tasting the salt of him ...

His release approached on a gallop. But refusing to thrust to her throat, he held steady -

-

Until everything went out of order.

One moment, she had her lips pursed on his cock, and the next, she was kissing his mouth. What happened?

The logistics remained lost in a fog. Somehow, he must have freed himself of the tie binding his hands and pulled her up from her crouch at his feet and into his arms. And this time, unlike the last time, she lost the will to struggle.

Stripped of her male garb, her breasts free of the tight bindings, his tunic somehow open, their flesh glued together, she kissed him back.

Martin held her lightly, his hands loose upon her shoulders. Desperate for a harder connection, she moaned into his throat.

Immediately, he tore his mouth away. "Did I hurt ye?"

Unable to speak, she could only stare. No other bedmate, save Martin, had ever bothered to ask.

Past lovers had hurt her.

The first time, as a virgin, she had bled like a stuck sow at penetration. The hunter who had initiated her made no acknowledgment of her discomfort. Subsequent lovers had shown either disinterest or out-and-out indifference to her lack of enjoyment.

And so, she assumed the role of aggressor. Watching her companions squirm as she withheld their enjoyment made for a spiteful pleasure.

Lifting his soulful eyes to hers, Martin whispered, "So sorry, if I hurt ye."

She continued to examine his face for disingenuousness, but found only sorrow. "There was no hurt. You kiss very well. I -- I liked it." Since he had been honest with her, he deserved payback in kind. If the truth swelled his head -- well, there was no help for it.

His lips lifted at the corners. "I very much liked kissing ye too."

"You liked kissing me -- though I am not your Avise?"

He sighed. "Refusing to name the feeling will not make the feeling disappear."

How true. She had loved Gralam since forever, and taking other lovers had not made that love subside.

Martin lowered his jaw and took her lips again. Support suddenly necessary, Julian grabbed onto the corner of the small table where her basin of water rested. 'Twas then, as the wood planks wobbled and the water heaved above the basin's shallow sides, she remembered.

Martin had interrupted her bathing.

What a humiliating plight! She had yet to wash off that day's pursuit and he had his nose and lips pressed to her kill-fragrant skin.

She determinedly pushed away. "Martin, I need to bathe first."

"Nay, ye do not. Yer female perfume makes me hard."

Hmm. Now there was a persuasive argument.

He looked down at her. "May I have another kiss?"

"My generosity does have its limits."

His eyes followed the contours of her breasts. "I would say yer *generosity* is boundless."

She twittered at his boyish naughtiness. "You, my eager virgin, are not getting your hands on them 'till after I have washed away the odor of my labors."

He sniffed the air. "Wildflowers."

"Your sense of romance far surpasses your sense of smell."

"Ye win the skirmish, huntress. This time."

"We shall see about that!" She recognized a challenge when she heard one, and had risen to the occasion.

As had he. Again. His impressive jut took her down a peg.

The virgin rolled up the sleeves of his tunic, and moistened his hands. "Come hither."

When she did, his wet palms slid on her flesh, gliding down her throat to meet at her collarbone. She bit her tongue against the order for him to make haste and fondle her breasts, finding enjoyment -- another first for her -- in slowness.

Martin looked into her eyes. "Why rush the destination, eh, when the trip has so many entertaining side stops along the way?"

When he did finally handle her nipples, the wait made the pleasure all the sweeter.

Though, she did mightily resent the water, which came between her needy flesh and his fingers, dexterous despite their size.

For a novice, he had an expert touch. Her hardened nipples responded by poking holes in his palms ere he finished.

And *finished* was a word Martin seemed not to understand.

Long after her flesh glowed rosy in cleanliness, he continued to bathe her, returning incessantly to her nipples. Until, unable to take the delay any longer, she splayed her legs.

A hint he took without further adieu.

He wound her black pelt around his fingers, ere moving inside. Through some mysterious means, the no-naught virgin easily found her pinnacle of sensation and rubbed the scrap of sensitive flesh with his thumb.

She tightened her lips, lest her needy murmurs escape.

He frowned. "Stop clamping yer mouth like that!"

Drop her defenses, her disguise, place herself entirely in his hands, risk having him find out how deeply he touched her and with more than his hands?

'Twas too much to ask!

She pushed him away. "Your turn."

He hooted. "No need. In advance of seeing ye, I jumped in the brook."

Considerate man! She braced herself against the urge to fling herself into his arms. "You misunderstand. Bathing you is not my intent."

"Then what is yer intent?"

"Finishing what I started ere the kiss."

He shook his head. Then, to her utter amazement, he dropped to a reclining position on the floor, a pose that awarded him a view of information she had tried to withhold --

"Yer wet! And not from yer bath. Dewey drops anoint yer pubic lips like Holy Water. In me mind, I had planned to start me worship at yer breasts, to fondle and adore ye there, to soothe those hurtful red marks. But with such a seductive place as this, how can I help but begin at the core of the matter? Now, tell me what ye refused to tell me ere placing your lips on me manhood."

Easy to find some arbitrary mate and mindlessly use him to quench specific bodily needs. Less easy to handpick a lover and openly admit a generalized and flagrant desire for him as a person in his own right, not just as an object o'er whom she derived pleasure from exerting control.

Julian had not expected to want Martin. She had expected to use him as she had used all her previous lovers, and then cast him aside when he had satisfied her need.

"Only what you have already found out, namely that I am wet," she whispered, despising how her voice trembled. "Drenched, really."

"Wet. Drenched. This is a good result?"

"A very good result."

"And this is done? I mean to say -- a man will taste a woman's secret inlet? Will tongue her hidden core?"

"In my female experience -- the undertaking is done not nearly often enough."

Wrenching his shoulders up off the floor, he shot his tongue up inside her folds.

Arms hanging at her sides, hands knuckled under, Julian swallowed her yelp.

The timid virgin had pierced her! Not her heart -- nay, that he would never get close enough to pierce -- but the deep recesses of her body, where no other lover had dared -- or bothered -- to go. When considering the indifference of the small army who had preceded him, his inclination to give her pleasure seemed naught short of miraculous.

In her disappointing experience, when first confronted with the enormity of her breasts, a prospective lover would make disgusting smacking noises and bat at her chest like a babe looking to suckle. Then, the overzealous clout would attempt to do two tasks at the same time -- simultaneously grabbing above whilst poking below -- giving neither endeavor his full and complete attention.

Not Martin.

He lavished her loins with his full and undivided, and specific attention. His single-mindedness took her aback.

As did his prodigious skill.

After the initial upward stroke, a tonguing that dug her toes under, he backtracked, traversing her genitalia as a virtuoso might, his masterly mouth licking her pubic lips, kissing her pubic lips, suckling her pubic lips ...

She swallowed another yelp, refusing to pant and moan, as she just about swooned in delight.

The monk practiced what he most definitely had not preached! Where had a former seminarian learned to apply just enough pressure to stimulate but not enough to hurt?

Though she yearned to thread her fingers through his golden bowl of hair, combing that sleek cap of silk, she forced her arms to stay hinged at her sides, the fingers clenched. Too fearful of giving her tension away, she resisted the urge to pull him closer. His hands also stayed rooted on the floor.

No complaints. Who needed grabby fingers when, a long and pliant, and unreservedly enthusiastic, tongue reached her in all the right places?

As an unexpected bonus, he could curl the tip.

Julian made no noise ... not even to shout "Aye, aye, aye," when his tongue found the origin of her sensation, that not-so tiny scrap of flesh that so many former lovers had missed.

Or, had not cared enough to find.

Martin's mapping abilities located the lay of her land with ease.

She ground her pelvis against his mouth. As pleasure slammed into her belly and then burst upwards, and her tight muscles clenched and then let go, she closed her lips on the scream. Silently, she spun out into the void.

For the very first time.

Martin. The finest lover she had ever had.

And they had yet to couple.



## Chapter Twenty-seven

Avice felt like climbing her bedchamber's tapestry-covered walls. She needed Gralam so!

In part, that urgent yearning had prompted her to move from her sunny and cheerful little cottage into this dark and dreary timber palisade keep, her austere sleeping accommodations adjoining that of the equally austere and increasingly dreary, Norman overlord.

Steadfast to his word, Gralam had called off Martin.

And that move had gained her naught. In essence, she had simply traded one guard for another. The overlord refused to let her out of his sight, but instead dragged her along with him everywhere, like a pampered pet he could stroke at whim.

Only, his whim dictated he not touch her at all.

Avice clamped her thighs together. The pressure failed to relieve the hollow ache inside her. For that, she needed Gralam!

The women of her family disdained nuptials -- handfasting, aye, but never did they take a vow in church. However, after finding the right mate, her witch ancestors had practiced an intense monogamy. The unions had at their foundations a passion of hearts and minds and acceptance, a love that lasted a lifetime.

She had found hot and sweaty passion with Gralam, as well as a union of the minds. But due to the circumstances that surrounded their coming together -- her summoning of him in a cantrip -- he mistrusted her. As for herself -- well -- experience had tempered her faith in the benevolence of overlords. How could a Norman interloper forgive what she had done?

Without trust, there could be no heart union.

But lack of trust in no way daunted lust.

The recipient of her lust had just departed for the barracks -- a male bastion she could not enter -- leaving her behind with yet another guard posted outside. Unable to bear her crazed need for Gralam another moment, she flung open the bedchamber portal. "A quick trip to the garderobe," she explained to the sentry on duty and raced down the hall.

She had to, *had to*, escape this gloomy keep!

The morn had begun on a somber note, but strong air currents had blown away the heavy o'erlay of clouds. Now, sunshine lit the calm sky and warmed the earth. The woods and moors provided her with a constant source of amazement and awe ...

And a steady supply of wild-growing plants necessary for healing those who sought out her curative services.

Despite Gralam's edict to remain indoors, she escaped the gated fortress wall and fled for the heaths and heathers, plucking herbs up by the root -- so as not to waste any part of the plant -- as she went.

Henbane, cowbane, mandrake and monkshood, the poisonous ingredients were essential to her craft. Used carefully and sparingly, a much-diluted form of these herbs could relieve pain. Too much, and an agony-wracked patient became a peaceful corpse.

Once she reached the moors, she rolled her medicinal collection up inside her surcoat for safekeeping and then disrobed. To renew her powers and reestablish her place in the universe, she began to create a magic circle, something she had neglected to do in far too long.

On the edge of the imagined circumference, she used four stones to symbolize North, South, East, and West. These points on the perimeter represented the Four Elements; their delineation enclosed a place of purity, an oasis where evil could not permeate.

That accomplished, Avice returned to her pile of clothing. From her belt, she removed the anthame, a double-edged dagger used in rituals. Starting at the East and following the course of the sun, she scored the earth with the blade, casting the circle as her lips moved in simple entreaty, a charm said for the man she had wronged.

*Please, spirits and goddesses, help me help Gralam.*

The circle completed, she stepped into infinity. In the eternal middle, she faced northerly, the most powerful direction, and the element that symbolized Earth, as well as the North Star, around which all celestial bodies revolved. So too did this direction encapsulate secrets, darkness, and the unknown. 'Twas from there, she called out to the powers of good.

"Goddesses and spirits," she invited, "please feel free to join me within this magic circle."

Next, she faced southerly. The point represented the element of Fire and, through that burning association, the sun. Here, east met west, as did intuition, insight, reason and logic meet the intellect, clairvoyance, and nature.

“Goddesses and spirits,” she invited, “please feel free to join me within this magic circle.”

She turned to the east. The element of Air symbolized clarity, spiritual awareness, and mysticism.

“Goddesses and spirits,” she invited, “please feel free to join me within this magic circle.”

Lastly, she looked to the west, the element that symbolized imagination, inspiration, emotion and reason.

“Goddesses and spirits,” she invited, “please feel free to join me within this magic circle.”

Avice took a deep breath. “I wronged a good man, intentionally made him suffer, and I humbly ask for your aid in righting my mistake.”

That said, she stepped outside the magic circle. Looking inward, she silently recited an incantation to transform herself into a white gyrfalcon.

Feathers now masked her human form. With a spread of wings, she took flight. Soaring out from the moors into the forest, she circled high above the treetops.

Movement below drew her attention.

Two nobles, straight from the House of Wessex, if the insignia on their velvet surcoats told her true, skulked about in the wooded glen.

On a hawkish screech, she winged 'round, swooping back to where she had left her garb. A quick change from falcon to female and an even swifter donning of her discarded garb, and she headed for the keep.

The magic circle had done its work. She had asked for spiritual direction in her quest to help Gralam, and she had received her answer. The insight set her witch's bones atremble.

Now, to warn the overlord!

\* \* \* \* \*

The opening portal ended Gralam's pacing.

“Here ye be!” the disobedient witch called, racing across the fragrant rushes of her bedchamber. “When I found yer solar empty, I fair went apoplectic.”

Having an acquaintance with apoplexy himself, the familiarity due to Avice's unexplained absence, he could well understand her distress --

Understand, but not empathize. In fact, he could easily spank her eminently round bottom.

Save, she would only enjoy the punishment, and so punishment would become an undeserved reward.

Tricky, dealing with the witch.

Gralam leaned a shoulder against the tapestry-covered wall, his lazy pose giving no outward indication of his distraught state.

He had imagined that all sorts of horrors had befallen her. Thieves, rapists, witch hunters. She might have toppled into a bog and drowned -- a distinct possibility on these hellish moors. Though, on second thought, not a particular concern for witches, he supposed. As a test, zealots strapped witches in ducking stools to see if they could float.

*A ducking stool! For Avice?*

Dear Lord! Worry o'er her safety terrorized him at every turn.

He revealed none of his concerns to her. "An extraordinarily long visit to the garderobe." A dry repeating of the message she had given the guard.

Her hands went to her mid-section. "A stomach complaint."

He had checked the garderobe at least a dozen times, and no witch did he find seated in the hole on the outer wall. "A lying complaint, more like."

"We are not on the moors, m'lord."

"Which means --?"

"My promise of truthfulness only applies on the bogs."

"So here you revert to deceitful pagan?"

"Arguments later. Now, allow me to tell ye where I spent me day."

His mouth hardened. "Not in your bedchamber, where I instructed you to remain."

Her hands went to her hips. "Pig shit on yer piggin' rules."

He left the support of the wall, which had helped him remain upright when tension had locked his bad knee, and rounded on her.

"Uh-oh." She took a backward step.

"You not only disobeyed me, you dishonored our agreement." He stabbed his thumbs in his eyes. A knife twisted in his gut. "You might have been hurt!"

"Look at me!"

He cast her a morose look.

"See?" She spun. "Safe and sound."

Her patronizing tone did not amuse him. "Did you do aught untoward whilst you were gone missing?"

Her features winched up. "Please to define, 'untoward'."

God's teeth! He recognized that shifty look. "Tell-me-what-you-did."

The minx had the temerity to dawdle. "Me feet grew tired, so I took a small flight. As a white gyrfalcon."

"Did anyone see you change shape?"

"Of course not!" She glared at him.

He glared right back at her. On the moors, their hottest lovemaking had begun with such heated glances. But this was not the moors, as she had so aptly reminded him. Why did she refuse to understand the assailable nature of their positions?

Undeterred by his irritation, she continued along unfazed. "I saw two men skulking about the forest. A gray-haired noble of middle years, the other much younger."

"Father and son," he said grimly. "Invited guests from the House of Wessex, here to hunt fowl. I need to impress on them my smooth running of this fiefdom."

Her mouth gaped. "Ye mean to say, ye ken they were here all along and possessed not the common decency to keep me informed?"

"I need not inform you of even the time of day. You are not my confidante, but my leman."

"Some leman!" She snorted. "Ye ne'er touch me! If I did not ken better, I would say yer pillicock has lost its stiffening again."

Gralam sputtered to himself. His dong was well and good, thank you very much! Why, even now his dong had very nicely stiffened --

Wait -- *again*? What mean she by *again*?

His virility had returned at the first sighing of Avice, and so he had not had to divulge the truth of his impotency to her. How had she come by the knowledge of his prior limpness?

Since to ask was to admit to a problem from which he no longer suffered, he remained mute on the subject. "You are to stay in this bedchamber until my guests from the House of Wessex have departed. Is that understood?"

"Aye, m'lord. Of course, m'lord. I understand, m'lord. Yer piggin' opinion of me is as clear as the pompous snout on yer face, m'lord." She wiped a finger over her glistening lashes. "Ye will ne'er piggin' trust me."

He hardened his heart. "The lack of trust goes both ways, for why else would you sneak from your bedchamber?" Turning on his heel, he left the witch alone.

## Chapter Twenty-eight

The next morn, Gralam heard someone following him, soft footsteps that resounded in the hallway's empty space.

Sidestepping into a narrow alcove, a darkness so thick no rush light would permeate, he awaited her approach.

When she crept past, he sprung out. "What are you up to now, Avice?" Caught in the act, she would be penitent, he thought smugly.

But nay, the witch had no knowledge of such moral parochialisms. When her feet once again touched down from her ceiling high lurch, she turned the trestle table on him and started right in on a scold. "Did no one e'er tell ye not to piggin' scare a body like that? I fair jumped out of me skin! Ye nigh gave me an apoplexy!"

"That is your second close call in recent days. Mayhap you should seek the wisdom of a physician for the ailment." The unmitigated gall of her, tiptoeing at his heels like a bloody court spy! "When I checked on you this morn, I told you to stay put inside your bedchamber until I let you out."

"And so I did."

"Pardon?" He did a double-take. "I would no more let you out than I would a Fox-Maiden. Do you think to ram the lie down my throat?"

"But ye did let me out -- in a manner speaking."

"We are using English here -- or at least one of us is -- that is the manner of speaking." These moor people chewed up and spit out a woefully guttural language that defied comprehension, unlike his native tongue, a lyrical manner of speech pleasant on the ear and easily grasped.

Lord, but he missed his birth language! Missed the sunshine of his native shores, missed the congenial sophistication of his people. He had left his homeland in shamed disgrace and might return in hopeless exile.

Showing none of his heartbreak, Gralam folded his arms across his chest. "How did you manage to escape the sentry?"

"That wee detail is for me to ken, and for ye to ne'er find out. Although I must say, this drafty keep has no shortage of mice in residence." She looked right and left. "Plenty of rats too, of the royal variety, if ye decipher me meaning."

Oh, he did. He also understood, if belatedly, how she had managed to escape.

Amongst a host of other strays, he entertained a particular tenderness for stray felines. Upon his arrival on these dratted moors, he had ordered a cut made in the wall of his solar so that a feral pet he had acquired could come and go at her whim. Since their apartments connected, Avice must have availed herself of that same egress --

In the guise of a cat!

