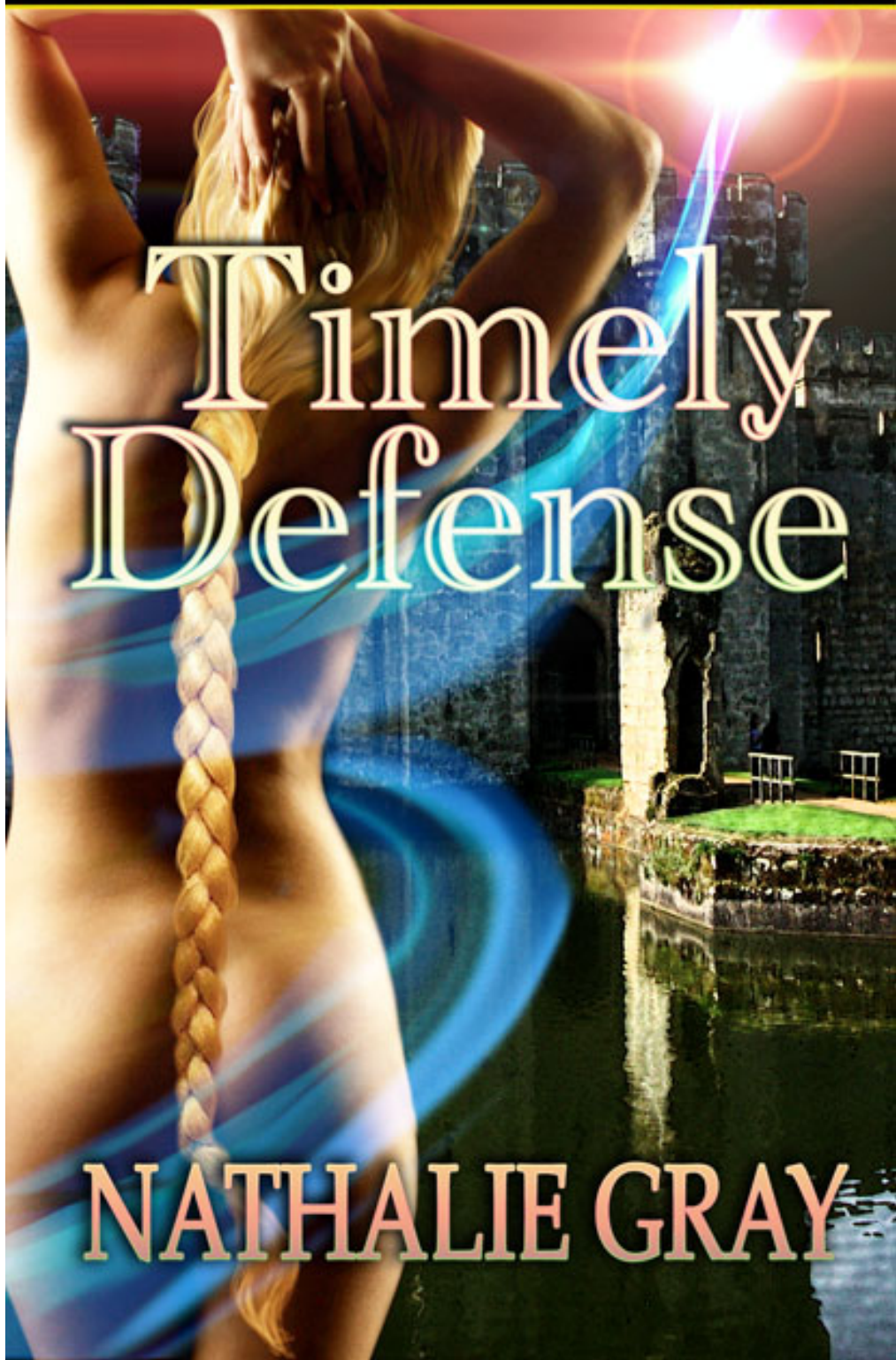


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Timely
Defense

NATHALIE GRAY



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Timely Defense

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TIMELY DEFENSE

Nathalie Gray

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Chapter One

The first sign of trouble was ice cubes tinkling in his glass.

A.J. slid the crystal tumbler farther on the teak ledge, clear of the stack of legal files he'd been going through, but the tinkling continued. After putting a stick of gum in his mouth, he returned the pack to his breast pocket and craned his neck over the leather backrest to catch the pilots exchanging nervous glances. Being six three was nice for that. It gave him a clear view. Even when he wished it didn't...as in how he'd just seen the pilots looking as worried as he felt.

The private jet—his client's, a Swiss pharmaceutical giant—suddenly pitched down before leveling off. His migraine accentuated. They always did in times of stress, although they had begun to worry him of late. Sometimes, his head hurt so much he had to sit and take a breather. During his last yearly, the doc had remarked casually how at thirty-four stress was slowly killing him one neuron at a time. A.J. had always found her sense of humor a tad dry.

Another bout of turbulence made him squeeze his eyes shut. The feeling his stomach was plugged directly in his throat forced A.J. to take a sip of ginger ale, hoping it'd help. Barely. Despite the day's success, the flight to Geneva was proving to be very unpleasant. Still, what a day it'd been!

He *loved* winning big court cases, especially when the triumph involved more money than even he could spend—and he could *spend*—drama, TV crews and cute jurors. The crown prosecutor had even refused to shake his hand after the verdict had been rendered. Jealous prick! That he'd charmed his way through jury selection and performed the worst case of character assassination in Toronto's legal history only reinforced his view nice guys finished last. Alexandre-Jean Bernier never finished last. They didn't call him The Shark for nothing.

Another quiver rattled the ice cubes in his ginger ale. A.J. stood but a violent lurch slammed him back in his seat.

"We're going to experience some moderate to strong turbulence, sir, please fasten your seat belt," said one of the pilots on the intercom. The German accent made the word "turbulence" sound like "toor-boo-lanssew".

"You think," A.J. grumbled, chewing his gum with frantic energy. After patting his chest for the MP3 player, he hurriedly buckled his seat belt and tried to focus on the game of golf he'd been invited to play at a select club near Geneva. *Yeah, focus on golf.*

He'd visited Europe several times but had never been to Switzerland. Winning such a high-profile pharmaceutical case had put a nice shine on his already glowing CV, which had garnered very profitable attention in return. Judging from the private jet, his

newest client must have had a fat expense account. Great, because A.J. was as good as he was expensive.

When a furious tremor shook the entire jet, bright yellow masks popped out of the overhead panels and dangled in his face. The same cheap plastic as economy class. Ha. Somewhere at the rear of the jet, he heard his luggage thudding around. He didn't care for the clothes – although they were designer pieces, each of them, right down to his underwear – but as long as his golf set was fine, he wouldn't sue. This set had cost more than his first car. He couldn't believe how in the span of a decade he'd gone from driving a battered Datsun to the silver monster of an Alfa Romeo parked at home.