Explaining how the crafty puss had managed to sneak past the guard posted at her portal, and why she could say he had let her out *in a manner of speaking*.

He exploded. "Hell and damnation!"

"Oh, I hope yer not directing that oath at me, m'lord. Witches believe in neither. 'Tis all about intent, ye see. In this instance, me intent be as pure as driven snow." She looked up at him at him from under her lashes. "We witches also believe in forgiveness, especially if the transgressor performs good works to make up the transgression. Do ye believe the same?"

Ignoring her question, he asked one of his own, "Why are you here alone, and not with your betrothed?"

"I have no betrothed, and I be not alone." The minx had the temerity to grin. "I be here with ye."

He gritted his teeth. "*Where-is-Martin?*"

She shrugged her answer.

"Find him, be with him, bed him!" He proceeded along the corridor.

Undeterred by his snub, she stayed with him, shoulder to shoulder, matching her footsteps to his.

An easy feat. A babe could keep up with him now. In his frustration, his leg muscles had tightened, which in turn only exaggerated his limp. His bad leg dragging in tow, his infirmity slowed him to a crawl.

Not so his heart. His heart raced. 'Twas always so in her company

He had tried not touching Avice, tried ignoring her, tried insulting her, and naught worked. She cleaved to him like a shadow. Like a bodyguard. Absurd to think, but 'twas almost as though she sought to protect *him*, not the other way 'round.

“So -- where do we go now?” she asked.

*He* was off to meet -- and kiss the arses of -- his esteemed guests from the House of Wessex. And Avice could not accompany him, which explained his order that morn for her to stay put. For her protection, he could not take her inside the great hall with him, seat her at his right hand, attend to her words as he would a favored confidante. All must know she did not hold his ear or his respect. He could not chance an assassin's blade meant for him might instead nick her. All must know he gave Avice no credence in the workings of his keep. To do this, he must publicly discount and denounce every bit of *vocal* advice she felt mercilessly free to offer. Her life depended upon him casting her in the role of whore, the overlord's paid-for --

Cunt.

To that end, he decided he would let Avice accompany him, after all. He would put her on display, a public presentation that would reach hither and yon ...

Or, at least as far as the big ears at The Confessor's court.

“We go to the great hall to meet my distinguished visitors,” he said, brusquely.

She rubbed her hands together. “Good! About time. I have a thing or two to get off me mind concerning yer high and mighty guests. Goddess! But nobles vex me no end. A hex on the lot of them, I say.”

He slanted her scowl.

She covered her mouth. “Present company excluded, naturally, m'lord.”

When they arrived, noble delegates from court already milled about the small annex outside the great hall. Herding Avice past this ready-made audience, Gralam led her inside, winking at the males as they passed. “The agricultural council will begin momentarily. I have a need to ... ahem ... *speak* to this female first.” Taking great pains to make it seem accidental, he stood in full view of those in the adjoining chamber who waited to gain entrance to the great hall.

He faced Avice. “On your knees, wench,” he said, straightaway. “You have not paid me homage yet today.”

“Here?” She looked about, adroitly took in their audience. “But the council is about to begin --”

“You are not to question my dictates!” he roared. “Kneel and be quick about it!”

Prepared for her to give him verbal battle, he widened his stance, readying himself in preparation for her barbed assault. One way or the other, he had to make her do this!

But the witch never ceased to surprise him. Rather than go on the attack, lunge for his throat, white teeth bared, she dropped to her knees before him. “M'lord,” she whispered, her gaze downcast, “name your requirement and 'tis yours.”

“More like it,” he grumbled.



A hush had fallen over the antechamber, their audience intent on listening and looking. No need to raise his voice, using his most stately, but quiet tone, he placed the unconscionable demand: "Remove your garb. My requirement is to see your unadorned female shape."

The order given to silence rumors ere they began. People talked, people speculated, people were wont to look for hidden meanings. The House of Wessex blamed witchcraft for everything from foul weather to unwise carnal alliances. To rule out sorcery as a cause of what many might construe as his unexplainable and unwholesome obsession with a peasant, he would prove Avice looked the same as every other female, without a witch's thumbprint anywhere on her pale body, the silky flesh of which he had minutely traversed with his fingertips --

Though not lately.

And thus explained his chronic foul mood. Chivalry could be a contentious bitch at times ...

"Aye, m'lord," she said obediently, and undid the ties at her throat. Once she had loosened the neckline, she removed the outer brown gunna over her head.

She reached for the crisp white linen head covering next.

"The veil stays."

His order stilled her busy fingers. "Pardon, m'lord?"

"Keep your coif in place."

Her fall of glorious fair hair would do much to cover her nudity. Since the purpose of this exercise was to reveal her body, the coif must stay.

That covered his hidden motivation, what covered hers?

As far as he could reason, naught explained her participation in this exhibitionism.

He frowned as she said a sweet, "As ye wish, m'lord."

"Go on," he urged. "You are used to going about without garb, correct?"

She made him no denial. Was she thinking the same thoughts as he?

He sighed in memory of that all too brief and splendid time together on the moors, when she oft went about with only the moon draping her skin.

Avice was a free soul, a natural spirit, with little regard for the outward trappings of propriety. But still, she somehow managed to retain an inherent modesty that ladies of his acquaintance would do well to emulate.

They could also mimic her honesty.

For all that witches excelled in deceit, Avice had openly admitted, without subterfuge, without apology -- and right from the first -- that she actively practiced her craft. The puss had many complicated facets to her character he had yet to delve.

Like this one. Why would she knowingly demean herself in front of a noble audience whom she most certainly detested? Why not turn him, and everyone else who watched and drooled, into a warty toad?

Having no wish to croak that day, he was heartily grateful she did not.

In that gratitude, he watched her, the same as he always watched her: Utterly transfixed.

Stripped of the mud-hued tunic and disreputable hose and boots, her body bare for all to see, she raised her chin. "Done, m'lord."

She had not turned him green. But for his high-handedness, she had still extracted a horrible price: His excitement swelled mightily at the nude sight of her.

And if their audience saw her bare, they also saw his naked longing.

Naught dignified about his hunger for a pagan witch he could not have. Naught noble about suffering her loss in his life. Naught chivalrous for wanting her with him, in bed and otherwise, every moment of every day. Regardless of where he was or whom he was with, so long as he drew breath, he would suffer her loss the same.

For the sake of their audience, he had tried to behave as an aristocrat would behave with his whore, a coldness of conduct that would accentuate their difference in rank and circumstance, and which would dictate an arrogant and presumptuous presupposing on his part that she would do as told. But in his besotted infatuation with the witch, rather than place a distant demand, he bent servilely to her and made a beggarly request. "A kiss?"

She might have tortured him, might have delayed, might have made him spitefully wait. She did none of that. Reaching up long and elegant arms, she looped her hands around his nape and brought him closer.

They looked into one another's eyes, their gazes locked. Not noble to peasant. Not owner to possession. Not client to whore. Not even master to mistress. They looked into the other's eyes, as lovers will do, equally entranced.

They gave one another lips and tongues in naked exchange.

At least he thought so initially. But the deeper their kiss became the more he realized his mistake.

She kissed him passionately, but with none of her former joyful spontaneity; appeasement of their audiences choreographed her part of the kiss.

And regardless, forgetting anyone watched at all, he lost himself to her.

After their mouths parted ways, gasping for air, he fell back against the wall.

A fact not missed by their audience.

Raucous laughter ensued from outside. Obviously, their onlookers thought the Norman overlord enamored of his peasant whore.

He had achieved the result he wished, but not without a forfeit of pride on his part. Coolness had been his goal, not heat!

The coolness was all on her side. The nipples on her perfectly round breasts were soft and pink, no elongation of arousal, no carnal distension, bespoke her excitement. Despite the show she had put on for the benefit of their audience, he knew differently. His kiss had left her unmoved.

But for the love of God, why had she gone along with the exhibitionistic spectacle if not to help him? Why cooperate only to thwart him? Clearly, she had understood his motives!

He could not say the same. What was her devious plot in this?

He cleared the hurt of her betrayal from his throat, and continued with his now tarnished performance. "You may rise and dress, then leave. Your service to me here is finished."

Without saying a word, Avice rose from her knees and garbed herself. In her faded rags, she left the great hall. Walking straight and proud through the center, she parted their audience, much as a queen would do with her lowly subjects.

As she swept through the crowd, Gralam looked after her, unable to quell his lust, still strong despite the hurt of her spite. She had ruined him this day! And still, she held the attraction of his loins.

A thunderous applause broke out in the antechamber.

*What?*

"Little wonder you keep the wench," a neighboring baron yelled to him. "With spirit like hers, you would be a fool to give her up!"

And so, Gralam came to understand Avice's devious plotting. The disrobing, the kiss, the condescension of her obedience -- she had done it all --

Not for herself, but for him.

To forestall his exile at the hands of the watching nobles, who judged his every breath, she had made him lose his breath with her. To keep his head with them, she had made him lose his head with her.

Ultimately, she had brought him low to save his life.

And that ... and that ... *generosity* ... on the part of a witch only reinforced his failings as a man.

## Chapter Twenty-nine

A frown tightened Martin's brow. Filtered in dawn's golden light, Avice approached him in the keep's courtyard. No joyful lilt tilted her lips, no radiance lit her eyes; the jaunty spring had departed from her step.

Ne'er had Martin seen Avice give way to sadness or dejection like this!

Since childhood, when they had romped together on the moors as the most innocent of friends, Avice had always shown herself stout of heart. A fall resulting in a cut or bruise would put nary a kink in her bold stride; like a wounded warrior, she marched bravely forward to meet and conquer whatever the challenge. Naught broke her robust spirits and hardy exuberance.

This day, her streaming wet face and misty green eyes told him both her exuberance and spirits had received a nasty blow.

Without inquiring as to the source of her distress, Martin opened his big arms wide and took her in.

"I have just now come from the great hall and I really must clean the fire pit in there today," she tearfully volunteered. "The smoke always makes me eyes water-up most dreadfully."

Stinging eyes might produce a drop or two of moisture, but no amount of soot and ashes would warrant this spate of copious weeping, especially not from the courageous Avice, a woman who ne'er cried.

In some situations -- generally speaking, when a female was flooding a man's chest with her salty brine -- diplomacy far outdistanced direct confrontation. Though very apparent that she had lied about the cause of her tears, Martin took the circumspect route and said naught about the prevarication.

"There, there," he soothed, stiffly patting her shoulder.

This awkwardness was new. Aye, Avice's lack of vesper attendance made him vaguely disgruntled. Her liaison with Lord Gralam of Normandy disappointed him. But ill at ease?

Martin shook his head. He ne'er felt uncomfortable with Avice! Why now?

"What can I do?" he asked. Hopefully, owing to her personal upset, Avice would fail to note his strained voice.

With a fierce sniff, she went up on tiptoe and wrapped his thick neck in a chokehold, her small body pressed tight to his much larger presence. "Hold me, giant. Just hold me for a bit."

More than anything, he wanted to forget everything and *just* hold her. Innocently hold her, as he had done on occasion in the past. But despite good intentions, he could only muster up an uncomfortable hug, his conscience having wedged itself between them.

Here, he had thought himself above the weaknesses of the flesh, yet he had succumbed to a carnal encounter with an anonymous female hunter in a wooded glen. Then, later, he had sought out her tutoring.

Martin let go a sigh. Humiliating, not living up to one's own high standards, to find oneself with feet of clay. Reprehensible too that, even now, unbridled recollections besieged him: His tutor's voluptuous shape, her knowing voice, her ribald laughter, the uncomplicated straightforwardness of her strong hands stroking his manhood ...

Of a sudden, Martin's loins turned to marble, melding to Avice's loins like pestle to mortar.

How could he be so shallow?

Or so inconstant?

And would she note his hardness?

He had ne'er been of a superfluous nature, ne'er fickle! Why now, when Avice needed a wide shoulder to cry upon, had his thoughts strayed to another? Had those straying thoughts caused his manhood to stir?

Locked in her own misery, praise be, Avice took no notice of his bulging braies.

"Oh, giant," she wheezed, "Gralam and I are always arguing! Terrible, terrible arguments. Why, why, do we constantly disagree? You and I seldom argue."

"Naught to argue about," he said without thinking. "We love one another. Where is the cause for disagreement there?"

Avice fell back on her heels. Her green eyes, now dry, widened. "Sometimes yer gigantic perception amazes me!"

At last, his betrothed had seen the light! Now Avice would forget all about the Norman overlord and agree to wed him. In kind, once they said their sacred vows, he would forget all about the female hunter.

His betrothed offered him a tremulous smile. "Giant, why did I not see it ere now? We do love one another!"

"Exactly." He smiled complacently.

"But we are not *in* love with one another, whereas I am head o'er heels in love with Gralam! Owing to yer explanation, I clearly understand. Passion creates friction, which creates heat, which creates a fire, which sparks an argument!" Her finger wagged back and forth betwixt them. "Now us -- because we share no passion, our differing points of view cause no rift in our affection. We need not get all in an uproar, for disagreements between us matter not." She beamed like white sunshine.

Martin blinked at the glaring light Avice cast. "But -- but --"

"Me thanks, giant, for setting me straight. I can hardly wait to get back to the solar to make up with Gralam! Considering the heat of our argument, the reconciliation should create a veritable bonfire!" Reaching up toward him and pulling his neck down, she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and then raced for the keep.

Martin stared after his betrothed a-goodly long time.

What mean she -- *in love*?

With whom? The overlord?

To be sure, Avice lusted after Lord Gralam. But lust, like a raging fire, always burned itself out. When the Norman eventually wed -- and he would wed, for a lord must have sons the same as a peasant -- he would choose a woman of his own station, a royal lady of the realm. When that happened, perhaps not this year, nor the next, but soon, Martin would be there to pick up the pieces, to console Avice, to hold her in his arms as she wept, to wed her when the tears had dried.

And Martin would wed Avice. Eventually. Falling back on patience, he would simply wait, bide his time, 'till she was ready.

Like two peas in a pod, Avice and he belonged together! Deep down, they understood one another, as only moor folk could understand one another.

More determined than e'er to learn the ways of passion so he might please Avice, Martin resolved right there and then to learn the steps of mating.

Already he had learned much. How to kiss a woman, bathe a woman, touch a woman. After kneeling on the floor between his tutor's spread thighs, he understood a woman's make. The scenery, the scent, the sensations ... the taste of a woman.

Or, at least one woman in particular.

'Twas all very enjoyable. But still, he remained wholly ignorant about some of the steps in the process. He understood the male part of himself went into his partner's female part, but 'twas providing enjoyment that left him flustered.

For the sake of his betrothed, he must find out!

Martin had only nibbled at the apple of carnal knowledge. For Avice, he must gobble the fruit whole.

\* \* \* \* \*

Julian kept her attention fixed on the woodlands. Her sharp gaze darted from tree to bush to trail, on the lookout for small game. During one such visual sweep of the area, she spied Martin about a hundred or so spades from where she crouched behind a mulberry bush. Well hidden by leaves and off to the side, she watched him approach.

And pass her right by.

That might have been that. In fact, ordinarily, that *would* have been that. She would have let him go in her thoughts and returned immediately to hunting ...

But for a sudden bout of restlessness.

After seeing Martin, the hunt no longer captured her interest and she combated an inexplicable boredom. Since the steward amused her, why not call after him and initiate another dalliance?

As she crouched at ground level, debating the wisdom of another tutoring session, lo and behold, the focus of her speculation sidled up behind her.

She squealed. "Cease doing that!"

Martin scratched his strong jaw where a mealy bug had just landed. "Cease doing what?"

"Sneaking up on a body, what else?"

"I apologize." He made her a formal bow. "I should have given ye due warning that I was sneaking up on ye." He tilted his golden head. "Course, to tell ye, would have eliminated the element of surprise."

"Surprise? *You* surprise *me*? The hell you did! I was but toying with you -- I was fully aware you were there, all along."

His light-hued brows rose like steeples. "Then, why squeal?"

"I thought you would enjoy my behaving like a female, all swishy and wishy, crying out shrilly o'er the least little thing."

"And here ye once accused me of misogyny! Ye might want to take a closer inspection at yer own view of the gender whose shape ye inhabit. Ye seem to find lacks where none exist. Females have their own unique strengths."

"I do not deplore my own gender!" she vehemently disagreed, whilst feeling slightly uneasy. "'Tis only that -- as a female, I can not do what I wish to do, go where I wish to go, because *your* gender bars me from such masculine pursuits."

But she had never tried to make her way as a woman either, and at times, she did mourn the loss of her softer side. Spending the rest of her life always on guard against

discovery narrowed her pursuits, as well as closing off other choices altogether -- like motherhood, for instance.

Lately, for all her talk of not wanting to get caught in the family way, she had begun to ache for a child. A daughter, she would raise up fearless, even if the fearlessness came in the form of courage to be her own true self, whatever that true self entailed.

Martin lifted his huge shoulders in a tremendous shrug. "Well, at any rate, I like how ye behave now, who ye are now. No need to change for me."

His acceptance warmed her, but still she fretted: Was she losing her edge?

Martin had ambushed her. She should have known he was coming at her from behind! Had he fur, rather than silky hair, and walked on four legs, rather than two, she need not worry about being caught red-faced -- she would be dead now.

'Twould never do to let Martin see her desperate concern o'er this turn of events. A woman's anguish was the surest way to drive a man away. Men were only after one thing from a woman, and that one thing was an uncomplicated rutting.

Not that she cared about driving Martin away. Not she! At the end of his tutoring, after he had served his purpose, she would fling wide the portal and give him the boot.

Martin stood directly in front of her. "I think yer magnificent."

Discarding his patronizing compliment, she fixed him with a withering stare. "How long were you following me?"

"I have ken yer whereabouts since two arrows past."

*Two arrows past!* And she had not suspected!

Her heart plummeted to her boots. She *was* losing her edge.

"Ye mostly likely had a lot on yer mind and so were distracted. And I did tell you, I excel at tracking," Martin said softly.

Had he rubbed in her ineptitude, called her bungling and incompetent, she would have understood how to handle him. She would have struck back! But faced with his sympathy, his pity, she floundered. Always her own worst critic, she sat there and brooded.

Martin was right: She had been distracted this day.

"Finished here yet?" asked the man who had distracted her, the same man who monopolized her every thought, daydream, and fantasy since their first meeting.

Martin was to blame for her lost edge.

This situation could not continue! She must chop him down to size. Put him in his place! Take back her diminished advantage. Her attraction to him made her weak!

Because of her crouching positioning, her gaze easily aligned itself to his braies. His bulge did naught to lift her foul mood. "Faugh! Is that virgin anticipation I see?"

"Aye. I have awaited you a goodly length, huntress. If you be done here, 'tis time for us to move ahead with our lessons."



Let his tongue hang out for a while. He deserved a taste of her lost pride. “No need for haste. You progress at a rapid speed.”

“Not fast enough for me.” Bending, he scooped up her hook of game and slung the bloodied carcasses o’er his formidable shoulder. “After you,” he said with a mannerly gesture.

Damn his solicitousness! And damn herself for appreciating it!

The hut was but a trice from their present location. Lust quelling all interest in idle conversation, they made the journey there in the charged silence of male/female awareness. Fine by her! This was about loins, not romance.

After hanging the game on a metal hook assigned for that purpose, Martin opened the portal to her hut, escorting her through first.

Once inside, with the world shut out, he eyed her mouth.

She dropped her sights lower.

There was but one way to regain her command of this tutoring!

Julian fell to her knees, pulled out his eager cock, and led him between her lips. She would finish what she had started the last time! And this time, he would not evade the result with a kiss. Cut him down to size, deflate his daunting power and she would banish him from her thoughts. Martin was just a man, like any other man, and this was one sure way of proving it.

She tongued him down the length, kissed along the side, squeezed his stones between her palms, and put her mouth upon him.

Much, *much* later, after swallowing the abundant proof of his virility down her throat, he helped her to her feet.

Not even breathing hard, he quirked a puzzled brow at her. “Now I go between yer legs?”

Stunned, her gaze went to his open braies.

Far from flaccid, far from deflated, he jutted straight out, his powerful cock as stiff as a staff.

’Twas as though he had never reached resolution!

## Chapter Thirty

Martin led the huntress to bed.

Her mouth had taken the edge off, but now he needed more than her mouth; he needed to get inside her, deep inside her, all the way inside her.

“Cast off yer garb,” he insisted, though demanding was not something he usually did, and neither was insisting. Usually, he accepted his lot in life, which amounted to less substance than air, and got on about trying to make something out of naught. But after having this strong woman at his feet, not once but twice, he reasoned he must have some worth. Why else would such a magnificent woman deem him meritorious of her attention?

“C-c-cast off my garb?” she repeated his order, only with an adorable stutter.

She seemed taken aback. Why? Even a virgin such as he understood that mating involved exposure of specific body parts. “Go on!” he prompted. “Ye need satisfaction.”

Her expression -- resistance meets surprise -- told him that this lesson was not going as she had planned. Used to being in charge, she thought to be in charge of him. The huntress had much to learn.

As, did he.

She sputtered. “I need satisfaction. *I* need satisfaction? *Me?*”

“Aye, ye do.”

“And who is going to give me this satisfaction?”

“Why, meself, naturally.”

“You and who else?”

Here, he threw back his head and roared. “Unless there be someone else in this hut, hidden under the tick, no one else. And what would ye do with a second man, anyway?”

"Plenty." She shot him a look, if not to kill, then to wound grievously. "There is much I might do, and have done, with a second man, and a third man too."

His mouth flapped open. "Praise the Lord! More than one man making love to ye at one time?"

"Making love has naught to do with it."

"But why more than one suitor?"

"Because they are not suitors, but companions in lust. And because a female likes the extra attention during the frolic."

"Ye cannot be serious!" Imagining such a bed huddle proved beyond him.

"I have never been more serious. And you should close your lips. Women find gaping mouths unattractive. You want your Avicé to find you attractive, do you not?"

He brushed this instruction aside. "No extra attention will ye require with me in yer bed."

"That remains to be seen." After removing her clothes, which she did with an odd sort of defiance, she got atop the bed.

On her belly, bottom raised in the air.

"Come into me, ram to ewe," she said to his astonishment.

Not exactly how he had envisioned his first intimate occasion. Though his manhood would take what it could get, his soul demanded more, not to mention his unflagging need for romance.

"But yer lips," he began in confused disappointment. "Turned away like thus, I cannot kiss yer mouth."

"I told you once already, kissing is not a requirement of rutting."

Alas, kissing was *his* requirement. And who said a word about rutting? Despite her ram to ewe comparison, they were not sheep!

Best make no mention of sheep, lest she go in search of a flock to join them. Three in a bed, indeed! Martin shook his head. The strange ideas departing her lips bewildered him.

The *ideas* bewildered him, not the lips, themselves. Her lips ne'er bewildered him. Bedeviled him, aye, but also beckoned him. The head of his member slipping inside those luscious lips had maddened him, and he would not, *could* not, do without them.

Martin stripped-off. Heedless of orderliness, a tenet ingrained since childhood and reinforced in the monastery, he tossed the garb away as carelessly as celibacy. "Turn o'er, female, or I turn ye o'er."

Flopping onto her spine, her fine sturdy legs hooked o'er the edge of the bed, she asked, "Where has your timidity fled?" She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Are you sure you have never done the deed ere now?"

"As sure as I mean to kiss you." His lips clamped on hers.

After a moment of keeping him out, she relented to a force greater than both of them. Her mouth turned pliable, her lips parted, and his tongue dove inside.

Contented, he sighed into the interior, that warm and moist place he very much liked visiting. Then, of a sudden, everything turned crazed.

On his side, anyway.

He tasted his essence on her!

The urge to do more than spend in her mouth had him deepening the connection, had him thrusting his tongue to the back of her throat. The urge to mark her as his, to plant his seed inside her womb, had him growling into the kiss.

An uncivilized yank, a barbaric heave, and he had her legs up on the tick. Parting her thighs, he began to mount her.

As he charged her slit, the huntress shook her mouth free. Panting, breasts heaving, she held him back, two hands upon his chest. "Have you control?"

Used to be, he could deny himself all manner of corporal pleasure. That ability had abandoned him at the first sight of her. "I ken not."

She tossed her head back and forth on the furs. "Lose control and you may impregnate me."

That possibility startled him. "A child should be conceived in love. Anything less cheats the bairn --"

"I agree."

"And we do not love one another." Rethinking the intercourse, he pulled away.

"Love?" She snorted, and pulled him back to her. "Strangers know one another better than we."

"Just so," he rasped. She bound him to her, two hands about his neck. Unable to move or escape ... or dunk his hot head in the cistern's cold water ... he had all to do not to weep in building frustration. Then, when the hardened peaks of her breasts went from skimming his flesh to lacerating his flesh, his manhood did weep -- pre-release tears.

Salt to wound, she added, "So we agree -- you cannot spill your seed in my womb."

He ground his forehead to hers. "Tis as ye wish." But what an inopportune time to negotiate!

"Have you enough control to withdraw at the end?" She partially lowered a eyelid, an inquisitor at a tribunal. "*Ere* you spew."

"If it means getting me stiffy where we both need it." He nodded vigorously. "Aye, I do."

Her palms fell back onto the bed. "Then, do your worst. Fast and hard. No holding back. I would feel you deep."

*Fast and hard ... No holding back ... Deep.*

Paradise.

"I shall do as instructed," he managed to say, and reasonably enough. Then, losing all reason, he groaned in agony, "Only let me in, let me in, let me in, please let me inside ye."

A nonsensical thing to moan, as his carnal tutor had set up no further impediments to his entry; in fact, she had raised her knee and hooked her foot onto his spine, giving him full access.

Rather than ram to the hilt, he savored the entry, allowing only the head to engage, whilst his gaze sank into her black eyes. "Ye feel miraculous. So tight. So tight around me."

'Twas her mouth that fell open, that gaped now. "Do you intend to converse during this?"

"Why not?" He came up on his elbows.

"Because ... because ... rutting should be done furtively. In darkness, if possible. And always in silence."

"I have had enough of silence." The realization dawned that he spoke the whole tale. Though he had once thought silence would suit him, and felt guilty about leaving the solitude of prayer behind, he now accepted the rightness of his decision. Monastic life was not for him.

"So smooth is yer passage," he said in wonder. "Am I situated correctly? Shall I move higher? Lower?" Experimentally, he changed course.

At her gasp, his mind seized up. For a heartbeat, silence o'ercame him again. Then, he ushered the habit away. He would ne'er learn how to give her enjoyment if he hung onto the past. "Do I please ye, where I am -- here?"

Her chin jerked once in a nod of accord.

*Aha!* The huntress was too o'ercome to speak as well.

He took her hand, then her lips, and made the fit complete. Joined thus, he began to move. Slowly at first, later thrusting, ere driving. And still he kept hold of her mouth, their shared breathing a staccato rhythm as they approached the end.

Swallowing her cries, he broke their bond as he broke apart, his seed surging, spraying, onto the top of her belly, dripping into her dark pubic hair.

He wanted his semen inside her, *had* to have it inside her.

As though off in the distance, he heard her make soft little mewling sounds deep in her throat. His gaze following the tract of his spent seed, he captured some on a fingertip. "Open yer mouth."

Still mewling, her lips parted. Drop by viscous drop, he fed her his life force until 'twas all gone and she had licked his fingertip clean.

The texture of her tongue, the way she suckled on his finger -- all of her -- stirred him.

"Again," he said abruptly, to which she simply nodded.

Well, more than simply nodded -- actually, she nodded robustly.

Well, more than simply nodded robustly -- actually, she bunched the covering in both fists, twisting the furs like a rope, and panted.

Glorious!

He must have pleased her! Why else would she roll about on the covers?

The female who had previously declared an antipathy for kissing showed no such repugnance now. Her mouth ate at his as he deepened the kiss.

He loved Avice. Only Avice. He had sworn his troth to her. But oh, the huntress did excite him.

Whilst he delved her, she broke their lips apart. "Hard and deep," she instructed.

An apt student, he reared back and penetrated, hard and deep.

The huntress said hoarsely, "You are unusually good at this."

Indeed! Making love felt less like a lesson learned than a talent found.

## Chapter Thirty-one

*Pompous Norman!*

Avice beat her fingers on her chin, the closed portal receiving her glare. That arrogant, mistrustful, stiff-lipped, man!

Upon her return to the keep that day, she had searched out Gralam. Just as she had told Martin she would do, she had tried to apologize, had tried to make up their quarrel. And what did she get? An open mind? An open heart?

Nay! Refusing to listen, the overlord had coolly locked her inside the keep. Again. And, not inside her own bedchamber this time, either. Inside *his solar*.

To add insult to injury, skilled blacksmiths had worked frantically to install a metal bar on the exterior portal. Skilled craftsmen had later arrived and blocked the cat opening in the timber wall. With the cold warning, “stay put” the overlord had then left her alone, imprisoned within the seemingly impenetrable chamber, and gone freely on his merry way.

The crossbar’s heavy iron *clunk* still reverberated in her ears.

Avice snorted. When would the Norman learn no opulent chamber, no miserly cell, regardless of how stout the planks and how weightily barred, would keep her from performing her witch’s duty?

She would protect Gralam, despite himself.

To do that, she would need to make another break for freedom.

Not the garderobe. Not the cat entry. This time ’round, the arrow loop would serve as her means of escape.

’Twas still early! Plenty enough time to sneak out and return ere Gralam checked up on her again. The guard posted outside in the hallway would ne’er even realize she had flown the coop.

Neither would Gralam.

All the same, circumvention wearied her. Why would he not simply let her be? Left to her own devices, no harm would befall her. After all, she had taken care of herself ere his arrival and she would take care of herself after his departure --

Departure, not exile. A vast difference in meanings separated those two leave-takings. She would see his decision made freely, not come at the end of a royal decree.

She made quick work of divesting herself of her garb. As bare as a newborn bairn, she hunkered down by the bedpost. A trice later, she was all-decked out in white feathered finery. A spread of wing took her through the narrow arrow loop.

As she glided high above the courtyard, lifted on a slight breeze, Avice spotted Gralam. Head angled, jaw dipped, the Norman listened intently to what a craft smith had to say. At the conversation's conclusion, he walked away. From her unique aerial perspective, she noted how his injured leg dragged, like a dead branch hanging low from an otherwise perfect and robust tree.

She had done that to him. With malice aforethought, she had deliberately lamed him. At the time, she had thought to escape rape. But had she not hated everything Norman, had she not allowed prejudice to stifle reason, the lord would suffer no impediment now.

As she flew free, a respite from her earthbound body, she vowed to set Gralam free too. She would do so, for her sake as well as his.

She had already admitted her culpability in a grievous act to him. But she had ne'er admitted Gralam, himself, had been the recipient of that wrongdoing. Her unspoken lie devoured her self-confidence, which in turn ate away at her powers. In the twelvemonth since destroying the overlord's graceful gait, indecision had altered her ability to perform magic. She second-guessed her judgment now.

Her guilt might have killed off her witchcraft skills altogether -- save for Gralam, himself. His strength, his uncomplaining lack of self-pity, compensated for his disability. Only upon seeing the lord from a different viewpoint, as now, did she consider his limp.

Though the overlord rarely complained about his impediment, she heard him pacing about his solar at night, trying to outdistance the pain. Those creaking floors served as part of her punishment.

She should have looked deeper ere setting her powers loose! N'er should she have allowed politics to interfere with healing!

Gralam was her first and only lover. Owing to Martin's perception, she realized the Norman overlord was the first and last man she would e'er love. Naught he did or said would drive her away.

No witch's incantation could undo the harm her prejudice had wrought. No chanted magical words would bring back a moment in time. That one opportunity so start fresh was



lost. But she had not yet exhausted her powers of womanly persuasion to try again. Not from the starting point, but from where they were right now.

They might yet have a second chance for the magic of happiness. 'Twas not their unequal status in life that stood between them, not that he was a Norman lord and she an Anglo-Saxon peasant, nor did what the future might bring prohibit their relationship -- they could work that out together. Nay, lack of trust stood between them.

Sad for both of them, Avice circled the courtyard once again. Peering down upon the man she loved, but could not bring herself to tell, her short-curved beak trembled.

Birds do not tear-up. Her falcon eyes remained dry. But oh, inside, she most assuredly did cry.

*Gralam, Gralam, Gralam ... I made a dire mistake. Forgive me, Gralam.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Julian smiled as Martin held out his hand to her.

"Come with me," he whispered.

"I already have, silly!" she smugly replied.

"Nay, not like that -- outside. I wish to give ye something."

"Something other than your largesse, you mean?" She twittered at her own wit. After a night of rutting, her spirits soared high.

As it turned out, the shy virgin had surpassed her every expectation. After screaming her throat sore in appreciation of too many climaxes to count, she wondered at her good fortune in finding someone of Martin's virility and stamina.

"Aye," said her good fortune, "I would give you something other than my *largesse*. Though, continue to enchant me as you have done, and you will have that too."

"In that case ..." She placed her hand swiftly in his.

In a fog of satiation, she drifted outside with her new lover, one in a long succession, but the only one thus far ever to give her pleasure, or to care about the same. Her naked flesh glowed with the sweat of enjoyment, a sheen dawn cooled whilst leaving the heat of desire untouched.

With Martin, her lust had naught to do with power. Simply put, for the first time, she basked in carnality for passion's sake, no ulterior motive.

Passion was not the same as love. She must not confuse one for the other. She had her sights set on bigger game than Martin.

Gralam.

The overlord was her quarry. She had planned his entrapment for too long to forsake the hunt now.

"For ye," her companion said, presenting her with a bouquet of wildflowers.

No matter how jaded, her eyes welled up with tears.

*Idiot!* She chastised herself even as she crushed the flowers to her. Trying not to slobber all o'er the pretty rose and blue and yellow blossoms, petals far too sweet for a hard-living huntress like her, she stammered, "When d-d-did you pick these?"

"Last eve. I tore myself away whilst ye slumbered and crept outside. The moon was high, and by its light, I chose what I thought would match your beauty. None did."

With Martin's poor eyesight, 'twas just as well he was a steward not a hunter.

Pride demanded she gave as good as she got on the furs. And so she stood, naked and cum-coated, her thighs loose with abandon. After such a strenuous rutting, kindness itself would have called her disheveled. "'Tis you who are the beauty here."

At her sentimentality, she flushed with mortification. To mask her betraying warmth, she lowered her chin as she fell to her knees and undid Martin's braises. Hiding her glowing face as best she could, Julian slowly brought forth Martin's cock. "Up for another go 'round?"

"Always."

His answer contained no boast. Erections came and went. Some lasted but the blink of one eye, some a full wink. In this contest of wills, his stalwart member had yet to back down.

A telling brush against her lips preceded a slide toward her mouth. And though no hunter was he, and with poor eyesight to boot, where it counted the most, where she needed him the most, Martin's aim was true.

"Hard and deep?" her solicitous lover asked.

She clutched the base, felt his hard wood hesitate for a beat.

"Always," Julian replied.

When he thrust hard and deep down her throat, she gave herself over to passion.

\* \* \* \* \*

Avice had to get away. Just for the space of an afternoon, she had to escape the guilt and secrets that kept her apart from the man she loved.

With a screech, she flapped her powerful white gyrfalcon wings, long and pointed and designed for swift flight, and took off for the woodlands.

A thin thread of ashy smoke rose from a lean-to dwelling situated within a thick grove of gnarled oak

*Odd, about the little hut,* she mused.

Moor folk were an individualistic, even an unsociable lot, wary of strangers to the point of suspicion, even antagonism. For the most part, they minded their own affairs and lived scattered all about the heaths and heathers in family groupings. By necessity, they collectively tilled the soil on homesteads of thatched-roofed cottages, abodes in marked similarity to her own little domicile. With that said, 'twas not unusual for the occasional

single tenant farmer to strike out on his own, to live and farm so far afield from others that the recluse's existence went entirely unseen, unnoticed, throughout the course of his life.

But this was not the moors.

She flew over darkly dense, inhospitable forest. The trees grew so close together, their heavy green canopies impeded the light. Their root tangle would make cultivating a small kitchen garden nigh on impossible. Not even a hermit would live here. Not even a witch would live here.

So -- who did live here?

Doubtlessly someone with a secret to hide.

A poacher, mayhap. How else to explain the hut's seclusion?

Game stealing was illegal, a gravely punishable offence if caught. As a practicing witch, she well understood the skill involved in evading the authorities. Obviously, this individual was very skilled to avoid both detection and apprehension.

Curiosity getting the best of her and in need of a distraction from her own punishable secrets, she decided to investigate.

A bird of prey possessed inordinately acute senses. From a great distance, she could spy a hare darting through the underbrush or discern mice scurrying for cover from her predator's claws. From the height of treetops, she could differentiate animal paws from human footprints.