Violent turbulence and blinding lightning strikes forced his eyes closed, and for a second A.J. swore he was going to faint. Actually *faint* like a woman! It'd happened to him once in high school when he'd tried to impress a girl and taken on Steve Jarvis, hockey captain and neighborhood brute. A.J. had ended up flat on his back, bleeding from the nose and going *blind* – or so he'd thought though he'd woken to discover he'd only fainted, to his undying shame. Back in prepuberty years, he'd been a scrawny little thing with a too-big head and gangly limbs. At six three and two twenty-four, he was scrawny no more. But he still couldn't fight and instead relied on his killer smile to charm his way out of trouble. Or sue the shit out of it, whichever worked. He wasn't a scrupulous sort of man.

He checked his watch just to give himself something to do. Four o'clock. Barely an hour left. *Not quick enough.* A.J. leaned sideways so he could take a peek through the window and wished he hadn't.

"What the hell...?"

The rest of his sentence died in his throat as bright blue flashes illuminated ash-gray clouds from within. He was just a lawyer, but shouldn't they be flying *over* a storm instead of right *through* it? A.J. was about to voice his concern when everything inside the cabin went black. Shaking like a lone Tic Tac in its box, he braced his hands on the elbow rests, clutching at them until his knuckles burned. Damn. This wasn't good. Not good.

Someone is so getting sued for this.

With a gasp he watched as everything turned a blinding white that seared through his brain, triggering tiny bursting suns at the edge of his vision. His cheeks felt numb, his ears buzzed. Then nothing.

* * * * *

A.J. dreamed he was peeing.

He knew it was a dream because he was doing it standing. Only armchair sports fans and bikers peed standing. His mom had taught him to sit as a civilized man. Thinking of her made him feel better. She'd died while he was still a good lawyer. An *honest* one. Even if he didn't believe in anything divine, he hoped heaven existed and she was finally having some well-deserved rest. It hadn't been easy rearing a

headstrong and popular boy all by herself, putting him in all the “right” schools, the “right” sports, exposing him to the “right” people. Despite their humble background and financial vulnerability, he’d landed in a top-drawer legal firm and been made partner within a couple of years. Her cancer had won not long afterward but, dammit, he’d showered her with gifts and attention for the short time he’d been able to. In a sense, it was better to have lost her before the nickname and the high-profile cases. A.J. didn’t think he could’ve lived with the disappointment in her eyes.

A.J. could almost hear her... Her only child, a bright boy, a popular boy, turned into the worst kind of cynical, coldhearted lawyer. The courtroom equivalent of a hit man.

The urge to pee woke him fully.

A.J. jerked to a sitting position and blinked several times. Where the hell was he? He’d never believed in hallucinations. Those were for the feeble-minded, over-medicated quacks who populated courtrooms – on either side of the aisle too.

There were *no* burgundy drapes tied around the four-poster bed in which he lay.

No giant fireplace occupied a stone wall on which hung tapestries depicting quaint hunting scenes.

And there certainly could *not* be a cute girl with a bonnet and medieval dress squeaking in fright and dashing out the door.

Okay, I’m seeing things. We obviously crashed and I bonked my head really hard against the genuine teak armrests of the ultra-expensive Learjet. Yep. That’s it. Concussion. I’m so suing the cretins.

Auditory hallucinations joined those of the visual variety when several voices rose beyond the door – cleated too – and two men wearing *dresses* and swords barged into the room and started yelling at him in a language he didn’t understand. Bonnet Girl returned, a woman with the palest blonde hair he’d ever seen in tow. Everyone started talking at once until the woman said a single harsh word and everyone shut right up. Much better. She had the Prosecutor from Hell thing going for her, right down to the Stare of Impending Annihilation.

She took a tentative step toward him, said something he couldn’t understand and waited. Clearly, she’d asked him a question.

A.J. snapped his chin in her general direction. “Who the hell are you?”

One of the men, a large fellow with reddish-blond hair and beard, slid his sword halfway out its sheath and looked at the woman as if asking, “*Can I bash his head in since we don’t understand what he’s saying? Can I, huh, can I?*”

Before checking his dress code, A.J. flipped the sheets over his legs, swung them over the edge and cursed when he realized he was butt naked. Both the Boss Lady and Bonnet Girl squealed the way only women could and flinched while he hurriedly yanked the sheet around his waist. Standing, he bunched the sheet in front of him and advanced on Boss Lady.

“What happened? Did we crash? Where are the other two guys, the pilots? And, Christ, would you tell Conan the Barbarian to put the prop back before he pokes someone in the eye?”

With each question, Boss Lady took a small step back from him and A.J. only noticed then how cute she was. Cute in a blonde, blue-eyed, pleasantly plump and curvy way. Too bad he was too busy being a crash-landing victim about to take legal action to properly introduce himself and ask her out for dinner. He noticed too late the pewter pot at his feet and kicked it. Yellow liquid – *damn let it not be what I think it is* – sloshed all over his feet and what portion of sheet that dragged on the floor. It was still warm.

“Arghhhhhhh, Jesus fucking Christ!”

With a leap, he cleared the disgusting mess and leaned against the stone wall, panting and shaking his foot. Drops of...*PISS* landed on the immaculate wooden floor. “Okay, tell me what the hell is going on before I start suing everything that fucking moves!”

Conan took a threatening step forward, clearly not impressed with the tone. A.J. stared guns at him while Bonnet Girl rushed out of the room. Scowling, Boss Lady cocked her head at him while her gaze traveled down his denuded chest and belly to the fist he kept over the sheet around his waist then lower. Talk about taking advantage of the situation!

On the floor, a rivulet of piss was crawling dangerously near. He backed away against the wall, realizing fully how much of an under-medicated mental patient it made him look while he kept the sheet up over his ankles. A corner – warm but rapidly cooling – had stuck to his ankle. Dis-gus-ting.

It dawned on him he might be in France or Switzerland since the plane had only been an hour or so from Geneva when the storm had struck. English would be getting him nowhere fast. Good thing he’d been born and raised in bilingual Montreal, home of The Best Smoked Meat Sandwiches in the world and some hockey team he couldn’t name.

“Where am I?” he asked in French.

Finally, a light bulb seemed to have gone on in everyone’s eyes.

“You are in my home, in Sargans,” Boss Lady replied.

Her peculiar and heavily accented French required some mental interpreting but he thought he got most of it. “What happened? Did we crash? Where are the others?”

“We found you by the lake, late the day before yesterday. You were hurt. There was no one else but you, Sir...”

“The name’s A.J. That’s *impossible*. There were two other men – the pilots – and the not-so-small Learjet we were traveling in. You know, a *plane*? Big metal white thing with wings?”

She raised her hand, which silenced him and stopped Conan and his colleague from coming around the bed toward A.J. He didn't like the look on the large man's face. Neither did he like the sword in his hand. Judging by the holster-scabbard thing, the blade must have been as long as a hockey stick!

"There was no one else but you, Sir Ayjay," she snapped. "You should lie back down before you undo all the hard work we put into you. You have lost blood."