Avice performed a tricky loop-di-loo -- her bird specialty -- and swooped lower. The portal to the hut had just swung wide and she was anxious to make out the features of the two men who had exited the lean-to, walking hand-in-hand.

According to the laws of the land, sodomy was punishable by death. As a witch, she looked at things a little differently: Love was love, no matter its shape and form, no matter its physical manifestation. Love was a positive power deserving of celebration.

Rubbing her tail feathers together in glee at the sheer romance of it all, she flew lower still, first noting, from out of her peripheral vision, one of the men's great height and bulky substance. Then, she took in the bowl-cut hair, the usually golden strands tarnished to bronze in the shadowy woods.

Did her eyes deceive her or was that her childhood friend?

Her yellow falcon eyes widened. There could be no mistake. 'Twas Martin!

But who accompanied him?

Avice shifted her wings to a glide and gawked at the couple, whose rapt gazes and constant touches bespoke of an enamoring far surpassing the usual lust.

Dipping in a southerly direction, she perched her tail feather atop a branch to watch as the besotted pair stopped to kiss. No lukewarm pucker either. Mouths open, twisting

together, they had yet to come up for air. And their hands! Their hands moved everywhere at once.

*Goddess!* The two lovers had no restraint whatsoever!

Thus explained their need for a secluded trysting spot.

And here she had thought her affiliation to Martin would prove dangerous! What would happen if Martin's affiliation to another man came to light?

She could tell this was no one-time interlude either. Whoever he was, Martin's mystery love had clearly captivated the giant. But once again, Avice detected more than physical passion between them. Martin and his hunter loved one another. Even a birdbrain could see the truth of their bond. When they mated, they joined more than their bodies. Their minds and hearts, and inner spirits engaged, as well.

When Martin's lover turned to profile and smiled, Avice's beak snapped open.

Why, the smiling man was none other than Julian, the overlord's lead hunter!

Gralam thought highly of his vassal, enough that he had brought the young man with him from Normandy to these shores.

Imagine that! Martin paired with a Norman!

The situation should not have come as a surprise. Her childhood friend had always espoused tolerance and brotherly love --

Delighted for Martin's well-deserved happiness, her bird's beak tilted in an equivalent of a smile. *Time to give the lovers some privacy ...*

Avice flapped her wings for a quick departure.

She had flown but a few yards when a hard glancing blow struck the back of her feathered head.

*Screech ... screech ... screech ...*

Pain. Excruciating pain.

Despite frantically flapping her wings, she plummeted.

Wind draft broke the full impact of her descent. The slight breeze turned what could have been a catastrophic free-fall into a gentle glide to earth. The goddesses must have been watching o'er her, for she landed far removed from where Martin trysted with Julian, a row of puffy bushes softening the jolt of her touchdown.

But the ache in head! Ah, she felt so dizzy! And her stomach! Her belly roiled!

Willing herself to ignore both the pain exploding in her skull and the resultant nausea, Avice concentrated with all her might. She must make a swift reversion to her female form! If a human or animal found her in her bird shape, injured and vulnerable, unable to take flight or defend herself -- or spell-cast -- dire consequences would surely follow.

She forced the metamorphosis. The transition started not a moment too soon and ended on a scream. Oh, her skull throbbed so! And her vision! What was wrong with her eyes? The already sparse light in the forest dimmed to a pinpoint of agony.

As consciousness faded in and out, Martin held her thoughts.

Her friend must take care. He must not behave heedlessly, recklessly. There were those who would persecute him for his choice of whom to love. Whoever had brought her down might have seen him with his male companion.

*Must warn ... must warn ... must tell Martin ...*

Giving into the wracking in her head, Avise succumbed to total darkness.

## Chapter Thirty-two

Owing to his debility, Gralam had designed a new rigging for his steed. Deciding to put man and beast ... and contraption ... to the test, he kneed his recently broken animal and they were off, riding at a gallop across the keep's open courtyard, through the raised gate, over the drawbridge, and out into the meadow.

So far, so good. The heavier reins gave him more control over his mount.

He never usually rode in the forest -- too few trails and too many roots for a horse to trip o'er. But for some reason unbeknown to him, he directed the charger in that direction.

At the edge of woodlands, still obeying a peculiar sense of immediacy, he pulled up on the reins and lowered himself, injured leg first, o'er the war saddle's high cantle. After securing his steed, he entered the forest at a rushing limp.

Why?

Gralam shook his head in consternation. He had no explanation. Thus far, all his actions were unaccountable.

He should leave! Turn back. What was this fool's errand?

No answer, save for an acrid aroma of ashes and smoke that led him ever deeper into the trees. Someone must have lit a fire earlier, he randomly conjectured. A hunter, perchance, breaking the fast at a temporary campsite.

Following the billowing soot, he continued his inexplicable rush, finding not the temporary campsite he had hypothesized, but rather a squatter's hut.

Peasants needed to fill their empty bellies, same as hungry overlords. Upon his discovery that the moor populace had not enough to eat, Gralam had turned a blind eye to small poaching. Now that agricultural production had improved and stomachs no longer went empty, he would need to halt the illicit gaming activity, ere news of the trespass ... and his negligence ... got back to the king.

Today was as good a time as any to begin.

He would hammer his fist on the secluded hut in the woods and command the poacher to stop his illegalities or face the prospect of dangling at the end of a hanging rope!

Two strides taken toward the hut, and Gralam spied the poacher, garbed in the usual hunting attire, ambling along the path up ahead.

To get a jump on the miscreant, Gralam sidestepped off-trail and settled himself behind some large rocks, where he pulled his broadsword --

Only to sheathe his weapon again, and scratch his head.

What was Julian doing here, at such a distant outpost?

Naturally, Gralam surmised his lead hunter lived *somewhere*. Though, that Julian had chosen to live here, a place so far removed from the kennels, was peculiar ...

No more peculiar than the fellow himself, Gralam supposed, on second consideration.

The hunter was an odd duck, after all. But for all his many eccentricities, his vassal had served him well and good since boyhood and Gralam had no complaints ...

He was about to call out a friendly greeting, when another individual joined his compatriot. The gold helmet of hair gave the man's identity away.

Martin.

So -- his new overseer had an acquaintance with his Norman vassal. A ferocious lead hunter and a devout and gentle-mannered former seminarian? What common ground did those two share? And what, pray tell, was that in Martin's hand?

Gralam narrowed his gaze. Looked like Avice's betrothed held flower sprigs. A love token for the witch, perchance? But surely, the bouquet would wilt ere Martin returned to the keep --

Rather than announce his presence, Gralam hung back.

The knowledge that Martin had plucked a keepsake for Avice, that their courtship had started to progress, should have gladdened him. But nay. A fit of jealousy squeezed Gralam's stones. At the sight of that keepsake. At the idea of a successful courtship between Avice and Martin.

Whilst Gralam gave himself good sound talking to, a stern lecture for selfishly putting his wants and desires in front of Avice's safety, Martin flourished the nosegay.

At Julian.

Gralam frowned. *What was this?*

When Julian accepted the blossoms and then kissed Martin lustfully on the lips, Gralam asked himself the question again. And again, when Julian fell to his knees and fiddled with Martin's braises. When Julian towed Martin's erect member to his mouth, the question died a swift death.

Backing up, Gralam turned away. He had seen more than enough.

Whilst not condemning a relationship between two males, he could not condone this particular liaison.

*Martin supposedly loved Avice.* For that reason and more, Gralam had assigned her unto his care. And here was his steward stuffing his privates in the lead hunter's face!

Gralam would deal with Martin irresponsibility later. For now, he must obviously chart a different course for Avice's future protection.

To avoid a confrontation with the amorous couple, Gralam took a different return route through the woods for his steed.

Almost there, and the trail came to an abrupt end, a squat bush impeding the narrow path. Broken vegetation lay scattered all about, the green scent of freshly cut wood hung ripe in the air.

But for the same inexplicable sense of urgency that had driven him all day, he might have simply avoided the irksome hindrance. Gone around, stomped his way back to his steed through the overgrowth. As 'twas, he pushed the severed branches aside and climbed into the green fray.

And found Avice lying inert amongst the crushed leaves.

Her lithe body crumbled and nude, her unbound hair fanned out pale around her, in stark contrast to her blue-tinged skin. She looked ...

Nay! He refused to think how she looked.

"Avice!" he cried.

And received no response.

In truth, he had expected none.

Falling to his knees at her side, he placed his ear to her chest.

Praise God! Her heart still beat. She lived!

Shadows ruled the forest, and Avice felt cold to the touch. No time to ponder the circumstances, he swept his fur cape from his shoulders, wrapped her up in its warmth and then into his arms. As he stood, relief poured o'er him.

She still breathed!

Hope existed. For her. For *them*. After almost losing her, he was not about to let her go again.

With his love held close to his chest, Gralam raced for his waiting steed.

Cupping her head to support her lolling neck, he discovered the bump. About the size of a hen's egg, the swelling rose from her skull in sharp denunciation.

He had not protected Avice!

Her moaning only confirmed his failure. As did the blood-coated fingers he used to untie his steed. Due to his negligence, Avice had suffered a laceration, a wound that bled copiously, and a bump of unknown origins.



With utmost care, Gralam placed his love before him on the mount. Even so, she stirred. "What are ye doing here, m'lord?"

"Shh. Do not try to speak." He smoothed her tangled hair back from her forehead.

"Be we in the woodlands?" Her tone contained terror.

"Nay. Not in the wood. At the edge. I had gone for a ride ..."

"Martin," she interrupted. "Bring me Martin." Her eyes rolled back. "Please, I must tell him -- must tell him --"

His dreams of lasting togetherness dying, Gralam nodded. "You must tell him you love him. I understand. Rest easy now. Your Martin will come to you later. I give you my solemn word to have him summoned to my solar. You may tell him then of your devotion."

## Chapter Thirty-three

On a burst of alertness, she ascended from numbing oblivion.

*Alive, alive! I be alive!*

A moment later, her gratitude ended.

Pain. Horrible, terrible, pain exploded in her skull. The violent maelstrom sent torturous particles of awareness to all her nerve endings. Harrowing agony threatened to send her back into the void. But worse than even her pounding head, her aching limbs, and her bruised muscles was the fitful forgetfulness that befuddled her thoughts:

Who be she? And what the piggin' snit had happened to her?

Her body balked at her command to move. She tried to wiggle her toes and succeeded, but failed at flexing her fingers.

Why could she not raise her arms? What clamped her hands?

Her body tossed about on a fiery sea, her mind clouded, she fought the return from total darkness. Eyes closed, she lay perfectly still, as a frightened possum would do, and pondered her dilemma.

Softness -- a fresh tick, perchance? -- supported her from crown to heel. A thick coat of something -- fur, mayhap? -- covered her sensitized skin. Scented air -- roses, definitely roses! -- surrounded her. Fine strands of sweet-smelling hair tickled her forehead. All of her felt clean and smelled fragrant. Whatever had happened, wherever she was, whoever she was, someone had tended to her, cared for her, bathed her hair and naked body in perfumed water. Someone had put her to bed.

More curious than frightened now, she raised her lids.

Though only halfway. Leaving behind the surety of full darkness, she cautiously ventured into the ambiguity of half light.

Her brain dull, her unblinking gaze fixed above her, her arms immobilized, she contemplated the oak rafters overhead.

*A vaulted ceiling!* The sheer height of the space, combined with the lack of cobwebs and absence of sooty wood fire ash, told her that whatever her location, the bedchamber belonged to someone of wealth and discernment. Was she a royal living in a splendid keep?

A steady sound of breathing came from the left. Someone was in the chamber with her. Who?

Tossing her aching head about on the furs, an admittedly foolish action that hurt like a piggin' battleaxe to the skull, she cast her blurry eyes in that general direction.

At first, double vision hindered her investigation. Strange! She could see far away, as far away as the cobweb-free ceiling, but up close posed a problem.

Persisting, she narrowed her gaze.

A few feet out from the bed gradually came into focus.

*Hmm.* Who was that handsome and refined dark-haired nobleman sitting beside the bed, a sumptuous bed to be sure, a bed surely befitting a noblewoman? And why did that handsome and refined dark-haired nobleman look so worried?

Rather than ask -- too difficult to phrase the question -- she investigated the other side, the right side, where similar sounds of breathing originated.

A giant of a man, a peasant farmer for sure, sat beside the bed, his big sturdy body nigh doubled over on a three-legged stool. Though clearly a different circumstance governed his life, the serf's anxious expression matched the lord's worried look.

Fancy that! Two eminently gorgeous males seemingly cared about her.

From out of her foggy mind, one vainglory thought came through clear as a bell:

*What a beauty I must be to fetch such rapt masculine attention!*

How she wished she might see her beauteous face!

Like magic, she caught her reflection in a polished copper plate situated on the wall.

And gasped.

What a disappointment! Her visage, though pleasant enough, was not the stuff of courtly legends. With her unremarkable green eyes and broad-cheekbones, and the ordinary and regular layout of the rest, she doubted she had e'er seen the inside of a royal palace. Positively, no doting baron parents had bequeathed her gold coffers at birth. Her skin had seen one too many sunny days to believe herself a cosseted lady of wealth and privilege. And her hair! The unruly strands stuck out like snarled, colorless wires.

Pig snit! She resembled a veritable witch!

Her lips pursed. *Mirror, begone from me sights!*

The polished copper plate made a deafening sound as it fell.

*Uh-oh.*

“No matter,” said the dark-haired man.

“Mice behind the wall,” the gigantic man offered.

She glared at the both of them. “What the piggin’ pox ails me, anyway?”

“Praise God! She spoke!” chimed her two male companions in almost perfect unison, if disparate diction.

A night and day dissimilarity described those two. The fair-haired peasant thought her good as gold, whilst the dark-haired noble rewarded her with gold for being less than good.

Less than good, less than good, less than good ...

Gracious goddess! She was a whore!

Her nose wrinkled. Nay, that sounded wrong.

Her reflection popping up on the wall as a result of wish fulfillment; the copper plate falling to the ground on account of another wish made, her supplication to a goddess ...

Piggin’ poke! She be a witch!

She took a deep breath; her gaze darted to and fro. All right. So, she be a witch. What powers did she possess? Sure, she could make a metal mirror bounce, but what else could she do?

Her eyes glinted on her dual restraint. Certainly, not move her own hands.

Each man held a palm, one squeezing tight, the other squeezing gently, both squeezing lovingly.

*Bosh!* She expected magic, and what she got was love.

She loved both men, in a different manner for each. And that they loved her, each to his own individual fashion.

She could work with this.

Smiling like an idiot, she yanked at both hands, which brought two very different sets of lips to her mouth.

First, she sampled the dark man to the left first.

His kiss, firm and tense, told her much about his reserved character. This one would not let love rule him!

Or, so he thought.

In actuality, his shiver bespoke the whole tale of his adoration. His love misted her eyes.

Next, she sampled the fair man to her right.

His mouth, mobile and enthusiastic, gave every hint of an uncomplicated nature. This one adored her openly and to distraction!

Or, so he thought.

In actuality, his conflicted love dried her misty eyes right good and quick.

She broke off the mouth-to-mouth experimentation. "Well? Tell me lads, who do ye love?"

As if on cue, they said together, "Avice."

*Clunk.* Another piece of her puzzle fell into place.

She now had a name to go with the face. She went by Avice. Avice the Enchantress, to be precise. Had to be so. Two men might lie, but ne'er together --

Rethinking that last maxim, she turned the meaning about.

Two men might very well lie together. At times, with a woman betwixt and between them. Such described her present situation, both literally and figuratively.

And she would need to perform magic to resolve the fix.

A woman's magic. A woman's natural powers. Without resorting to trickery, she would use her powers of feminine persuasion to shake loose from all this misguided affection. A mite woozy still, she possessed little control over the supernatural variety.

A luxuriant fur pelt covered her teats. A twist and a tweak rid her of the encumbrance. A push and a pull brought her suitors to her thrusting chest. "I need ye."

Without having to be told, both men staked out a nipple.

And her memory returned as her aches and pains fled.

The man on the right -- Martin -- dug into her flesh as though his very life depended upon it. He gobbled her nipple, licking the peak with a relish that would have made her squirm --

Had his enthusiastic appreciation been genuine.

Alas, his carnal appetite was more pretense than true, and so she felt very little. A tingle mayhap, but that might have been the lingering aftereffects of dizziness.

The man on her left -- Gralam -- delicately suckled her nipple, refusing to give into his dark appetites, which explained why she felt very little. Oh, sure, a telltale moisture between her legs, but she expected better, at least a flood!

Both men had something to hide. She recognized the symptoms, having much to hide herself.

And both men brought on her sighs. She sighed for Gralam, who, in his seriousness would not admit the robustness of his love. For Martin, who admitted his love too robustly for her to take him seriously.

Oh, to call up a broomstick! Both men could use a swat on the arse to wake them up. Where was her magic when she needed it?

She grinned. There was magic. Then again, there was *magic*.

Avice wiggled out from under the furs.

Men being men, be they paupers or kings, both Gralam and Martin took note of her nudity.

Their shocked surprise set her eyes to rolling. "La! Where else did ye think this seduction be going?" She chuckled good-naturedly. "Out of the garb, lads, and get in here, both of ye. Two pricks will hasten me full recovery."

Letting go her hand, Gralam shook his head. "You love Martin. I should leave you two alone."

*Goddess!* How she detested selfless nobility!

She detested the selfish nobility more.

Her childhood friend broke free of her palm and jumped to his feet. "I have no wish to hurt ye, Avice, but this is wrong, and I must leave. Ye see --"

"No need to tell me," she cut in, ere the honest giant gave away his propensity for male love in the overlord's presence. "I quite understand. The Church forbids pre-marital relations --"

"Aye, there is that, but *that* sin is not the reason I must depart. Avice, our betrothal --"

"Was a mistake right from the very first."

Martin's irrepressible joy was a fountain that gushed at every opportunity, splashing everyone who came close. He had soaked her in happiness since childhood, and she would always love him. But not *that* way.

The giant bobbed his head. "There is something else, too, something I must confess --"

"Please to resist the impulse. We can discuss all of this later."

Her childhood friend spoke directly to the overlord. "With m'lord's permission, may I have a few days for meself? Away from here, and away from me steward's duties? I should like to make a retreat to the local monastery and pray for guidance." He touched his golden halo of hair. "And mayhap, see about getting shorn."

Behind Martin's broad back, Avice caught and held Gralam's gaze, imploring him to grant the concession.