It occurred to him he might be walking around with a horrible head wound or broken back and hurriedly checked for injuries. Boss Lady was right, he'd been injured...in the face too, dammit. With tentative fingers he touched his eyebrow, felt sharp little points sticking out...

Noooo.

Someone had stitched him back up. To judge by the rest of the surroundings, these folks must have used yarn. Great. Now he'd look like Frankenstein's Monster.

"You stitched me back up?! Are you a doctor? A nurse? Or do you go around and suture head wounds in your spare time? What else do you do, vasectomy, open-heart?" He pointed to his face. "No one but a qualified doctor gets to touch this, is that clear? You're already—"

"My stitching," she cut in, her cheeks flushing beet red, "is the finest in the region, Sir Ayjay, and I assure you—"

"Yeah, yeah, and I can staple sheets of paper together but it doesn't make me an engineer, now *does* it?"

A look of confusion and fury crossed her face.

He threw his hands up, or meant to anyway, but it'd mean giving up on the sheet, which he wasn't about to do in front of three people—two of them guys. "Mirror. Got any of those?"

Boss Lady indicated something behind him. A.J. turned, spotted nothing but a dresser with a small earthenware mug and something resembling a caveman's idea of a CD. "Am I supposed to see something? What am I looking for?"

"You asked for a mirror. Here is one," the blonde replied. By her side, both men wore that macho expression—*oh look, girlie wants a mirror*—A.J. particularly disliked.

Neolithic CD in hand, A.J. angled it to his face. "You're kidding me, right? I wouldn't even know it was me in there. I could have a cowlick like a horn right on the top of my head and not see a damn thing. Do you have a *real* mirror?"

"This is a *real* mirror."

A.J. put gentle fingers to his stitches again. Sharp but pliable at the same time. Strange. "What did you use to sew me back together?"

"Sheep gut, of course."

"Arghhhh! Sheep gut?" A.J. thought he was going to start hyperventilating. *In the name of everything that's holy...* "Sheep gut? As in, stomach and...and...oh fuck.

Intestines? Ever heard of bacteria? Germs, you know, little things that crawl around IN YOUR GUT?!"

Boss Lady only cocked her head as though he made little sense but was entertaining as hell.

Bonnet Girl came rushing back, a basin and a folded cloth in hand. She was getting down to her knees, clearly intending to wash his feet, when A.J. grabbed her sleeve and pulled her up.

"No, no. I don't think so. I'll—"

Everyone froze as he reached for the cloth in the girl's hand. He looked up at Boss Lady's face, an expression of intense embarrassment making her even cuter while both men looked as if he'd just gutted a baby rabbit with a wooden spoon. Horrified didn't begin to express the look on their faces.

What?

Realizing he must have done something remarkably stupid and strange for these folks, A.J. pulled his hand away, looked down at Bonnet Girl and offered what he hoped was an apologetic grimace. She just stared as if he'd sprouted another head in the middle of his chest. He tried to ignore the fact a girl was washing his own urine off his feet before thanking her and walking around to stand by Boss Lady.

"I want to see that lake. There has to be something left and you're going to take me right now."

Conan snarled something to his boss, who shook her blonde head. A.J. had made it his specialty to read people. It'd proven invaluable when it came time to push their buttons. So he interpreted what had just happened as Conan asking his boss if he could hurt him, at least just a little. Boss replied, *no, just look at him, the poor bugger, he's standing in piss with his face bashed in and reconstructed using sheep intestine and bits of bark. Let him be.*

"There were a few things, Sir Ayjay, and we retrieved them for you," she replied, avoiding coming in contact with him. Conan clearly itched to make some contact of his own. "There was not much, I am afraid."

Her blue gaze guided A.J.'s to a corner of the room where his golf bag was propped against the wall with not a scratch on its vinyl surface. Well, that had been a good investment. At ten grand, he'd always seen his golf set as investment instead of an expense. Expenses came with price tags with a few zeros. But ten thousand dollars worth of something was more than a *purchase*. A.J. shook his head. Two men might be dead right now, he might possibly be the only survivor of a plane crash but a *golf bag* had made it without a mark...? Life was like that sometimes. Hopelessly bitchy.

Beside the golf bag was a chair on which had been set a few items, some he could recognize right away. His watch was there, along with his MP3 player and something with foil sticking out the side.

Boss Lady said something to Conan, who glared at A.J. before taking his leave, his equally fierce-looking colleague with him. Bonnet Girl stood, exchanged a few words with her boss then left as well.

Alone with the blonde, A.J. could finally get some peace and quiet to think about what had happened.

"You may address me as Lady Marion," she began, her gaze once again going down the length of him.

Hey. She was checking him out!

So he checked her out too. Equal opportunity, right?

"Lady Marion" stood about five two, five three, with long pale blonde hair coiled in a thick braid hooked over a shoulder. A royal blue dress that couldn't begin to hide all those lovely curves fell to the floor, with slits at the shoulders creating a contrast against the narrow white sleeves of the shirt she wore underneath. A gold-threaded wool belt where hung a ring of keys fit for a museum cinched her strong waist and dangled to the ground. Just his luck to have landed – literally – in the middle of a medieval fair.

"I want to see that lake. Now would be a good time."

She shook her head. "You were injured. You cannot ride a horse yet."

A.J. took a step forward, knowing he was invading her "Lady Zone" and not giving a shit. He was the victim, dammit, and was going to get straight answers and get them right now!

She narrowed her blue eyes at him, as though trying to decide if she should scream for Conan to come help, knee A.J. in the balls or just stay rooted to the spot and keep on staring. She must have chosen the latter because she put her fists on her hips and gave him one of the most potent Stares of Approaching Female Anger he'd ever been graced with. And he'd tasted several kinds in his line of work. Not many people abided with lawyers to begin with, but those like him, everyone despised.

"I'm the one with his face split open, so I get to stare, okay?"

She snorted. "Your face is hardly split open. It is merely a cut. But I should have known from your hands."

"Known what? What's wrong with my hands? They're perfectly good, functional hands and I've just had them done, my hands, which I can't say the same about you. I've seen teenage boys with cleaner fingernails."

He actually heard her teeth grinding.

"How dare you insult me in my own home?" she snarled.

Stare of Eradication and Looming Painful Death. Plenty of them. Accusing finger-pointing right into his chest too. The woman had nerves of steel. A.J. looked down at it, gave his trademark Shark smile before shaking his head. "That was a mistake. You don't get to poke me in the chest, I don't care how cute you are."

"Oh? And what shall happen to me?"

“Well,” he started, taking a step forward which forced Lady Marion to either be very, very close to him or yield and take a step back, which she did. Hurray for small victories. He was so shallow.

“It’s going to start with a thing called a subpoena then a little trip down to the courthouse, or whatever you call them over here, then it’s probably going to end with you in a hard little chair while I walk around and take a few strips off your lovely person. Who knows? It might end with an out-of-court settlement—which I rarely do, because I tend to win—or me burning a hole in my stomach with a lovely triple espresso while reading a newspaper where there’s a picture of you wearing numbered coveralls.”