The overlord tapped his fingers against his injured thigh. "We all need guidance from time to time. Aye, you have my permission to make your retreat."

"Methanks, m'lord."

With that, Martin backed silently out of the chamber. Not wishing to hurt her, or give away his love for another, he had made his decision, the right decision, the *only* decision an honorable man such as he could make. Oh, the giant loved her. Indeed, he truly did. But not passionately, not the way he loved his hunter from the woodlands. Now *that* was the same adoration Gralam felt for her. Why did the foolish man refuse to admit it?

For her safety, of course. He would protect her, even if that protection made them both miserable.

She had little choice but to accept his refusal to put his feelings for her into words. His misery was something else again. She would have none of his misery! After almost dying this

day -- her mysterious plummeting to the ground might have killed her! -- she would celebrate life with passion.

She raised her arms to him. "Come unto me, m'lord."

"Avice -- 'twould be a mistake." Just as Martin had done, he backed away.

"Nay, not a mistake." She sat up amidst the furs. "Coming together would be an act of defiance."

"Against whom?"

"Not whom -- what, milord! Let us defy the tyranny of untimely death. Despite a fall that might have killed me, I live. Despite the animosity of yer political enemies, ye live."

He frowned. "I told you to await me inside my solar! You disobeyed my directive!" He pointed an accusatory finger at her. "You changed into the gyrfalcon again."

She shrugged. "And what if I did? Ye cannot keep me cooped up forever."

"I damn well wish I could." Now he raked his accusatory fingers through his hair. "If that is what it took to keep you safe from harm, I wish I could keep you in a cage. Or on my wrist. Or on a leash." He fled for the portal.

Heedless of her nudity, she went after him. "Ye cannot mean it! Please, I beg ye -- rethink yer wish." At the portal, she grabbed his arm. "Words said in haste are oft times regretted in leisure."

His eyes chilled to black ice. "I meant every word I said. Above all else, regardless of the method employed, I wish to keep you safe."

And with that ominous wish hanging between them, Gralam slammed out of the solar.

## Chapter Thirty-four

The day following Avice's mysterious mishap, Gralam approached Julian in front of the kennels. "Did you go a-hunting yesterday?"

"For a brief time only, my lord."

Gralam reshuffled his stance, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. "Where?"

"The woodlands."

He nodded. Julian's answer confirmed what Gralam already had knowledge of -- would the lead hunter confirm his suspicions too? "Did you happen upon any falcons during the gaming pursuit?"

"I did. In fact, I saw the gyrfalcon you sought, my lord. I raised my slingshot to bring her down."

Gralam closed his eyes.

"Not to harm her, my lord." Julian rushed out the words. "But to capture her. For you. For the hunt. So she might eventually ride upon your wrist."

"Did you meet with success?"

When Gralam raised his lids, Julian was shaking his hooded head. "I thought I had made a direct hit, but evidently not. For, when I looked for the bird, I found naught." His mouth tightened. "Not even a white feather or two. Odd, for I suspected the rock I shot had met its intended target. I heard a shrill scream, you see, presumably the cry of the wounded bird. So sure was I of a direct hit, I searched the undergrowth. But, lamentably, I found naught."

Bile backwashed into Gralam's throat. As he had already concluded, Avice's injury was all his fault. "From this day forward, you are to cease your pursuit of the gyrfalcon. Of all falcons."



Julian dipped his chin. "Aye, my lord. Did I do aught wrong, my lord?"

Accusing Martin and Julian of sodomy would not undo the harm done to Avice. Unwilling to see her upset, Gralam would ignore the delicate situation. Pretend no knowledge of what had transpired between his hunter and his newly appointed steward. Concentrate instead on Avice's safety.

Her requirements must come first! As to responsibility -- if he needed to cast blame here, he need look no further than himself.

"Nay. You did naught wrong, Julian," he answered, his tongue pushing out the sparse words.

That said, Gralam turned about and returned to the keep.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Damn the fiendish witch anyway!* Gralam raged less than a week later. *Where had she gone to now?*

Remorseful o'er their most recent quarrelling, a disagreement which had resulted in him closing Avice up in his solar again, the bar drawn across again, a sentry posted outside again, under order not to let her out again "no matter what" he had returned to set things right. Intent on offering her his "pompous nose" to punch in lieu of an apology she would certainly refuse to accept, he had lifted the bar and burst through the portal.

Only to find the crafty witch had once again vacated the chamber.

Not bothering to question the sentry, he raced for the stables.

Galloping o'er the drawbridge and out into the meadow, his swift mount loyally taking each command, Gralam's surveyed the open terrain.

And found no sign of the escaped witch.

With a nudge, he directed the destrier through the trees, where recent experience told him Avice oftentimes wandered. Especially as a bird.

Gralam sighted the white gyrfalcon first, the Wessex noblemen only secondarily.

He would recognize Avice, anywhere. Regardless of her disguise, regardless of what shape and manner she assumed.

And his anger, long simmering, rolled to a full boil.

*God's bones!* Why would she never stay put? Why would she never do as told?

Would he always be impotent? As a man? As a ruler?

Obviously, his commands as her overlord meant naught to her. She ignored both orders and sanctions. As to his concerns for her wellbeing -- she stomped all o'er those.

He had good cause for his unease. The presence of the Wessex noblemen alone justified his fretting. And then there was the blow she had taken to the back of her head. Done through no maliciousness of intent, still the accident had nearly killed her.

If he had but one wish in life, one expression of desire to invoke, one appeal to make in the hopes that a dream might come true, he would request full governance of the witch. Gladly, would he keep Avice within his reach at all times!

He stared up at the sky, his eyes slanted on the bird circling above his head. With a spin, she perched on a close by oak. "I swear I do wish to find some manner and means to attach you to me!"

Lifting off from the tree branch into the air, the white falcon gave a cry.

*Screeeechhh!*

She dived, swooping low, as though to peck out the younger Lord Nial's eyes.

The father, as any father would under the circumstance -- save mayhap Gralam's own sire -- raced to the rescue. Pulling an arrow from the quiver on his shoulder, the elder nobleman aimed his crossbow at the attacking falcon.

*Nay!*

Regardless of the political repercussions, regardless of his seething anger at Avice for placing him in this untenable position, Gralam unsheathed his own dagger, prepared to dirk the father ere he got off an arrow at the bird.

It all happened so quickly! The swooping gyrfalcon. The raised bow. His own knife, ready to inflict a mortal wound. In the sequence of events, no one noticed the hissing viper.

Save the female falcon.

Unlike his native Normandy, on these shores there lived but one variety of poisonous snake -- the common viper of the moors. With a flap of white plumage, the gyrfalcon pushed the young huntsman to the ground. She then went in after the adder lurking amongst the heather.

*Screeeechhh!*

The white feathered bird carried the danger to the Wessex noblemen away in her talons, the snake still coiled and ready to strike. She dropped the menace into a nearby cavern.

Upon her winged return, she landed upon Gralam's extended wrist --

Just as the grateful father and son rushed to his side.

The elder did the speaking. "Your falcon saved my son's life."

"'Twould appear so." Gralam stroked the beautiful white feathers.

The bird preened. *Screech, screech, screech.*

"I am forever in your debt," the Wessex nobleman continued. "An obligation I intend to repay upon my return to court. You have found a champion in me this day, my friend."

The influential lord patted the bird's head. "I shan't support a move to exile a Norman who saved my son's life."

The bird began to flap her wings, as though applauding this decision.

Unlike the falcon, Gralam showed no outward display of emotion. "As you will, Lord Nial."

"'Tis as I will! How could I not champion a man with such a falcon as this?" The nobleman wagged his head. "Though, the bird is somewhat impetuous."

"That she is," Gralam readily agreed. This latest episode only proved the witch's heedless impulsiveness. She might have been hurt, bitten. Flying straight at the viper like that had been foolhardy!

Lord Nial rocked back and forth on his heels. "With the proper training, the falcon will serve you well, Gralam. You must harness her raw courage! Extract unquestioned obedience from her, and she will respect you for it."

At this, the falcon bristled, her beak obviously out of joint.

Lord Nial called to his son. "Bring my falconry equipment here to me."

After the dutiful younger Nial had presented the bulging cloth sack to his father, the elder lord extracted from the interior two items: short straps, finely wrought from a soft kid leather and bejeweled with gleaming stones, and a long cord of perhaps 50 yards in length.

"Here," the Wessex lord said brusquely. "Fasten these jesses and bracelets around both your falcon's legs, then attach the leash to one."

How could Gralam refuse such an exquisite ... and well-deserved gift? For if e'er a pretty bird needed training, 'twas the white gyrfalcon impetuously flapping her wings upon his arm.

Ignoring the falcon's ruffled feathers, Gralam attached the bejeweled bracelets and the leash.

"Now this." Lord Nial held forth a black gauzy cloth.

"What is it?" Gralam asked, perplexed.

"I never use a hood in training. Too confining. Place this black mesh o'er the bird's head instead. A falcon tends to be high-strung, and is easily frightened. You will never train your bird to complete obedience to everyone, but with perseverance, you will 'man' her to you."

Lord Nial watched closely as Gralam covered the falcon's head and body with the voluminous folds of the black gauze.

"She will never love you," the Anglo-Saxon baron continued. "Or, try to please you. Unlike a hunting dog, a falcon is a natural predator, not a social animal. But with consistent petting and holding, she will one day become both companionable and disciplined, both to your voice and to your appearance. Treat her with firmness -- never once weaken in your expectations of her or ease up on your authority -- and she will take your command and understand the place she serves in your life."

Discipline and a leash -- the very things Avice needed to remain safe.

After this day's fortuitous events, she deserved every consideration. If that consideration took the shape of her lost freedom, so be it!

With a grateful wave of farewell from the Wessex nobleman and his son, Gralam turned his loyal steed back to his motte-and-bailey, his leashed falcon ensconced upon his wrist.

## Chapter Thirty-five

Under the black gauze cloth, Avice jerked her beak. What a piggin' cauldron she had landed herself in this time!

This was what came of watching an arrogant Norman's back!

Gralam had called the noblemen "invited guests." But suspecting they meant to do the overlord eventual harm, she had flown from the solar in suspicious pursuit, tracking the barons from the keep's gate into the trees.

And what did she get for her troubles?

A thank ye? A big mushy kiss? A vow of undying love?

Not likely! A black gauzy cloth and bracelets were what she had got for her troubles!

She had disobeyed the overlord. What of it? A bad feeling in the pit of her belly told her to go after the Wessex father and son, and she never discounted either bad feelings or her belly. Had she put the bad feeling in the pit of her belly off to gas, a lad might now lay dead, bitten by a viper.

Nay, she had no regrets, no sorrow for her transgression. She had done the right thing for the boy and for Gralam.

The overlord refused to see her good deed as such.

Idiot Norman! Where was his gratitude?

Up his piggin' arse, was where.

Had she not earned him a boon with the House of Wessex, with two Anglo-Saxon barons of power and influence?

But nay, he exhibited no gratitude, whatsoever. Instead, he gave her the silent treatment. She hated his quiet brooding!

Under the black gauze, Avice gave an aggrieved bird sniff.

Well, the overlord had certainly gotten his wish. Just look at her! Tied by a leash, no way to escape, wish bound to live out the remainder of her days in boring captivity.

In feathers, no less!

Using great care, Gralam transferred her from his arm to the rush-festooned floor of what Avice could only assume was his solar. *Assume*, because with the black gauze covering her, 'twas difficult to place her exact whereabouts. The filmy stuff blurred all landmarks, distorted all sounds, shaded the light, blocking out even the sun on their silent ride back to the keep.

The falcon master had kept to utmost quiet during their return journey to the motte-and-bailey. He did so now too as he rearranged her. The jesses around her leg went taut during the new positioning of her body. Once again, because the veil obscured her view, she could only assume Gralam was busily attaching the end of the leash to something, a hook or such, inside the chamber.

His tone hard and unyielding, he spoke for the first time. "Change back into a woman now."

About piggin' time! But really, was the man made of ice? Did he have cold water rather than blood in his veins? Where was his genuine feeling?

She *felt* his anger. When would he drop his condescendingly irritating control and just vent his piggin' spleen on her?

Better he beat her, and have done with it. His broody resentment vexed her very last nerve. What she had done this day enraged the man. Her very existence enraged the man.

Beneath his brooding anger lurked fear. She sensed his hidden fright. Only trust could dispel his sort of fear.

*Trust me, Gralam!*

Regardless of his poor opinion of her, she made haste to do his bidding.

Verily, what choice did she have but to obey?

Owing to Gralam's wish, she was every bit as bound to his command as she was to the leash. The leash and jesses, and bracelets, were but physical manifestations of his spiritual control of her. The idiot man ruled her completely!

Here on out, she would need to accede to his authority, unequivocally.

Used to her independence, used to going her own way, her lost mobility grated.

*Sad, they had come to this end*, she thought, returning smidgeon by smidgeon to her womanly shape.

Finished transforming herself, she stood in front of him in her own skin.

Naked skin. All-over naked skin. A fact not lost on the falcon keeper.

Her filmy veil prevented her from getting a close bead on his features, but she felt his look clear enough. Gralam's hot gaze fair burned her skin!

"I told you to stay inside my solar this day," he blasted.

The windy heat of his rage lifted the gauze overlaying her forehead. His fiery fury nigh on singed her eyebrows.

Gralam continued his scathing address. "Though you agreed to abide by my rule here in the keep, at every turn, you willfully ignored my authority. Obviously, you have no idea what making a promise means. Saying and doing are two entirely different things with you."

"Not anymore, m'lord," she said speaking low.

Ere his wish, naught would have restrained her had she desired to go. Now, she hung on his every word. Because of his wish, she was duty-bound to heed him. In all matters, big and small.

Gralam, of course, with no way to ken this, went on with his rampage. "To ensure you stay out of trouble, you will remain leashed. At least, inside my solar. At most, everywhere else."

His voice, usually cool, always tempered, unfailingly courteous, was neither cool nor tempered nor courteous now. With each harsh utterance, Gralam discharged his wrath like a quiver of arrows dipped in ire.

She dipped her chin. "Aye, m'lord."

A slight pull tugged on the smoky veil as his large hand traversed the mesh. O'er the black netting, Gralam palmed her face. Holding her jaw firmly, he proclaimed his power o'er her. The control he had always held o'er himself he now transferred to her. She could make no move, could not even scratch her nose, without his permission to do so. Her body, her mind ... her very will ... now belonged wholly to him.

There were compensations for her total and *blind* submission. His former broodiness had offered no inlet into his thoughts. Now, though, she could see, hear ... *touch* his anger and have his anger touch her.

Her owner's masculine rough anger excited her. His masculine strength prompted a hitherto unknown docility in her female breast. She welcomed his mastery! Above all else, she strove to please him. Pleasing him became its own reward, *her* reward.

As a result of his wish? Or something else? Something inside herself? A seed of need that had long lain dormant --?

"You, my disobedient witch, are under strict falcon-training restrictions."

She nodded. Mutely craving the discipline as a female falcon craved her owner's orders. Her owner's dominance made her feel cherished and safe, and aye, loved. Rather than fight her master's authority, she licked her lips in anticipation of what was to come.

*Pinion me! Pinion me! Pinion me!*

In response to her owner, in response to her own hidden desires too, her breathing quickened; the covering of black gauze lifted and fell with the enlivened rhythm of her heaving teats. Her nipples hardened alarmingly. She took a shallow inhale, blew the hurried

puff out, the exhale pressing her very aroused flesh into the loose weave of the semi-transparent cloth.

On a promise of sensual delight, she shuddered. Convulsively. The whisper light overlay of mesh hurt her sensitized areoles. Upon looking down at herself, she saw that the reddened tips had distended, the elongation poking the filmy netting, her excitement finally driving the turgid points through the webbing until the ends met the air.

*Goddess!* She must look so wanton, so bestial, with her reddened nipples sticking out like that, as if the wickedly sharp crowns sought the stroke of his fingers.

In this instance, appearances were not deceiving. Appearances told the truth.

She longed to feel his unbridled hands on her, the substance of his touch unguarded and true! Harsh honesty was far superior to mannered falseness.

*Drop yer defenses, Gralam. Let us have this out, once and for all.*

Due to the veil, she could not make out his expression. Had his features tightened in anger?

At the resolution his trapped anger would surely take, her belly clenched, her cunny gave way, honey drizzled hotly down between her legs. Could he discern the slick coat of moisture on her pubic hair, the slick consistency of the skim surely darkening and weighing down the usually light springy curls on her lower belly? The veil covered her head and shoulders, and teats, but bared her lower belly and loins. He could plainly see the physical ramifications of her excitement ...

She felt no loss of modesty for her partial nudity. Rather, she felt only pride at her carnal expectancy. In this one thing, she had naught to hide. She *lusted* after this one man.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” he roared at her.

Naught if not adaptable to whatever the circumstances, she would work her magic with whatever ingredients she had at her disposal. He had asked her a question, and now was her chance to air her grievances, to defend herself, to take him to task for his woeful ingratitude, to get her own anger out in the open!

She opened her mouth to speak, to retaliate ...

No spiteful words ushered forth. She could not vent her spleen. Instead of lambasting him for this present injustice, she told him instead what had beat in her heart for a full year and then some. “So very sorry, m’lord. I wronged ye.”

“How have you wronged me?”

She felt perfectly vindicated doing what she had done this day, but a *past* transgression compelled her to say, “I have wronged ye in both thought and in deed.”

Misunderstanding his intentions from the very first, she had ascribed to him the most diabolical of thoughts, attributed to him heinous acts, due solely to his place of origin. Though that was over and she trusted him now, still she had amends to make. “I shall say



whatever ye wish me to say, do whatever ye wish me to do. Ye might even say yer wish is me command."

The apology felt wonderful. No wonder Martin was forever running to confession, making a full breast of his puny sins. Unburdening herself made her feel as light as one of her falcon feathers. Imagine the sensation dropping to her knees in penitence would bring --

She was on route to the floor, when Gralam beat out her bent knees.

From the rushes, he said, "Now that you are restored to your female shape, I need to loosen your jesses and bracelets and leash."

"Aye, Master." She spoke to the top of his head.

"Pardon? *Master?*"

"More than m'lord, ye are my master, my owner, my keeper. Do what ye would -- I can make ye no denial."

"Delighted to hear." He paused, and then grunted, "Open your legs."

She did, gladly.

"Your cunt is wet."

*Cunt.* Crude aye, but stark purity as well overlay the word. There was truthfulness in the unstudied impoliteness. Hope too. At long last, he was unmasking himself to her! Wishful thinking?

Nay! Trapped in the shadows of the black veil, cut off visually from her surroundings, he became her entire world, every nuance of his voice taking on a heightened significance. That he had dropped his fine courtesy meant his control had further loosened. Unadorned, unpretty, *uncivilized* desire colored his voice. Now that she was subject to his control, he had lowered his hold on his own restraint. "Aye, Master. I be very wet. For ye."

"Petting is a necessary part of your training," he said abruptly.

If he thought to put her obedience to the test, he had chosen the wrong determination. "Aye, Master." Her heart wildly beating, thrashing about like a bird encased in her chest, she awaited the start of her instruction. *Let the petting begin!*

His arms clamped about her in an unexpected embrace, he nosed her belly, seemingly inhaling her scent. Then, she felt the clean blade of his cheekbone impressed against her navel. In that position, he rubbed his face against her, a smooth back and forth glide as he always used a blade on his whiskers. He did this repeatedly. Rubbing. Inhaling. Moving o'er her. Still stroking her thus, he unhurriedly traversed her from waist to pubic bone. At the concave delta between her legs, he paused -- had he arrived at his final destination? -- and took a great inward breath.

Of her.

His cupped hand molded her hipbone, holding her steady where she stood. "Open," he said. "Cease trying to lock me out!"

An unjust accusation! She had not locked her thighs against him. Far from it! But she could not act in anticipation of his order. He must order her first.

The tie around her ankles had plenty of give, enough to part her thighs further, which she did.

“More,” he said.

At his demand, she stretched out her feet as wide as the jesses would allow, her pubic lips split so far apart, she must look like she was about to take all-comers. When his mouth *finally* landed on her cunny, his lips at first pursed, and then opening atop her feverish skin, she no longer cared how she must look.

Oh! He kissed her. So hot, so burning hot, there at the notch! His teeth grated her flesh, ere repeating the same pattern of his rubbing, methodically mouthing her, leaving not one patch of her external genitalia unattended.

He tongued her next. N'er would she have believed this civilized and reticent noble would lick her so savagely! Despite his fine manners, he licked her like a beast of the wilderness. But only on the outside. He made no foray into her body's clasp.

Finally, when she thought she might scream in frustration, for she was fair desperate for a more intimate connection, he cupped her mons, his thumb circling the pubic lips.

*Come inside. Finger me deep!*

*Fuck me hard!*

What kept him? Did he think to torture her?

At the tremendous gnawing inside her cunny, she moaned through her mouth and reached out to him.

“Nay, pretty bird,” he chastised, his fingers still rounding her dripping wet slit. “A falcon in training does not raise her wings.”

Disappointment rolled o'er her, flattening out her joy. “I may not caress ye?”

“This is obedience training. Place your arms behind your back.”

Equal participation thwarted, she did as instructed, desolately clasping her hands together at the base of her spine.

The pose hiked up her pelvis. But rather than take advantage of her slanted hips, he moved behind her.

Why?

She had her answer when he clasped her hands. A pull, and he tied her wrists together, tight, there against the base of her spine, evidently with leather strapping for this falconry training.

She had not expected him to go this far, to carry through with his bonding of her to this extreme degree. But she had underestimated his rage.

And her own perverse pleasures.

He had pinioned her!

He was not the only one here to have his wishes granted. Though she did miss touching him, in pinioning her, he had done what she wished too! He had bound her arms behind her, as he would the wings of a bird, a falcon, to prevent flight.

Her swollen teats sticking straight out, the nipples sore, her loss of freedom as devastating as 'twas well-suited to her offence, her arousal grew and went out of bounds. As he moved to her front again and cradled her between the legs, his large hand encompassing the pudendum, she quaked with need.

Holding her open, two fingers at her pubic lips now, he sent his tongue up inside her passage.

Her throat spasmed, her head jerked back.

His tongue jabbed her! Angrily lanced up inside her. Deeply lanced up inside her.

If this be his idea of punishment for wayward behavior, she might n'er obey him again.

But, of course, due to his wish, she must obey him.

When next his long thick finger, a digit she remembered so well from their all too brief time together on the moors, departed her slippery folds to slide easily into the passion-swollen void, she seized up.

*Ahhhhh.*

In her intense greed, her cunny grasped his long and thick digit. Two strokes and she would scream for sure!

*Please, Gralam, pleeeeeeassee!*

But the overlord withdrew, rose to his feet, leaving her suspended in pre-climax. "Time to begin my manning of you, disobedient falcon."

## Chapter Thirty-six

Gralam pushed Avice against the wall.

Any wall. He cared not which wall, so long the training leash would reach.

She offered him no resistance. Giving no cry of distress, she allowed him to position her. "Lower your head."

She did, dutifully, his subject in all things -- even this, her training.

But for fortune, Avice might have died this day. Owing to her deliberate and willful disobedience, he might have lost her. In the course of protecting his son, a nobleman father might have gotten off an arrow and taken a falcon down.

Not just any falcon, either. A witch, his leman, the courageous female who enchanted him ... *Avice* ... might have taken a barb through the heart.

Had that come to pass, he might just as well have plunged a dagger through his own heart. How dare she play fast and loose with her life like that! How dare she seek to kill *him* that way!

Posed to the wall, she resembled a trapped bird. Feathers reverted to silky flesh, furled wings transformed into slender arms held immobilized behind her, clawed feet replaced with endlessly long pale legs. Bindings tied her hands together above the gentle flare of her buttocks, jesses encircling both ankles kept her unmoving against the timber wall. Though incapable of flight, bound to him, her "Master," by a length of sturdy leather, she remained graceful still.

He pushed -- nay, *rammed* -- two thick fingers digits into her wet, wet, *hot* cunt.

Mounted thus on his two digits, he feasted his starved eyes her body.

Christ, her nipples! The shadowy veil did naught to disguise her heightened blush of carnal greed. Elongated with avaricious compliance, swollen with intemperance, her red nipples boldly projected outwards, the sharp ends poking through the black mesh.

And her pubic hair! A pretty wreath of damp, silvery curls. A circlet of seduction that ringed her lower belly ... and decorated his wide wrist.

He wore the bracelet gladly.

Two fingers opening and closing inside her conspicuously wet passage, a vee he made to widen her canal, he could scarce breath to speak. "You call me your master," he began hoarsely, "but I am not convinced you see me as such. In your falcon form, I could use certain exercises until you came to terms with your subjugation to my authority. Naturally, that sort of training is out of the question in your female form. Nevertheless, you must learn who owns you, so I must avail myself of other means of manning you." He swallowed. Once. Again. "A vigorous and daily penetration will serve that purpose."

Under the loose netting, her lush lips gaped. "Aye, Master."

Doubtlessly, she was willing -- the hot-blooded wench was always willing -- but, he could make no pretense of an early withdrawal.

He swallowed once more. Harder this time. "I shan't beget a child off a witch. I wish no get from these manning encounters."

"Aye, Master."

Christ, but she was beautiful, and he had to have her!

But he could not condone the employment of witchcraft. "Through natural means, can you guarantee the coupling will produce no unfortunate results?"

"If by natural, ye mean no magic -- aye. Though, mind ye, the intercourse will need be unnatural. Sodomy, Master, is the only way to guarantee no child will come of this."

He gazed longingly at her passage, and then tore both his fingers and his glance away from her. "Turn about, belly to the wall, eyes to the timbers."

"'Tis as ye wish, Master." She turned.

No conversation, no sweet words -- what was the point? He wished no fruit from this picking. Since he lacked the necessary control to achieve those ends through a natural intercourse, she was quite correct: Only sodomy would produce an empty harvest.

Once again, he found himself on his knees at worship. Though, this time, he knelt at her back.

His cheek against the roundness of her buttock, he nuzzled the firm flesh, ere slipping his tongue inside the crevice.

Not deep enough!

A hand on each cheek, his big thumbs hooked into the shapely gorge, he opened her up.

*Ah. So sweet there. So unnaturally sweet.*

Without any further thoughts to the rights or wrongs of this, he sent his tongue to the dimple.

Her sighs accompanied his moistening of the back portal.

The witch took well to her training.

Apart from some sighing and shivering, she made no noise, no moves, as he prepared her. No brutal trainer, he took his time over readying her for the unnatural congress. When her body went slack, wholly receptive to his fingering, to his mouthing, to his tongue piercing, he undid the placket on his braies.

He fisted his cock, his grip tight, fierce, unreasonable.

Desperate!

He had been too long without her, empty days, a hollow constant, a bottomless ache that had would not retreat.

He stepped up to her, behind her, his cock moving in on her, his pre-cum moistened bluntness delving her curved divide.

One deep panting breath that exactly echoed her deep panting breath, and he was there, at the back portal, the head of his cock prodding, pressing, PUSHING!

No impediment, he lanced her full. An unwholesome engagement that went from root to end in one fateful thrust, and took him into the realm of the forbidden.

*Ahhhh.* Tight. She was so sinfully tight.

She moaned. "Master, Master, Master."

One hand at her hip, the other clasped to her breast, he squeezed the small fullness beneath the veil as his cock stilled inside her buttocks. No move yet. No thrust. No driving pounding.

His pubic hair meshed to her flesh, her spine straightened. "Please, Master, please ..."

"Pardon?" he croaked. "Please what?"

"Move." She turned her veiled jaw to him and whispered, "Please do."

He held firm and steady. "Henceforth, you will obey me."

She nodded, mutely.

"Nay, say it."

"Henceforth, I obey ye."

He smoothed his palm over a round cheek. "Bring this out further from the wall."

"Aye, Master." She slanted her body, which in turn made her buttocks more accessible.

Not good enough.

He grunted, pulled away, removed the touch of his hands. His cock still engaged, but only shallowly, the head barely inside. "You hold back still."

“I hold back naught,” she cried.

“Words. Only words. You must show me.”

He waited, counting off the seconds, as she rearranged her body.

When she had rounded, her veiled head dipped to the floor, the white globes of her buttocks fully displayed, he slipped inside again and began to move. Slow strokes building to fast strokes building to full driving force, his eyes glued to his cock entering and leaving her body at his whim, at his pleasure, to the detriment of his immortal soul.

His falcon belonged to him fully now.

Hell was a small price to pay for the possession.

\* \* \* \* \*

The yellow cast of an ensconced torch infiltrated Avice’s black veil.

Gralam was leading her to the thick oak posters of his bed, where a light emblazoned the darkness. Without speaking, he helped place her atop the furs. No need for covers, for the chamber was summer warm. And besides, they both sweated with lust.

Her Master made no comment, but simply positioned her up on hands and knees. Afterwards, he retied her wrists to the stout headboard. Training jesses, attached to a goodly length of leash restrained her at the ankles, eliminating any need to reattach her legs.

The tick dipped. Gralam had climbed aboard the bed with her. His garb brushed against her bare thigh when he went behind her. Immediately and without preamble, his big palm nestled her bottom cheek, bared under the mesh. “I am not done manning you yet.”

Avice smirked. No need to tell her, she had figured as much all on her own.

Thus far, he had *manned* her twice. She had no complaints, beyond a woeful stickiness, a skim of semen that coated her hindquarters and thighs, and gave ample proof to her owner’s potency.

Out-of-the-blue, he asked, “Do you like it?”

Unable to lie, she answered honestly. “After a time, a falcon learns to tolerate the handling.”

“Methinks you more than simply tolerate the handling. You came both times,” he rasped against her veiled-covered ear.

She raised her shoulder to her blushing face. “Aye, Master. That I did.”

“You wished it. You craved the sodomy. All witches do.”

“I crave *ye*. The method of our joining matters naught.” Because she loved him. Why did he refuse to accept her love? Why did he refuse to accept her?

*And why, why, would he not trust her?* She asked herself as he entered her body again, a torturously slow and tender taking that brought tears to her eyes.

"Sleep now," he rasped after they had both hollered themselves hoarse. Gathering her close, he spooned her to him, as though she were precious --

As though, he loved her.

\* \* \* \* \*

The black training veil had to go!

Gralam made the decision in the wee hours that morn, whilst pacing the rush-strewn floor of his solar.

The veil had to go for two reasons: The black netting made kissing Avice's lush lips impossible; and the covering served as yet another barrier between them. Too many barriers already separated them without adding falcon training to the confusion!

Gralam could take no more.

Of her ridiculous subservience. Of her uncharacteristic obedience. Of her contrived stillness. What good was her carnal response if that response came at the end of a leather strap?

'Twas wrong to harness a force of nature! Why had he not seen it ere now? Avice's power was not to be feared or contained; her powers meant no harm. As to keeping her safe - he would need to trust in his abilities there.

Stalking to the bed, he whipped the falcon training leash from the hook, unfastened her jesses and bracelets, and gently removed the black veil from her face.

Avice awakened on a sigh.

Leaning over her, he spoke against her lush lips. "You frightened me so! When I saw you collapse upon the ground, I thought I had lost you."

She fiercely negated his logic. "Nay, Mast --"

"You are not to call me that!"

"Nay, m'lor --"

"Nor that."

Her forehead puckered. "Then what? What shall I call ye?"

*Your love. Call me your love. As I shall call you mine.*

He shook free of the dangerous thought. "Gralam. Call me Gralam. As you did on the moors. And know this: 'Twas owing to me you sustained your injury. I am to blame for you falling from the skies, your body almost broken. Know this too, I have no belly for training you or subjugating you or tying you to me. Enforcing my authority o'er you will fail in the end. I fear for your safety, so I ask you to stay here with me of your own free will. I set you free, falcon!"

"A wish? Or a command?"



“Neither a wish nor a command -- a decision entirely up you to make. *I set you free.*”

“Well, then, Gralam.” Laughing joyfully, Avice reached up her arms, and pulled him close. “I cannot see what will come, any more than ye can. Not for next year, or even on the morrow. We have only right this moment. In this moment, claim me as yers. Bind me to ye. Not with wishes, or with a leather leash, but with actions!”

He took her lips first, then her whole mouth, then her sweet tongue.

When she hooked her foot around his spine, he willingly complied. Fitting not only his cock to her passage, but his entire body to her entire body, his mind to her mind, his man’s heart beating against her woman’s heart. When he entered her, he accepted all of her, including her witchcraft, including the qualities about her he could never understand.

“Avice,” he breathed against her lips, then into her mouth, a kiss that surged from a hopeful place, a potent place, within himself, as they came together equally as one.

## Chapter Thirty-seven

Nearing the end of each day, Julian made a point of stopping off at the kennels to check on the well being of the hounds. After determining the dogs' needs, if any, she would then customarily take the connecting portal into the stables, her love of all animals prompting the visit. Wild horses, in particular, tugged at her heartstrings. Displaced from their homes, they, like she, suffered the confinement of castle life.

Whilst she rubbed down a black steed, rusted hinges behind her complained.

The heavy portal to the stable had just opened, and then closed with a resounding thud.

People came and went to the corrals at all hours of the day and night. She spared the visit not a moment's thought --

Until a telltale metal rattle alerted her that this unseen someone had barred the stables against admittance from the courtyard. *Strange.*

Even then, Julian continued patting the black steed. Though unusual to close off the entrance to the stable midday, a barred portal had no real impact on her. Regardless of the stealthy visitor's intent, whether nefarious or benign, she still had a way out through the kennels.

A lilting peel of feminine laughter met her ears then. A deep male chuckle rumbled next, followed soon after by a telling rustle.

*Aha!* The ribaldry, the sounds of shedding garb, explained the barred portal.

Not the first two lovers in history to put a stable to use for a tryst!

Julian grimaced. But la! What a commotion they made!

Hoarse moans. Halting groans. Heated sighs. Heavy footsteps crunching across the straw festooned stable floor --

*Ouch!* The couple had installed themselves in the neighboring stall. Too close for comfort, by far.

Unlike jousting -- where one might sit back in the arena and receive a vicarious thrill from watching a performance down below on the lists -- rutting made for a less than gratifying spectator sport. Forced to listen to all that boring thrashing and thumping, she feared falling asleep.

A dire circumstance considering the closeness of the quarters and the size of the horse sharing the accommodations with her. A hoof to the head whilst slumbering would kill her for sure. Bored to death -- what an ignoble way to die!

"Ack!" A female voice cried. "I forgot all about yer leg. We should adjourn to yer sumptuous bed in the solar, m'lord."

*Avice!* Julian recognized the slut's sultry voice.

"Never mind about my leg."

*Gralam!*

Julian peeked through a knot in the wide wooden boards at the couple.

The Norman overlord and his Anglo-Saxon whore nested like two billing and cooing lovebirds in the next stall. Gralam lounged against the adjoining stall, his black hair rumpled, his dark eyes hooded, his face taut of expression. Oh, but he lusted after his slut! Intense desire contorted his handsome features.

One arm raised and bent on the pen's top board, the tapered fingers of that hand hovering close to Julian's own sleeve, she could almost believe the overlord sought to enfold her within his embrace ... not the whore.

By all that was right and just, Julian should have been the one o'er whom the overlord pined. *She* should have been the one who had shed her garb in advance of receiving Gralam into her body.

Julian made ready to jump the stall and gorge out the bitch's eyes.

She caught herself just in the nick of time. Giving way to emotions would ill serve her purpose.

Ducked down closer to the hay-covered floor, Julian, however, continued to peep at the couple.

With those slightly slanted green eyes, pointed chin, and hip-length colorless hair, the bitch was stunning. What man would not want to rut on the tart of the moors?

Julian looked down at her clunky man's boots. God, but she felt huge next to Gralam's tiny, whey-faced whore --

With Martin, she felt dainty. The steward always encouraged her to be herself when with him. He had shown her, in big ways and in small ways, that competent, womanly

women, strong females who could hold their own in combat as well as in life, had much to offer. Aye, the steward appreciated her strength ... and her bed skills too.

But that was Martin. What did he know?

Did Avice give Gralam her all? Did the whore do things wives, and even lemans, commonly refused to do?

Julian would give the man she loved everything, and then some. She would turn herself inside out for the Norman warrior. He was the most stalwart of fighters, the most courageous man she had e'er witnessed on the battlefield.

Gralam deserved a woman who matched him physically, who welcomed his embraces, who denied him naught on the furs ... or in the hay.

Avice whispered, "Ye think to mount me *here*?"

The skinny bitch should be grateful the overlord would mount her anywhere!

"Aye," Gralam growled back, "Like the stud in yonder stall!"

Avice giggled. "I think ye better than any stud. Yer pecker is *huge*."

Julian's mouth leached dry. Lithe of build, wholly masculine despite his effortless grace, Gralam's hard warrior body held no surprises. Not because she had seen more than her quotient of naked male bodies, either.