She opened her mouth to speak, snapped it close, tried again.

“Yes, I know, I can be ruthless.” Feeling smug, A.J. adjusted the sheet around his waist.

“I have absolutely no idea what you just said to me,” Lady Marion breathed, shaking her head before bursting into mocking laughter.

It was his turn to try for a witty repartee, finding nothing that didn’t involve obscenities—he had his standards—and clamping his jaws together. She was *laughing* at him!

Deciding if he wanted to have the last word, and damn it if he did to, he’d have to shock her into silence. So A.J. let the sheet fall around his ankles, stepped out then crossed his arms. “Do you have a phone I could use?”

Complete silence followed his little stunt. But there was much staring and reddening. Lady Marion blushed sunburn red right up to the roots of her hair, stammered something before jumping back and slamming against the door. As much as he wanted to steady her, A.J. didn’t move a muscle and watched as she put a hand out and palmed blindly behind her for the lever. Yet as much as she looked shocked, a measure of admiration also shined in her pale eyes, which wasn’t helping his already inflated ego. He knew if he tried to walk out the door, the rest of him would be fine but his head would get stuck. He was many things but modest he was not.

“I’ll take that as a no.”

It was his turn to grin.

Damn he loved winning!

Chapter Two

The sight of a naked man had never unnerved Marion. She'd bandaged and stitched enough in her life to dull such excitement. But Sir Ayjay was different. He was a stranger, a handsome one at that, and looked at her in a way no man had in a long time, not as Lady Marion, Sargans' *châtelaine* and four years widowed, but as a *woman*.

Although Hugo had claimed his man had found an unconscious Italian by the side of the lake, she doubted Sir Ayjay was one. The excitement the visitor had caused as Thorins and Hugo carried him inside the walls! Female *oohs* and *ahhs* of admiration had followed in their wake. She had to admit, she'd thought the dark-haired stranger quite stunning herself, despite the cut marring his eyebrow. But a look had sufficed...he was no Italian. He certainly possessed the sleek elegance, smooth black hair and sharp features of an Italian, but he towered over everyone else by a good head and had not spoken a word of Latin thus far. He had fine hands as well, clean and limber, with nails trimmed and polished, and possessed a fine bracelet of the palest silver she'd ever seen, even if the rest of the items they'd gathered from the lakeside were unfamiliar to her. Sir Ayjay was a wealthy lord in his own homeland no doubt and judging from his impeccable hands, one who hadn't worked a day in his life. The man stood there as though being stark naked were nothing at all. The scandalous, foul-mouthed...argh!

Her maid Hannah's claim she'd never seen such a finely sculpted and well-endowed man—which Marion could verily attest—only deepened Marion's mental battle. She wanted to stare, yet at the same time, knew she couldn't. It wasn't proper. With much more difficulty than she ought to have experienced, she forced her gaze away from his chiseled body and settled on the tapestry on the far wall.

"Night shall fall soon," she said through clenched teeth. By the corner of her eye, she could still see how light and shadow played on his firm and fit body. Good Lord, what was she doing! "I shall take you to the lake tomorrow."

He seemed about to say something but lost his countenance and paled considerably. Sinking on the foot of the bed, he rubbed his temple and grimaced. Worry instantly flared through her chest and left her surprised by its intensity and suddenness. She knew nothing about him except he must have been a lord...albeit a blasphemous one. She rushed forward. "You should lie down."

Sir Ayjay ignored her hand and began to stare at her while he rubbed his temple. "Just migraines, I'll be fine. Where is this fair taking place?"

She had no idea what "my grains" had to do with his head but let it drop. He looked in so much pain. "A fair?"

"This," he snapped, indicating her dress, the room and what lay beyond the pair of narrow windows. "This whole show. Where is it? Where have I landed?" He spoke through his teeth.

Guessing he meant the location of her castle, she nodded. "Castle Sargans sits in the canton of Santis, under Lord Matheus' rule. We are in the third year of His Holiness Pope Blessed Eugene the Third."

He only looked at her, his black gaze sliding down her face and neck, chest and waist, down her dress then back up to her eyes. Arousal stirred low in her belly. She mentally shook the impious images away.

"You're the master of ceremonies here then?"

"I am the *châtelaine* here, Sir Ayjay. This is my castle and those are the people entrusted in me you have met. Hugo, the bearded one, and one of his men Thorins. Hannah is my personal maid. No one here shall hurt you as long as you are under my care."

"Under your care, huh?"

The sudden, ardent glint in his eyes unsettled and titillated her.

"Where are the bathrooms?" he asked, looking around the room. He spotted his clothes neatly hung on the back of the chair and went for them.

She honestly tried not to sneak a peek at his backside but failed miserably. Long legs ended with a very tight bottom that made her palms tingle. *Good Lord, woman, take a hold of yourself.*

"Bathrooms?"

He pulled his white undertunic—as fine as she'd ever seen on a man—and snaked an arm in the tailored sleeve. "Please don't tell me all you have are chamber pots. That would finish me off."

How crude!

"My household may not be as fine as what you are used to, Sir Ayjay, but I assure you we have all the commodities necessary."

"Good."

Clutching her hands in front of her, she whirled on the spot so he could don his strange little stockings, gleaming black shoes and those odd garments Hannah and she had so exclaimed over. Such small and delicate buttons. And that silvery opening with the tiny hooks, how clever!

Quicker alone than both women together, Sir Ayjay tackled his clothes by himself and was dressed in an instant. Looking magnificent in his rich black hose and thin undertunic, he stood by her side. He left the matching black overtunic hanging on the chair but after retrieving his thick silver bracelet from the small pile of salvaged items, he snapped it to his left wrist. His hard chest—for she'd had the chance to touch it while she stitched his eyebrow—looked particularly enticing under the fine fabric of his

undertunic, which he'd tucked inside his hose for added emphasis. Barely within the bounds of decency!

"Lady Marion?" he asked, his eyes narrowed as he looked down at her.

"Are you feeling well enough?" she asked in an attempt to cover her lack of modesty. To stare at a man this way.

"As good as can be expected, given I've crash-landed in the Alps, right in the middle of a medieval fair and without a phone for miles around."

"We have treated you well so far."

"I'm not saying you haven't, Lady Marion, only I'm far from home, I have a killer migraine and something tells me it's not the end of my adventure."

A killer my grain?

"You speak French yet I cannot place your accent. Where are you from?"

"Canada. Oh but wait, you haven't discovered us yet, right? So I guess I'm from France then." His words dripped with sarcasm.

"I have never heard of either lands."

"See? You haven't discovered us yet. But it's there, believe me."

"Are you always so tart?"

He grinned a fake smile. It resembled a grimace. "You wait until I get caffeine-deprived."

"And what do your people call you, back in your homeland? Is there a more appropriate title than sir?"

"Nothing I'd repeat in front of a lady. But mostly, I'm called a lawyer. Although I'm not even sure it's fit to be said aloud either."

"Lawyer? A Man of Law?"

He nodded. "And I've heard all the jokes too."

She wasn't sure what he'd just said so she opened the door and led him to the nearest privacy area reserved for men.

"Don't tell me," he said as they rounded a corner and walked down the narrow corridor leading to their destination. "We're getting close. I can smell it."

Such vile tongue for a man so obviously refined.

She pointed at the curtain to their left and took a few steps back, meaning to let him do his deed in peace but he poked his head inside, exclaimed in a language she couldn't understand—a syllable that sounded like "fok" kept returning—before turning to her and shaking his head.

"You've got to be kidding me! It's a hole in the floor!"

"It certainly is *not*. There is, er, a seat of some sort...and, yes, well, with a hole in the middle."

"I want a real toilet, dammit, with porcelain and chrome and *paper*. I'm all for creating the medieval mood and everything, and I've got to say, your actors are damn good in their roles, but this is going too far. I'm not balancing my naked ass over a hole, waiting for—"

"Sir Ayjay! Please!"

He froze, took another look beyond the curtain and crossed his arms. "I am not using this one. Is there another? What about the ladies' bathroom? You always have nicer ones than men."

The idea a man would demand to use the ladies' privacy area was so ludicrous, so outlandish, Marion had to hide her grin behind her hand and when failing to subdue her laughter, she turned away to preserve his pride.

"Oh this is funny to you, is it?" he demanded. He walked around her so he could stand in front, his long hands on his hips, his decadent mouth in a thin line.

She looked up to meet his gaze.

Marion had to put out a hand to steady her when her gaze met his. There hadn't been any reason to lean against walls since her husband's death as no man had elicited in her body such strong response. Sir Ayjay, with his ardent gaze, pleasing form and unusual ways raised the fine hairs on her arms. So much so Marion wasn't sure if she'd ever felt this way at all.

His eyes narrowed, his chin lowered until he was leaning a shoulder against the wall. A subtle flicker of tongue glistened behind his parted lips. Heat spread to her chest and neck. She knew she was blushing again.

"Look," he began, shrugged then set his dark gaze on her again. "We didn't start out very well, you and I, and in my defense, I blame the concussion and loss of blood, but it's still no excuse to act like the perfect asshole I can be. So how about we start over?"

Some of his words didn't make much sense but she could understand an offer for truce when she was presented with one. "That would be agreeable."

"So if you'll take me to a phone, I'd like to report the plane crash and the two missing pilots."

Fone? Plain crash? Pie lots?

Again words were lost, well, most of them, but she nodded anyway, unsure what else to do. He'd clearly received a hard knock on the head. "I shall try my utmost to provide you with what you need, Sir Ayjay."

He peeled his lean frame from the wall and cocked his head. "What I need..."

Marion waited as he looked up at the ceiling, took a deep breath before gracing her with the most lascivious look a man had ever granted her. "I need a bathroom where I won't have to stand to do my business, I need food and water...and whatever else you think I might need. I'm opened to suggestions."

"I have no doubt you are, Sir Ayjay." Why was she suddenly short of breath? The man was provoking her dark humors!

He took a quick peek at the dark, round disc on his bracelet. "Do you think you could take me to the kitchen? I'm hungry enough to eat squid."

She didn't know what a "skweed" was but it didn't sound appetizing.

"Of course, I shall have a meal sent to your chamber –"

"I hate to eat alone. Have you had lunch already?"

"Have I eaten?"

He nodded, his mouth curving up at the corner in a very charming fashion. She felt manipulated and didn't really care all that much.

"Would you prefer me to join you, Sir Ayjay?"

Another nod, this one dislodged a lock of that silky black hair and brushed against his injured eyebrow. She fought against the impulse to tuck it back up.

"Follow me."

Her back burned as she imagined his intent gaze on it. Did he appreciate what he saw, she wondered. They reached the bright and sunny kitchen where Cook was preparing one of her rich and tasty stews—one of the last batches before fall would force them to start being careful with the supplies. Sir Ayjay took a long sniff and grinned widely.

"Smells like heaven in here," he remarked.

Cook spun around, wooden ladle in hand, and offered him a rare smile. "A man who knows his food, good sir, I'm glad to see." She tucked a silver strand of hair behind her ear.

Had Marion not known her better, she would've thought the leathery old woman was blushing.

"I know good food when I smell it," he replied.

Bustling around the kitchen, Cook sat both Sir Ayjay and Marion at one end of the long worktable and set mugs and a pitcher in front of them. Pewter bowls where large helpings of steamy, dark stew made Marion nod in gratitude. She was famished, truth be told, as she'd spent part of the night checking on her injured guest and the vats of dyed wool simmering in the annex. Hannah had replaced her after a while so she could get a few moments of sleep. Sargans' prized wool, dyed and spun as nowhere else in the region, made all the difference in their coffers as the levies kept rising. Marion feared it would all become too much. She'd already lasted much longer than her husband's family had predicted—or tolerated. An image of his cousin's latest offer made the skin on her arms crawl.

"Are you all right?"

Sir Ayjay, his head cocked to one side, so contrasted with Lord Matheus, Marion couldn't hold on to the gloom wrapping itself around her shoulders. There would be plenty of opportunity for it later on.

“Of course, I am. What makes you say this?”

She did try not to snap but ended up sounding cross just the same. She hoped she hadn’t spoiled the moment.

“You’d never make a good lawyer, Lady Marion. You don’t lie very well.”

How perceptive. And how she’d thought the man was only an indolent lord with perfect hands...and a perfect body.

Marion was reminded in an acute manner how long it’d been since her last intimate encounter with a man. Since Johannes’ death, she hadn’t known a man, only the occasional solitary pleasure she managed to draw from her tired frame. She couldn’t help the sudden and vivid image of a man such as Sir Ayjay making love to her. Heat gathered low in her belly. She hid her embarrassment behind a polite cough.

They shared a quick grin before honoring Cook’s stew – under her watchful eyes. Sir Ayjay’s facial expression, which bordered on rapture, must have convinced the old woman for she nodded, muttered something under her breath then returned to her work.

“Lady Marion,” Hugo called from the doorway. He looked cross to the highest degree when he spotted their guest sitting across from her. “There’s a problem at the gate. It’s loud and pompous and wears a ruby ring.”

“Her Ladyship is eating, tell the fop to wait –”

“Cook!” snapped Marion, afraid Sir Ayjay would take offense at her staff taking such liberties with their tongues.

Cook snarled a curse as she brought the cleaver down with violence. A trio of carrots were instantly chopped in half. “Sargans would be well and fine if Lord Matheus would fall on his sword, this one.”

“My thanks, Cook, I can take care of him by myself.” Marion tried to ignore the old woman’s sadistic look as she beheaded another bunch of carrots. “My apologies, Sir Ayjay, but I must meet with Lord Matheus. He is not a patient man, I fear. I shall join you in my study, if you wish. We can discuss your stay there.” She rose from the table, was shocked when he followed suit and waited for her to depart before sitting again.