Since the age of seven, she had acted as Gralam's man-of-arms, a service that involved protecting his back on the battlefield and stitching him up afterwards. Julian had personally tended every scar, pucker, and zigzagging wound left on his dark Norman flesh. She had nursed him through countless camp fevers. When he suffered battle fatigue, she had put him to bed, but had not once gotten into that bed with him. Fear of losing him had always quenched the impulse. The same fear prevented her from revealing the truth of her gender. She had ministered to every inch of him -- save a specific dozen or so inches, and two heavy stones. Even so, she could confirm Avice's description: The overlord did possess an awesome endowment.

"I cannot wait for a bed," the well-hung noble continued, "I must have you straightaway. You are past lovely --"

Pain, physical and intense, arrowed through Julian. If a stampeding boar had gored her, the injury would not have hurt as much. She clutched her belly. Hot tears burned her eyes.

Gralam's words! *Sweet virgin Mary!* She would give everything, do anything, to have the taciturn warrior speak to her, just once, in those loquacious tones.

Then again, why would Lord Gralam expound on her beauty, when he, like everyone else, looked upon her as a male?

Save Martin. The steward was the only one who had e'er seen right through her, and still called her magnificent.

Julian pushed Martin's face away and pushed a hand between her legs. Making a fist that mirrored the fist inside her belly, she pressed all five knuckles against her hide-covered slit. To stem the ache. To stem the urgency. To stem the awful need. Her body's chasm, so empty, so needy, cried out to be filled.

Not by any man. By one man. By Gralam. Only he could make the emptiness go away.

Rather than spare herself the ordeal that was to come, Julian continued to squint through the knot in the stall's rough-hewn plank, torturing herself by witnessing the man she loved rutting on another woman.

And rutting was all 'twas! Impossible, that Gralam might entertain tender feelings for that slut of the moors.

In all his naked beauty, the overlord rose above the whore, about to take the bitch on a bed of sweet-smelling straw.

Aye, Julian had ambitions. But above all that, she longed to stay forever by the overlord's side. Not even a wife could follow her husband into battle. But garbed as a male, Julian had followed Gralam there. She had accompanied him everywhere --

With the exception of bed.

She would follow him there too. If only he would allow it!

He had never once treated her badly or roughly or with disrespect. And for his many kindnesses, Julian loved him. Unequivocally loved him. Hopelessly and unrequitedly loved him.

And there he was, kneeling at the feet of a naked peasant whore!

Whilst Julian watched, Gralam rubbed the side of his jaw against the slut's bare belly. Reaching above, he enfolded a tiny breast, and then pulled at the engorged end.

The whore purred, and spread her thighs wider still.

When Gralam chuckled "Greedy puss!" and licked Avise's plump nether lips, Julian pretended he tongued *her* moistened folds instead. She could almost feel the rasp.

Gralam lifted his jaw. "You taste of honey," he told Avise softly, reverently, as though she meant the whole world to him.

How well Julian understood! Gralam meant the whole world to her.

Julian rolled her braies down to her knees, and plunged a middle finger into her juicy slit. Hard. So hard. As Gralam moved between the whore's legs, his muscled buttocks pumping slow, so did Julian's fingers -- two now -- move upwards into her sheath. When Gralam's pace accelerated, so too did the speed of her digits.

"Gralam, oh, Gralam," the whore sang out and crossed her ankles 'round the overlord's spine.

Whilst Julian masturbated, the man she loved kissed the corner of another woman's mouth. When the other woman came apart on a scream, Julian pulled up her braies. She was

about to slink away, leave the mismatched pair to their afterglow, when Gralam whispered, "You set me afire, Witch."

At first, Julian thought the word *witch* must be an endearment, the private language two lovers spoke during the thralls of passion ...

Until Gralam groaned. "Damn it to hell! Even at such an unguarded moment as this, I must watch my tongue. Spies lurk everywhere! Such a careless utterance might jeopardize your life."

Avice murmured some unintelligible reassurance, and Julian swallowed her gasp. During the rigors of battle, Gralam exhibited naught less than bravery --

A chilling fright iced his voice now.

Good God! Did he speak literally? Is that why a courageous warrior had suddenly become faint of heart?

'Twas known far and wide that Avice used her knowledge of herbs to heal the sick. No heresy there, as both king and Church tolerated the "cunning folk" who dealt in remedies passed down from one generation to the next. But Gralam had just named Avice a witch, an offence punishable by certain death at the stake. Not only did he consort with a sorceress, but he protected her too!

Why?

The politically astute Gralam had to know his actions would lead to his own downfall. What madness had compelled him to put himself in harm's way for a heretic and a common whore?

Bewitchment?

Bewitchment!

Spell-casting explained the overlord's reckless behavior. Avice had used her evil Black Arts to seduce him away from what was right!

And after seeing those two go at one another, Julian doubted Gralam would walk away from Avice anytime soon. That witch had her talons deep in the overlord.

Ere the man she loved suffered the terrifying consequences, Julian meant to make Gralam see reason. Regardless of what she had to do, she would convince Gralam to loose himself of the witch!

And if that failed?

She would find some other way to set him free! The witch's malicious grip on the overlord must end.

\* \* \* \* \*

After escorting Avice to the Laughton cottage, where she would act as midwife, Gralam had little to occupy his time. Returning to the lonely keep offered less than no appeal.

"Mayhap a stroll in the woods?" Avice finally suggested at the portal, seeing his reluctance to leave.

He nodded. "I shan't go far ... just in case you should have need of me."

She laughed. "For what?"

He grabbed at straws. "To draw water from the cistern, perchance."

"And how, then, do ye propose I keep the husband busy and out of me hair?"

"Say the proud father-to-be should faint, then you would most certainly need me to fetch water from the well."

"Another method, if you please. Unlikely for a father of six to faint at this, the seventh lying-in of his wife."

"I could always make a nuisance of myself," he generously offered.

"That position is already filled."

"The husband again?"

"Aye." She shooed him away with a wave of both hands.

"Very well." He headed off to begin his pacing. "No need to ask me twice."

"Make it a brief walk! This is the *seventh* birthing, remember," Avice called after him.

Well, good. Well, fine! Their separation would not be of a lengthy duration. Only for the duration of a *short* walk. Then he would accompany her back to the motte-and-bailey. Still ailing from her mishap with a slingshot, Avice missed him so when he was not at her side. He had only her wellbeing in mind. 'Twas a lovely day on the moors and he was perfectly content pacing amongst the heaths and heathers.

Wait -- *contented*? When had that happened?

Gralam shook his head. Absurd to believe happiness had ambushed him when he was otherwise occupied.

This was not Normandy. This was not his beloved home. Certainly, he ruled these odd people, saw to bettering their lot in life, but naught held him here! These shores represented but a temporary way station on his journey to prove he could be someone else --

Who?

"My lord!"

In the aftermath of finding Avice lying injured on the ground, he had forgotten all about the forest hut covered in vines and brambles. And here he was, without any outward knowledge, within scant feet of his lead hunter's little dwelling and Julian, himself.

Rather than denounce his compatriot's unorthodox carnal attraction to members of the same gender ... or admit to how he had acquired his knowledge of the same ... Gralam pretended to surprise. "Julian! So this is where you live, eh?"

"Aye," his lead hunter said shyly. "May I offer you a drink of mead, my lord?"

He clapped the lad on the back. "Show me the way! My throat is as parched as these damnable moors are soggy." At last! Something to do whilst Avice was otherwise occupied! A horn of mead would surely make the time pass quicker.

Julian led the way down the overgrown and unwelcoming path to an equally overgrown and unwelcoming domicile.

Avice had planted a small medicinal herb garden -- she told him none had malicious purposes -- beneath the arrow loop of his solar. When he gazed out onto the courtyard below, the damnable blossoms framed his view of the start of another new unfortunate day -

Gralam pinched the bridge of his nose. Untrue. The plants were not damnable, but quite pretty. They cheered him considerably and made the keep more hospitable. And not all his days seemed riddled with misfortune any longer. Verily, good fortune had begun to smile at him on a regular basis. Of late, he had experienced more pleasure in rising than displeasure. Then again, what man would not rise in pleasure with a lusty female beside him in bed?

Just thinking of the tempting puss made his rise now. How much longer would that babe tarry in getting birthed?

To get his mind off his arousal, Gralam concentrated on the lad walking ahead of him on the path.

Knowing what Gralam did now, his lead hunter's solitary ways made sense. Understandable why the lad had settled in such an isolated spot, understandable too why, even as a youth, Julian had always kept to himself, eschewing all occasions of camaraderie.

But how difficult Julian's life must be! The dictates of law and Church essentially forced the hunter to hide an intrinsic part of himself, to mask a persuasion bestowed upon him at birth by God, and about which he could do naught. He might as well try to change the size of his feet as change his mating preference.

A damnable shame the lead hunter hid a characteristic that certainly did not tell the whole tale of the man, any more than did his boot size. No one, not a king, not a Norman overlord, could control an individual's outlet for love. Why, Gralam, himself, was a prime example of inconvenient passion!

Past time to put into words his gratitude to the hunter who had saved his neck on countless occasions. "Lad, I wish you to know, I admire you greatly."

Instead of pointing the way through the portal, Julian gave a flirtatious smile. "I admire you greatly too, my lord."

That said, the hunter clasped Gralam's hand and raised the knuckles to his lips.



## Chapter Thirty-eight

“Uh -- lad. Nay!” Lord Gram dug his heels into the dirt. “I fear I gave you the wrong idea!”

Julian held the overlord’s hand all the tighter. “I would give my life for you.”

“Whilst I appreciate the sentiment, hopefully, that will never become necessary.”

The man for whom she would willingly die, shook his hand free of her grasp. Disengaged from her, he stepped away.

“You have served me well and loyally. But, Julian ... lad ... believe me, whilst flattered by your attentions, I have no interest in pursuing a relationship with an individual of my own gender.”

Julian’s heart pounded as she confessed to the truth. “I am not.”

“Pardon?” Gram frowned. “You are not -- what?”

“An individual of your own gender. I am not male.”

The overlord staggered backwards. “Good Lord! What fiend made you a eunuch? Tell me, and I will see him castrated.”

“My lord -- we speak at cross purposes here. I am not now, nor have e’er been male. I was born female.”

“You cannot be serious.”

“I have never been more serious.” Or, more vulnerable. Gram of Normandy could have her head for her deceit!

The overlord balefully shook his own head. “But -- how could I not have noticed! We have shared the same close accommodations in battle --”

Though a good man, her fellow compatriot saw only what he wished to see. In this instance, he only wished to see the dedication of an attendant, not the devotion of a woman. "I hid my gender well, my lord."

"But when I think back to the battlefield, to all the dangers you faced, how could a female have done what you did!"

She blurted the plea, the words tripping over one another in her speed to get them said. "My true gender need not interfere in my service to you, my lord. I can still attend you in the same capacity. Only now, I can also attend to you in bed --"

"I am sorry, but nay, Julian, nay." His voice extended her sympathy but alas, no lust.

"'Tis because of the Anglo-Saxon whore that you turn me down." Her pride, an easily disposable conceit of the past, toppled by the wayside. She threw herself at him. "I can give you everything and more than that evil witch gives you. I can free you of her spell." Wrapping her arms around the overlord's neck, she pressed her mouth to his.

No room for misinterpretation, Gralam's horror made itself clear at first contact. His firm lips locked tight against her seeking lips. He made to put her away from him.

No need. How well she realized her mistake! To achieve a goal, she had lived a lie most of her life. She would not live a lie anymore.

Of her own accord, she fell back.

"Forgive me!" She sobbed into her hands. "I should never have presumed."

"Julian --" Gralam paused. "Is that even your true name?"

"Aye." At best, a ragged reply. But with all her preconceptions in shreds, the tattered answer was all she managed. How could she have been so mistaken?

Julian looked up at the overlord who had mentored her since childhood, her lifelong infatuation tempered with the dawning of new womanly understanding.

Above the stiff collar of his cloak, Gralam's face had gone ash gray. Sick dread overlay his handsome features. Undaunted on the battlefield, the warlord visibly trembled now. "Julian -- about Avice ... about what you said ... who else have you told?"

Jealousy had blinded her to the truth. No bewitchment, no spell, held the overlord imprisoned. Gralam *loved* Avice, as a man loved a woman. Love was the only enchantment.

Humbled by the power of that love, she spoke to the ground. "I told no one. And I shan't tell anyone. Clearly, I have made a dreadful mistake. Please disregard everything I said. 'Twas vicious and unfounded spite, and vicious and unfounded spite alone, that drove me to speak the preposterous accusation. Avice is a healer, gifted with the knowledge of herbs and naught more. I wish you two every happiness."

"Julian --"

She shook her head. "I shall understand if you decide to strip me of my title of lead hunter." Her eyes flooded with tears. "I shall understand any measures you feel necessary to take against me."

"I see no reason to take any measures against you. As I say, you have served me well and faithfully. I trust you will continue to do so, in whatever gender and occupation you see fit."

That said, the Lord of Normandy left her outside her solitary hut and walked back in the direction whence he had come.

Usually, pining with heartsickness, she would have stayed and watched 'till Gralam disappeared from sight.

Not this day.

Finished with squandering time, she raced to track down the man who would understand her mistake.

A hunt easily accomplished, as her prey stood as a giant amongst men.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the fall of a footstep at his back, Martin looked up from his plowshare. Considering his noisy occupation -- the rough breathing of his oxen team, the clumps of earth lifting and falling, the clunking of the metal blade -- he should not have detected anyone at all. But, unaccountably, he did. For all that he had no name to put to the face, he knew who approached.

She looked him over, as if seeing him for the first time. "What have you done to your hair?"

"Had it shorn." He yanked at an abbreviated strand. "About time too, seeing I am a steward not a monk."

"You say that as if you have only now made your decision not to return to the seminary."

"I had already decided that a man may serve God in more than one manner. But because I had not reconciled myself to what shape that manner would take, I held on far too long to the trappings of an old commitment. And not only to the priesthood."

Tears rained down her magnificent face. "I see."

Dropping the plowshare, he turned her into his arms. "What is this? Surely, these tears are not for the sake of a hair trim?"

"Nay, not for the sake of a hair trim." The tears splashed all the harder.

Martin shelved her wet chin atop his callused farmer's thumb. "Lord Gralam?"

The huntress gave a nod, and then ducking her head, blubbered against his chest.

Two hands on her shoulders, he set her away from him. "If we are to make this right, I would have yer name."

She sniffed. "I doubt you can make it right, but my name is Julian."

"Aha! The Norman's *lead* hunter."

"I figured you would find me out if I narrowed the field to the superior position, so I gave myself a demotion to keep my identity a secret. I also serve as the overlord's man-of-arms."

By admitting the truth, she had given him the gift of her trust, and Martin's hope surged. "Well, though ye now outrank me, I be proud as the dickens of yer title. Ye worked long and hard to achieve that stature, *Julian*. Yers is a magnificent name, as magnificent as the female who owns it."

"Oh, Martin." Her gloomy eyes brightened; the corners of her lips lifted tremulously. "I am far from magnificent."

"The most magnificent huntress in all the land."

She gurgled a laugh. "Not much in the way of competition, as I am the *only* huntress in the land."

His usually facile tongue turned clumsy, words failing him as he tried to fix his former statement. "The most magnificent female I have e'er bedded."

"Unless you have been busy of late, I am the *only* female you have bedded."

The truth of the matter knocked him upside the head. "Ye are the most magnificent female I shall *e'er* bed."

"No need to make false statements in an effort to cheer me. I am not the only pinprick of light in the sky."

"To my eyes, ye outshine every star in the Heavens."

She spoke low. "What of Avice?"

"I love her," he said promptly. "As a sister. As she loves me as a brother." He cupped his big palm at her nape, where shaggy short hair felt like the finest of silk against his work-scarred knuckles. "Now tell me, magnificent Julian, how the man ye love has hurt ye."

"The man I love caused me no hurt." Her sobbing resumed. Great fat droplets streamed over her prominent cheekbones.

"No hurt?" He frowned. "Then, I am confused as to the reason for yer tears."

"Happiness is to blame. I cry from sheer happiness. I have come to understand fantasy colored my feelings for Lord Gralam. I have come to understand he is not the man I love. That I love another."

His prior hope gave way to his usual self-confidence. Why pretend? Why wheedle the pronouncement out of her? Since he ken exactly whom the huntress loved, 'twas his place to speak.

On a breath of exhilaration, Martin plunged ahead. "Let me say the words first." He placed two fingers, the cleanest he could find on his earth-stained hand, against her lips. "I love ye, Julian. Wed me, in yer hunter's garb, in any garb ye so prefer, just wed me, me darling, me magnificent, Julian."

"Oh, Martin, I love you so! What matter what I wear to speak the vows, so long as I say them to you."

Martin bent to his romantic Julian, bestowing upon her a kiss his betrothed lavishly returned.

\* \* \* \* \*

Avice smoothed a hand o'er her velvet-garbed knees, the bliaut a surprise gift from Gralam, the square-cut neckline and full flowing sleeves made to his "exacting specifications."

Or so he had told her in his courtly-mannered speech.

A gold brooch, bearing a heraldic motif of a falcon, fastened the girdle at the gown's dropped waist, the fibula imbedded with gemstones. The garnets and pearls caught the light of the ensconced wall torches and set the piece to sparkling. Beautiful, but still and all, a horrible waste of good coin.

Naturally, she had not told the Norman so. Only a fool would turn down such an expensive gift, and she be no fool.

A bejeweled diadem encircled her forehead. Though outrageously ornate, the band served the practical purpose of keeping her loosened hair from falling into her eyes. For that rationale and more, she had refrained from taking the overlord to task for the extravagance. She had to see where she was going, after all, or else face the prospect of tripping o'er her feet and stubbing a toe.

Avice kicked up her legs. *Bare feet. Bare toes.*

At the Norman's insistence, she had come to the great hall shoeless.

The overlord and his perverse fascination!

But who was she to complain? She had perverse fascinations of her own.

Even atop the thick, throne-like cushion, her flesh still smarted from last eventide's activities. She wiggled her glowing bottom and grinned. Say what she would about Gralam's reticent nature, the overlord was a carnal zealot in bed. The man had only to smack her arse once and she would holler in rapture.

Despite the roaring blaze leaping in the centrally located fire pit, the great hall stubbornly remained a drafty place. Avice spread out the bliaut's extra long length, until her rich skirts wrapped about her naked ankles. The rich red cloth, though gorgeous, befitted a high-ranking lady of nobility. For a peasant witch of the moors such as herself, the garb was completely inappropriate.