An expression bordering on open hostility flashed on Hugo’s face. He rubbed his beard downward – a sure sign of his ill humor – as he stared at the visitor, his other hand rested lightly on the pommel of his sword.

“A word, my lady. It’s all I need to set him right.”

She wasn’t sure if Hugo referred to Matheus, the arrogant lord and neighbor, or Sir Ayjay, the curious visitor. He’d spoken in French so all three would understand. The stranger visibly bristled and stared back at Hugo. Trouble was a-brewing between these two.

“Who’s this Lord Matheus? Does he have a phone?”

Though he came from far away and spoke a strange, clipped French, she could tell he was being mocking again and didn’t appreciate it. Not with the prospect of facing

Matheus and his increasingly forceful proposals. She was running out of options. As usual, when faced with troubles and more wretchedness for her people—Matheus' way of punishing her for refusing him—she hid it all behind a wall of crossness.

“I am fairly well-educated, Sir Ayjay, and if I do not know what a ‘fone’ is, neither shall Lord Matheus. I suggest you curb your tone in my home. I am still mistress of Sargans and intend to remain as long as I can.”

He looked shocked at first but quickly recovered as he straightened to his considerable height. “And I don’t think I like *your* tone, Lady Marion or whoever the hell you are. Do you have any idea the trouble I could heap on your pretty head?”

“Do you have any idea how quickly I could have you part with yours?”

With a beaming Hugo by her side, she left Sir Ayjay open-mouthed and clearly at a loss for words. A sharp *TWAK* indicated Cook had vented her displeasure upon the tubers lined on the table.

Chapter Three

He'd been threatened with everything from legal actions, a trip downriver with concrete slippers and chicken blood sent by mail...but beheading? That was new.

The back of Lady Marion proved just as delicious as the front of her. And here he thought he had her all charmed and everything. Then Hugo the Barbarian had shown up. Party pooper.

A.J. watched her storm out of the kitchen and down the corridor, the entire time admiring the way her hips swung left to right. Hugo turned just before they'd disappeared around a corner and A.J. swore he saw the other man grin derisively.

Asshole.

Sitting back down, he grabbed the hunk of bread supposed to serve as a utensil and offered an apologetic smile at the cook, who returned it a hundredfold. At least this one he'd won over. She must have been eighty years old.

I need to work on my material.

A quick check at his watch reminded him he'd crashed late afternoon on Wednesday...it was now almost five o'clock on Friday and there hadn't been a thing done about it that he knew of. Damn, how long would it take for him to be found? Wasn't someone somewhere missing a three million dollar airplane?

"So, how long have you been holding this fair? You're all pretty convincing, I must admit."

"Sir?"

Something told him he wouldn't be getting anything out of the old woman if he didn't play along. Plus, she'd fed him the most delicious stew he'd ever had. For free too!

"Lady Marion is quite a headstrong character."

A look of nostalgia flashed in the wizened eyes. "The lady has been through much, even before Lord Johannes, rest his soul." She crossed herself and spat on the floor. *Spat on the floor. In the kitchen...* "He died four years ago. She's been running the wool ever since."

"Her husband died?" A.J. asked, unsure if it was her real-life husband who'd died or her character's husband. The grief in the old woman's eyes convinced him it must have been the former. No one could fake this sort of pain.

"It would've been bad enough without his cousin, that vain, milk-livered measle. He's trying to take over, the swine, and keeps raising the levies. And when it doesn't work, he comes sniffing around, harasses the lady. Poor woman."

They even had the insults down pat too. Milk-livered measle. He'd have to remember that one. Would look great in the newspaper!

A split second after he logged the insult for future use, the "harasses the lady" part started to bother him. *They're all actors, man, get a grip.* "Harasses how?"

The old woman stopped her work, stared at him unblinkingly as she stabbed the butcher knife in the table. It twanged when she released it. "What do men do to harass ladies, good sir?"

Feeling on-the-spot worse than a witness during cross-examination, he tried not to squirm. She had the Hostile Judge Look, the one that usually told him he wouldn't be charming his way through *this* judge. Truth always worked best with those kind. "That Matheus person has been having troubles with his hearing, can't understand the word *no* when it slaps him in the face? That sort of harassment?"

Cook nodded solemnly. "Tries to drag the woman to the altar. His own cousin's widow." She spat again.

A.J. hoped she didn't do that sort of thing near the stew.

As much as he forced himself to remember everything there was a show, everyone actors, he couldn't help the knot forming in his gut. A good spike of adrenaline rushed through him. He stood and put his bowl and untouched mug near the pile on a table by the wall.

"Where's the front gate from here?"

She gave him a wide, knowing grin. He'd just scored a thousand points with her. Too bad he no longer cared.

Feeling pissed off and railroaded, A.J. left the kitchen, followed the old woman's sketchy directions, finding he was walking much quicker than he ought to. What the hell was wrong with him? Why the sudden urge to see Lady Marion and make a complete fool of himself by interfering with the show? And where had the sudden feeling of protectiveness for her come from?

Concussion, that's where. Scrambled eggs for brain. If I've lost any mental faculty, I'll sue them and the next four generations. Their dogs and neighbors too.

Everything was spinning around him. What fucked-up place was this? Where had he landed? And he still needed to pee, dammit, but no way in hell he was using their *bathrooms*. He'd wait until the rescue helicopter would come get him. Everyone must be looking for the missing plane by now. Surely the place would soon crawl with police and mountain rescue teams, and when he got out of fucking Conan Land, he'd get their organization for everything they were worth.

A pair of *maids*, he guessed, froze to look at him when he passed by. But they did return his smile. Feeling smug and somewhat relieved, he recognized Hugo's booming voice as he reached a large sort of rustic ballroom-looking area with a giant fireplace along the far wall and a candelabrum hanging high over several long trestle tables. From medieval movies he'd seen, he guessed a meal must have been close at hand. What were these rooms called again? Ah, the great hall.

Just as he was crossing the threshold, a scene right out of the movies unfolded before him. He wondered if it was part of the show as well or if Lord What's His Name really *was* grabbing Lady Marion by a wrist and keeping her put while a man read from a scroll.

Hugo had his sword out and looked ready to break heads but obviously wouldn't attack Lord Asshole when Lady Marion was giving him the Evil Eye. To add to the excitement, a pair of Evil Henchmen stood silent guard behind their lord. Wow. What a show. A.J. wondered where the spectators were hiding. Unless this was all a dress rehearsal. This troupe really was going all out for their fair. Living like folks from the medieval times, dressing like them and talking some strange old-style version of French. As much as he'd tried, he hadn't been able to spot a single anachronism anywhere in the castle. No cleverly disguised light fixture or electrical socket, no one with glasses or watches. Everything was very period. Toilets included.

A.J. silently made his way forward, wishing for the cell phone in his lost briefcase with unhealthy passion. He should be playing golf with that filthy-rich Swiss CEO, smoking cigars and drinking to their success. A nice glass of...well, ginger ale since he never, *ever*, touched booze in case he turned out like the piece of shit his father had been.

Surely it was all part of the game when Lord Asshole yanked Marion so she'd stop struggling against his grip. Her braid fell from her shoulder and dangled down her back. It was long, almost down to her delicious butt. And when the guy raised his gloved hand, palm opened and angled in a way that every human being on Earth would know what was coming...it *had* to be part of the show too, right?

Right?

The resounding clack of leather against skin had the effect of a lightning bolt right in the balls. A.J. jolted, his fists suddenly balled tighter than ever before. "Hey! What the hell's wrong with you!"

His courtroom voice boomed satisfyingly across the stone hall and froze everyone in place, including Lady Marion, who glared at him and silently shook her head. He didn't like the pleading look in her eyes. It cut right through his chest. Either she was an uncannily gifted actress or this jerk had slapped her for real.

"When she presses charges against you, I'll be happy to defend her case, and *pro bono* too! I'd start looking for a good lawyer if I were you. And I'm already taken."

The ugly red mark darkening her cheek confirmed his fear. The sight of it alone triggered a spike of adrenaline in his primeval male ego and A.J. aimed for Duke Brutish, stopping only when he stood a pace away. To his undying satisfaction, he stood almost a head taller and quite a bit wider at the shoulders than the man.

"Take your hand off Lady Marion." He realized in his anger he'd reverted to English.

Baron Woman-Beater said something. Was it German they were all speaking? A.J. repeated his command in French. With a sneer, the recipient of a Bulletproof Set of Battery Charges released Marion.

“Who is your valiant defender, Lady Marion? I have never seen him on my land.”

A.J. raised his hand. “Lady Marion, ordinarily I’d say don’t tell the asshole a thing unless your lawyer is there, but since I *am* here, just go ahead and lay it on him thick. We’ll all blame it on self-defense afterward, which isn’t far from the truth actually. I even know a lady judge who’d *love* to get her claws into King Turdface the First...she likes them brutish and ugly—she likes them so much—the women-beaters—there’s a prison I know with an entire wing dedicated to her catches. He’d look perfect behind a nice row of iron bars, no?” He encouraged her with a special grin, those he reserved for shy witnesses. Female ones.

At the word asshole, Matheus’ face took on an entertaining shade of red, which went very well with his auburn hair.

Lady Marion snapped her chin up as only women could. “I suggest you refrain from venting your ire on me again, Lord Matheus, for Sir Ayjay would likely take offense as he is to be my husband.”

Hey!

A.J.’s first reaction was to laugh but he quickly killed the urge when he spotted the determined desperation in her eyes. A woman desperate *and* determined...no telling what she might do. He had a healthy respect for the expression “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned”. A very smart man had written it and very smart men listened to it if they wanted to “live long and prosper” as Spock said. A.J. was smart. Capital S. *Don’t piss off women.*

Anyway, he knew what was going on. She’d only meant to stonewall the guy and had thrown the first thing she could think of. The classic “my boyfriend is bigger than you” method. Sure, he could pretend for a while. And he’d been thrown live grenades worse than this enough times to hide his feelings.

Playing along, A.J. nodded, crossed his arms over his chest and enjoyed the look of rage, hatred and disbelief alternatively tightening and screwing Lord Asshole’s face. All in all, A.J. enjoyed playing the bigger boyfriend.

“I was not aware of your...plans,” Matheus said, narrowing his pale gaze at her.

To her credit, she stared right back and didn’t let the jerk intimidate her. A.J. wanted to pat her on the back. She’d make a fine witness during cross-examination. He’d just sorely needed one such woman a few weeks back, when his own witness had required all his coaching and patient smiles to remember her lines as the prosecutor had cut into her.

“You did not inform me prior to your arrangements? I feel much aggrieved.”

A.J. wanted to snort in laughter. Aggrieved? *Wow, don’t hear that one every day.*

"You are my deceased husband's cousin and lord of this land, Lord Matheus, but a woman's heart is her own."

"A woman's heart – and place – is where she's *told* it should lie."

With Hugo visibly about to go nuclear, A.J. put his arm around Lady Marion's shoulder and looked the offended husband-to-be. Damn he really was getting into this whole thing. "I demand an apology, sir."

Lord Matheus smiled benignly. "Because I find you amusing, Sir..."

"Alexandre-Jean Bernier," A.J. replied with all the brand-name chic he could put into his name. *Like saying, those are Italian leather shoes. It's a Gucci purse you're looking at. That's not any forehead but a Botox forehead.*

"Sir Alexandre-Jean Bernier," repeated Matheus, becoming serious once more. "Because I find you highly entertaining, I shall invite you to my humble abode across the river. You and your charming future wife shall dine with me come this day of our Lord. I shall enjoy your repartee more fully at that time. Lady Marion, as always, it was a pleasure." He bowed then marched toward the double doors leading out.

"I am looking forward to it," A.J. replied loudly. He hated not having the last word.

The guy with the scroll and the two Evil Henchmen fell into step behind their lord.

What a hoot! Perfectly delivered. He should've been an actor. Well, he *was* close.

"Sir Ayjay..." Lady Marion began, faltered then shook her head.

A.J. just shrugged. "We need to talk, I know. But you should put some ice on your cheek first. And you," he added, turning on Hugo and pointing at the sword. "You're the one with the pointy stick. Why didn't you smite him down or something?"

"Lady Marion –"

"I told him not to interfere. Hugo is my friend and captain of the guard. He would not let serious harm come to me."

To his credit, Hugo really did look ashamed he'd followed her orders instead of his own guy instincts. He sheathed his sword and mumbled something in the other language everyone else spoke as he stormed out of the great hall.

"I do not know what came over me." She sank on a nearby stool and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Though he knew she *had* to be acting, his instincts told him this was real misery he saw, not something for his benefit. If anything, she looked embarrassed by her emotional response and mightily tried to keep the tears he knew were there from spilling over. Good acting. Too bad there wasn't any audience to enjoy it.

"Is His Anally Retentive Lordship part of the show as well?" he asked as he leaned back against the table and crossed his ankles. "What was he doing here?"

"When you arrived, his notary was reading an edict from my husband's family. This was his castle, his land. When he died, because we had no children, the governance of everything he owned passed to Lord Matheus, his cousin, except for the daily affairs and the wool trade. I am almost a tenant here, in my own home."

"I doubt the people here view you as a tenant. You're the Boss Lady. But what was he reading? Was he going to throw you out?"

"No, he was going to marry me."

"Let me guess, to himself, right?"

She nodded.

"Not that I can blame him for dreaming but did he think hitting you would make you want to marry him? He's a real charmer, isn't he?"

A mirthless laugh created dimples in her cheeks. He loved dimples.

"A woman does not need to love a man for her to be married to him. Especially not one such as Lord Matheus. What he wants, he takes."