*Inappropriate!* Avice snorted to herself. Now that word described her up and down, and inside and out.

She lovingly stroked the soft red nap of her lover's farewell token. No harm done wearing the frippery just this one time, she supposed. After the overlord departed for Normandy, she would barter the pretentious finery for a store of much needed medicinal supplies. With her being the overlord's discarded leman and all, she should get a considerable barter value at the next fair. As to all those gold pieces she had collected, paid for her "inconvenience," those would go to the purchase of new boots. No child on the moors would suffer chilblains from walking ankle deep in snow this coming winter, the shod feet compliments of her whoring for the Lord of Normandy.

Under her lashes, Avice demurely allowed her glance to stray to her generous ... and completely oblivious ... lover.

Oh, my! The normally dour overlord did look handsome this eventide. Happy too. As happy she had e'er seen him look. And with just cause.

Moor folk had harvested a staggering amount of grains and such this past growing season. Even with decreased tithes -- or mayhap *owing* to the decreased tithes -- they had toiled doubly hard. Owing to Martin's innovative approach to farming, crops of all sorts were in greater abundance than any preceding year.

No belly would rumble above the choir in Church that coming winter and that was for piggin' sure! And the king had gotten his share as well, in the form of increased revenue. Thus explained The Confessor's commendation of the moors, royal praise that could only improve the lot of her folk --

In the here and now.

Who could understand what the future held?

Avice waved at Martin, seated across the way with Julian, his new bride. As the overlord's steward, he held a place of honor at the trestle boards this eventide.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, the giant's booming voice almost knocked her back on her seat. "Hear tell the sermon at Church on the morrow is about the harvest and such."

She smiled and nodded. The giant would continue to hint about her attending vespers, and she would continue to take the path of least resistance. Same as always, she would tell him naught about her witchcraft.

A higher power had placed her on this green earth to be of service. To heal. To comfort. Not to embroil herself in either Church or royal politics. Keep her nose clean, and she might yet die of old age.

With a long stretch and an even longer yawn, Avice arose from her cushioned seat at the laden banquet boards. She turned a tired smile on Gralam. "I retire to bed now."

Immediately, the overlord returned his horn of mead to the oak planks, and made to rise.

She stilled him with a hand applied to his muscled arm. "Nay! Stay! Do! Make merry with yer guests."

"The festivities will continue unabated without me." He swung his good leg o'er the bench. "You moor people certainly know how to celebrate."

*You moor people ...*

Gralam still resisted claiming the moor folk as his own or including himself amongst them.

"Shall we away?" After accepting his proffered elbow, they began a promenade to the portal. He tried to disguise his pain, but his wince of discomfort was not lost on her.

"Yer injury?"

"A twinge from the damp is all."

"And all yer riding."

He grinned. "I can sit a horse as well as e'er I did. Mayhap even better."

When she tossed her head, her unbound hair whipped about her bare shoulders, the sharp sting waking her up to some harsh realities. What would happen to her moor folk, to all the plans for improvement, when Gralam abandoned them for Normandy?

"Will ye still be here when I return from the morrow's lying-in?"

Gralam ushered her through the portal to the stairs. "Where would I go?"

"A ship sails on the next high tide for Normandy." Lifting her skirts, she preceded him up the treads to the upper level. "Now that ye can sit a destrier, I suspect ye will wish to return home."

After opening the portal, he escorted her over the threshold to his solar. "No wishes, Avice!"

She smirked. "All right, all right. A *want*, then."

"Certainly, I *want* to return to the land of my birth, if only to mend torn fences with my father."

So -- as she had suspected, he would leave. This might be their last night together.

A broad smile masked her sadness. "Of course, m'lord."

The man she loved took a deep breath. "I never told you about my sire. If I may, I would like to now, since you mentioned my returning to Normandy."

Avice eyed his elegant noble's hands, long graceful fingers that unlaced the hide drawstrings on his tunic. "Go right ahead," she conceded, and then spoiled the amiable affect by snapping, "Who be stopping ye, anyway?"

"With such a gracious invitation as that, how could I resist?" A lopsided grin hung on his lips, ere his mouth straightened into its usual solemnity.

"Avice," he began, "do you recall my relating my need of the people of the moors. A need that equaled, if not surpassed, their need of me? That, for personal reasons, I wished to succeed here --"

"Do ye take me for a dim-witted dolt? Aye, I recall the conversation. What of it?"

"I wished to succeed here," he said slowly, "because I had left my homeland a disgraced coward. After refusing to follow my warrior father into yet another battle, he disowned me."

"No coward be ye, Gralam of Normandy."

"Thank you for saying so. And in my heart, I knew I was not craven, still doubts continued to assail me --"

"A smite on yer piggin' doubts! Please to listen, for I intend to say this but once. Laying down a sword and picking up the banner of peace, makes a man wise not cowardly. And ye did succeed here. We just left a great hall filled to the rafters with rejoicing o'er that success."

"But you see, due to my crippled leg, I cannot rejoice or enjoy that success. My injury forever reminds me, I am but half a man."

Her fault, his injury. Her fault, he felt like half a man.

"Pig-headed, Norman." She sniffed back the selfish tears. "Yer twice the man of anyone on these moors!"

"Nay, I am not, and I would like to show you why."

She looked away.

"Come! Look at me, Avice."

Despite her weepiness, she did as bade.

Gralam stood naked in front of her, and for the first time. But her guilt spoiled the unveiling. For rather than take in his male beauty, his injured leg stole her joy and attention.

His poor, twisted leg!

The tears fell freely then.

One look told her she could make no repair to the broken bone. With such an injury, she could little comprehend how he stood, let alone walked or rode a steed. That he did both, spoke to his perseverance and courage.

Racing forward, she threw herself at his feet.

"Get up, Avice!"

"Nay," she said frantically.

"There is no need for this."

Oh, but he was mistaken. There was every need for this! For what she had done, she should grovel. Beg his forgiveness --

However, the healer in her had no patience for theatrics, not when she might be of practical use. Though 'twas impossible to make his leg right, she might still ease his pain.



She began a deep kneading, her strong peasant fingers massaging the knot in the leg muscle. Loosen the tension and the pain would recede.

Until the next occasion.

There would be many such occasions. Gralam would suffer the consequences of her spiteful action all of his life.

*He suffered because of her, because of her, because of what she had done ...*

She determinedly pushed the recriminations away. Concentrate! She must stay focused, and direct her thoughts to what she could do now.

"Avice, I need to tell you how I came by the injury."

"No need." Her strong fingers continued their work. "I already ken how ye came by the injury."

"Nay, you do not. You only know what I told everyone. No simple fall from a steed did this to me. The truth is, *I* did this to me --"

"Nay! Ye did not!"

"Hush," he commanded in that quiet and dignified way of his. "Let me speak. I need to finish ere losing courage. Please? I have had enough of feeling weak, of feeling like a failure. I need your help here, Avice."

Inside, she died a thousand guilty deaths, but with such an uncharacteristic unveiling of his inner self, of his most private thoughts, what could she do but nod her head?

He nodded too. More serious than she had e'er seen him, he continued. "Upon my arrival here, in the name of achieving success, I lived down to my father's expectations and performed a cowardly act that nearly resulted in a young maiden's rape."

Avice gasped. "Nay! Ye could have had no part to play in rape --"

"Oh, but I did. In failing to provide sanctuary from harassment on these lands, I set up a course of events that allowed for assault. You see, there was a noble hunting party that I sought like a damnable toady to impress. Rather than warn them off interference with the moor people, I turned a blind eye and said naught. Longing to prove my father wrong about my cowardice, I proved myself a coward of the worse sort. No amount of success is worth one moment of that maiden's fright. I wish everyday for her forgiveness."

The persisting resentment, the indignant ill will she unknowingly harbored toward Gralam, broke from its mooring. A soothing balm, a warming radiance, filled her heart as she said the words to set them both free. "I forgive ye."

"Pardon?"

"Aye, that too. As a woman, as a witch, I absolve ye of all blame."

"My God! 'Twas you!"

Finally, she could admit the truth, and in the admittance not only lighten her burden of guilt, but his.

Avice looked up at Gralam, tears dribbling down her chin. "I mind-spoke to the steed, ordered him to unseat ye. I caused yer injury. I shan't argue against any punishment ye devise. From our first meeting, I have sincerely tried to make me wrongdoing up to ye --"

*"Make up your wrongdoing? From our first meeting."*

"Aye, from the first, when I called ye to me."

"Christ," he roared, clearly on the losing end of a battle for control. "Is that what this thing between us was about? Is that all I was to you -- some bloody penance? Was our time together on the moors your hair shirt?"

She needed to set him straight. To tell him he had attracted her on the moors, and that the attraction had grown into something else, and continued to grow. Repentance had played no part in her feelings for him, either then or now.

She piggin' loved him, the fool idiot!

So much to tell him. So much to share! She would begin one word at a time. "M'lord --"

He interrupted. "Never mind. No need to explain. Your answer no longer matters. The past is a moot point."

Moot point? Because he planned to leave on the next high tide for his homeland?

His hand fell heavily onto her shoulder; the other hand went to the front of his braies. Without saying a word, he opened the placard, brought her face forward against his loins.

She wanted to cry, to scream -- *Nay, not like this! Please, not with so many things left unsaid between us. Not done punitively.*

But words only seemed to get in the way. They served as a barrier, not a bridge.

Giving into the urgency, she nuzzled her nose to his loins, her nostrils flaring, savoring his distinctive musky scent.

With his hot moan -- a fierce and masculine compliment -- spurring her on, she fingered his uncut proportions next, coming away with a droplet of his lust captured on a finger. Placing that same finger in her mouth, she savored his essence.

Another male moan -- music to her ears -- as she tasted his hard male flesh for the very first time.

To familiarize herself with the terrain, she drew her tongue along his pillicock, sleek and hot, and firm, a lengthy expanse to traverse.

When she cupped his stones, fondling the weight and substance, the warrior who had ne'er once succumbed to the discomfort of his shattered leg cried full out.

Mean-spirited to tease, too starved for him to resist, she took him into her mouth and had her way with him.

His hands clenched on her shoulders, a man's desperate need for release.

From her.

He shouted as he came. But after her swallow, silence resonated in the chamber. The quiet proved harsher than any words he could have spoken.

Come high tide, Gralam would leave for Normandy.

Because she loved him, freely loved him with an open hand, Avice picked herself off her knees. Without another word, especially a word that might involve persuading him to stay, she returned to her little cottage on the moors.

## Epilogue

Gralam gazed off longingly into the distance, across the hillocks and dales.

Somewhere out there on the moors, across streams and amongst bogs of heaths and heathers, Avice resided.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, he shouted his petition for her ears alone, "Please come to me, Enchantress! I miss you so --"

The billowing winds caught up his voice and carried the entreaty o'er the parapets.

Whilst he waited for her arrival, he kept busy with honing the metal edge of his sword. Even if the waiting took a lifetime, he would continue to voice his summons, night after night. He trusted she would come to him eventually.

Only just finished a cursory sharpening, he sensed her presence. One moment he was alone, same as always, and the next moment, his loneliness had lifted.

Looking up from his chore, he saw her, materialized from out of the moonlit darkness, a slender shape undulating in the shadows between buttress and stone wall.

On a swirl of peasant linen, she rounded in on him. The eventide's breeze tossed her loose tresses. Her recent exercise flushed her cheeks. Lively mischief, same as always, set her eyes to sparkling. She was lovely, almost too lovely for him to bear.

Then again, he thought much the same every time he gazed upon her. As his return to misfortune would have it, he had done no gazing at all this excruciatingly long week.

His chest thudded. He had so much to tell her! *Everything* to tell her, all of the information lay hidden in his heart.

He would keep his tone purposefully light, as he would with any skittish fey creature. He had much to win here, much to lose as well, and a heavy hand would gain him naught.

In feigned nonchalance, he began with a tease. "Just winged in for a visit, did you, lovely gyrfalcon?"

"Arrogant Norman! I might have flown in on a broomstick."

"But you did not."

"Nay, I did not," she grudgingly admitted. "What gave me means of travel away?" Gliding toward him, she tilted the regal line of her jaw. "Hmm? Do ye claim clairvoyance now?"

Nay, he was no seer. Trusting the kind-hearted witch would choose the swiftest mode of transportation to put him out of his lonely misery, he had merely surmised she had winged her way to the keep in the guise of a falcon. Her unsentimental compassion had drawn him right from the first. 'Twas one of the many reasons he loved her.

No intention of telling her *that* quite yet, Gralam tilted his jaw to the side and examined her. "Apples in your cheeks, falcon finery decorating your tresses -- both gave you away."

A betraying white gyrfalcon feather drifted airborne between them. Reaching out, he captured the plume. After exhibiting the evidence in front of her nose, he pocketed the keepsake in his cloak.

"Norman" she said, eying his actions, "ye now have all the proof ye need to burn me for the craft. In case ye seek me out for the fires, me cottage is easy enough to find. Look for the one with broken falcon cages lining the thatched-roof."

"I would never cage you, Avice." He shuddered. "And never, not even in jest, will you mention witch burning to me again."

"Ye did make mention of both once, m'lord."

They entered a tricky conversational area. Though his thoughts circled like buzzing wasps, he kept to the subject at hand. "How did you manage your garb?"

"Carried in me beak." She scrunched up her mouth, which in turn wrinkled her nose. "I dislike the taste of linen immensely."

"You need not have dressed on my account. Arrayed in stars would have suited me fine."

"Stuff yer piggin' nonsense, Norman!" Without taking a breath between one phrase and the next, she asked, "What are ye doing up here, anyway?"

He showed her the flint in his palm. "Sharpening my blade."

"Why?"

"Otherwise, my sword would be pointless. Much like this conversation."

Now, she narrowed her eyes.

"No need sending me that hexing glance. I merely made an observation. In truth, your visit gladdens me."

She smirked.

He grinned. For the first time in seven torturously long days. Like a gurgling fountain, mirth welled up within his belly. Later Avice would call him on what she perceived as his arrogance. Ranting and raving, and throwing her arms about, she would have at it, her sharp tongue cutting him down to size. For all he cared, the witch could spell-cast him into a warty frog.

Green warts and white feathers. On the outside, a frog and a bird made for strange bedfellows. But that was only on the outside. And who cared about external appearances anyway?

Not he! 'Twas what went on inside a person that counted.

Under skin and bone, his heart beat a strong and sure refrain. After a lifetime spent following a course that ill suited him, he now charted his own direction. He was bound to make mistakes, given the newness of the adventure, but he hoped Avice would stay by his side, warty imperfections and all.

Finally, she approached. Joining him at the bulwark o'erlooking the moors, the same spot he had kept watch for her during the last seven sleepless nights, she lifted her chin. "My, but the sky is a-twinkle this eve. I predict a clear day for sailing on the morrow. Full tide in the morn. Seas smooth as silk."

Just like her skin, he mused.

"The ship to Normandy sails at sunrise," she apprised him. "Why tarry here?"

"Where else would I be but here?"

"M'lord," she said soberly, "ye said the past was a moot point."

"And so 'tis."

"I took that to mean ye planned to leave for home."

"I am home. These moors are my home."

"Oh!" She crumpled against him.

He wrapped her up in an arm, supporting her but giving her room to fly away, should she feel the need. "On the moors, you said we were equals, a man and a woman. Could you possibly extend that equality to this keep?"

"Aye, Gralam," she said softly.

"Then, good. Then, fine," he blustered.

Somehow, he had no idea how, the stars in the sky ended up in her eyes. "Ye do trust me. I realized ye did after the last time, after ... after ..."

"After you orally pleased me?"

She nodded. "Ye would not have allowed me the gift of yerself lest ye trusted me."

"My trust predated that lovely occasion."

"When, then? Tell me when ye came to trust me!"

"Twas a gradual process, culminating when I held a dagger in my hand, ready to inflict bodily injury on my House of Wessex guest."

"When I be in falcon guise, ye mean."

"Exactly. Though you swooped down on the lord's son, I trusted you would not harm the lad."

"But the viper --"

"Not visible from my location, until almost too late."

She snuggled closer in his arms. "Though hardly deserving of yer confidence, I be grateful for it all the same."

A warrior unused to opening up to another, he did to her. "That day, when my hunting guests chased you through the trees, I never completely understood why you faulted me, why you hated me so."

She gasped. "Gralam, I be so sorr --"

He held a finger to her lips. "Hush! Let me speak, or I shall lose my nerve." He took a breath and continued. "By virtue of my lineage, I assumed you would understand I had no need to bother with the unpleasantness of assault. That, 'twas my lordly prerogative to bed any wench I chose. In my conceit, I thought any female would consider bedding me an honor. I thought a toss of gold showed my humanity. I thought I deserved thanks for my rescue of you. I thought you would understand that, because I owned you, I had no need to rape you. I could not fathom you might have an alternative point of view."

He shook his head. "I am grateful for my limp. My uneven gait reminds me daily, I am not above the law of this land. That 'tis my duty -- nay, my *privilege* -- to protect its people. *My* people." He shook his head again. "Nay, my *folk*."

"Oh, Gralam --" She sniffed. "Trouble lies ahead for us -- I feel it in me bones."

"And we shall deal with it. Together."

He dropped a kiss on her tear-wet nose. "On a darkling moor, do you perchance recall asking me a question?"

She nodded.

"Ask me again now. I have finally found the answer and I would like to show it off."

She thumped his chest, where his heart wildly beat. "Who be ye inside here? Simply put, what kind of man?"

“Simply put, I am the man who loves you, Avice the Enchantress.”

“I love ye too, Gralam of Norm --” She shook her head, began again from the very beginning. “I love ye too, Gralam of *Moorstead*.”

 THE END 



## **Louisa Trent**

I am a writer raised in a family of storytellers. My earliest and fondest memory is of my Irish Nana relating a mystical story of a man looking in a window upon a beautiful lady whose long silvery hair swept the floor as she walked. With a simple telling, my grandmother drew me into her tale. A man. A woman. A forbidden love that wouldn't die. From opening word to shivery conclusion, I lived that story with her. Many years later, I'm still awed by the spell of the fantasy world she created with only the dip and swell of her voice.

There's power in words. Hope in love stories. Joy in a happy ending. I'm proud to carry on my family's storytelling tradition.

Visit Louisa on the web at <http://www.louisatrent.com> or email her at [louisatrent@louisatrent.com](mailto:louisatrent@louisatrent.com).