It tasted awfully bad in his mouth the way she said that. "Well, he's not going to bother you anymore, is he?" She didn't mirror his smile.

Why was he wasting saliva trying to convince a damn-fine actress she wasn't in real trouble? This wasn't a real medieval castle. Only a fair, a show. These weren't real people, just characters. Yet he was beginning to feel a weird attachment to them, even Hugo the Barbarian. Talk about a good concussion! He must have been bonked on the head pretty damn hard to think of anything there as real. The only truth in the otherwise fishy affair was somewhere close by a Learjet with two pilots on board crash-landed. No, something else was true. A.J. had begun to develop quite the crush on "Lady Marion".

* * * * *

Marion shook her head as she replayed the scene in her mind. What had she done? Panic had squeezed her throat, clammed her palms. With the added weight of her husband's family tentative agreement, she hadn't felt as if she had had any choice but to use something radical and shocking to buy herself at least a few days. Pretending to marry more than qualified as radical and shocking. Especially when she didn't know her future husband. Lord be blessed, Sir Ayjay had looked perfect, even acted the part. Oh she owed him. She did. And she'd been so brusque with him back in the kitchen. Poor man had probably been attacked on the road, left for dead, to find himself in a humble castle lost in the mountains, surrounded by even plainer folks and a *châtelaine* who lacked even the most basic manners.

But the look on Matheus' face. Ha!

As much as the idea had just burst out of her mouth like the harebrained creation it was, Marion couldn't help the thought of Sir Ayjay's long hands on her body, his lips, his fine...

Good Lord! Restrain yourself.

She had at least until the day of the Lord, two nights from now, until she was forced to find another lie to cover the first. Despair choked her and Marion found she couldn't

face Sir Ayjay, who obviously had no clue as to the gravity of the situation. He looked amused, of all things.

"I am deeply indebted to you, Sir Ayjay. I—"

He waved his hand in front of him in a dismissive manner. "It was my pleasure, believe me. Bullies like him plagued me long enough when I was a shrimpy little kid that I take shots at them every chance I get. Plus, I can't believe he actually *touched* you." He snarled another string of words where the mentions of "fok" were plentiful and tagged with other syllables as well. Sitting on a stool by her side, he patted her knee.

The familiarity of his gesture shocked her. She barely knew him yet he touched her? Heat wafted from her collar and as much as she tried to ignore the hand on her knee, she couldn't for it stirred her long-dormant emotions. Emotions such as *desire*, a deep, almost desperate longing for intimacy, for the body of a man next to hers. It'd been such a long time since she'd been intimate with a man. She'd slept alone for so many years.

"Sir Ayjay..."

"Sorry," he replied, snatching it away. "Got carried away with the whole husband thing." A roguish grin pulled his lips to one side. "Not that I would mind. I'm sure every man here would give his right—er, his right *hand* for a date with you. It's just I have to go back home. They'll be here any moment to take me back. Someone's bound to have a missing plane somewhere."

Missing plain?

He spoke in riddles again. "Before you woke in my home, do you remember where you were?"

He nodded. "Somewhere over the Alps, an hour away from Geneva. A storm hit suddenly, lightning strikes, everything. Then I couldn't see in front of my face. Apart from Viscount Tightass, waking up here has been a riot so far. But I have to go. Someone is waiting for me in Geneva."

Jeneva? An our? The words sounded foreign and peculiar, but the last part, she understood perfectly. He was already married. Her heart gave a painful thud. "I understand. I would not want to deprive her of your presence."

"Her?" he replied, an eyebrow cocked. Then understanding dawned on his face. He shook his head. "There's no 'her' waiting for me. I meant my *work* is waiting for me."

She tried to keep the relief from showing but knew she'd failed for he leaned forward in a conspiratorial way. He looked delighted with himself.

To save face, she plowed through and ignored the unsaid. "I shall do my best to return you to your people of course. But could I ask for just one thing in return? Even if I am in no place to ask anything more of you."

"You can ask me anything you want."

His suddenly fiery gaze settled on her mouth and Marion couldn't repress the tremor shaking her body. He must have seen her reaction for a perfect eyebrow quivered. His thumb rubbed a small circle on the stool right by her thigh and sent her

skin into a fever. So skilled. Wherever he was from, ladies must have stood in line for a mere look. The woman who would call Sir Ayjay husband would be blessed indeed.

“I would ask you not tell my people of my lie. I would prefer to be the one to tell them. I would be much obliged to you, Sir Ayjay.”

“It’s not my place to get involved in your show, Lady Marion. I’m just waiting for a ride back home. You do what you have to and I’ll try to stay out of your way.”

A peculiar answer for sure, but at least he’d given her his assurances he wouldn’t publicly shame her.

He rose, put his hands in his strange front pockets and cocked his head at her. “Meanwhile, I guess I’ll have to use the bathroom after all.”

His impish grin made her want to roll her eyes.

* * * * *

Word had spread around the castle about Sir Ayjay’s action toward Lord Matheus and her shocking declaration. Though he could have on several occasions, her visitor stayed true to his word and did nothing to convince anyone otherwise as her people hesitantly came to him and offered their thanks and congratulations. Cook even gave the man a bone-crushing hug, to the shock of everyone present! Sir Ayjay accepted everything graciously, with only an occasional twitch of suppressed mirth on his ambrosial lips. What had she done? Her shame would surely melt her whole.

While they sat for dinner, she at the head table with Hugo to her left and her “husband-to-be” to her right, she tried to come up with an honorable way to tell the truth. If he’d earlier acted in an irascible and snappish way, had been bent on leaving, Sir Ayjay presently looked at ease as he carved himself a piece of meat—after nearly forcing him to accept her gift of a utility knife...what man would refuse to wear a knife? How would he eat? He placed it on the trencher they shared and began to eat with all the refinement she’d come to expect from him. He’d become the talk of the entire castle by then and maids fought for the privilege of serving him or tending to his chamber. Gossip about his “endowment” had reached ludicrous proportions. She wished she could end the charade she’d started. Matheus had always made her so uneasy, even when Johannes had been alive. She’d always loathed his lewd glances and furtive hands.

“When shall you tell them, my lady?” Hugo asked as he leaned over, pretending to get a piece of cheese from the communal platter in front of her.

She looked around at her people, their smiling faces and lively talk. They’d had so little to celebrate in the years following their master’s death. Although they’d showed all the expected staunchness and loyalty to her and never once voiced their wish she’d just marry Matheus so the levies would be lightened, she had no doubt news of their lady finally marrying—even a foreign lord—was cause to celebrate. She didn’t have the heart to rob them of this precious little boon. Not yet.

"I don't know."

They shared a glance. At least she had Hugo. He'd often said he would've married her himself had he been of noble blood and not already happily married to another. Because Matheus had such a long arm, any nobleman who could have represented a good prospect had been quickly scared away or bought or both, which had kept her widowed. In his largesse, Matheus had offered to marry her, as though he were sacrificing himself for a noble cause. Some said he'd had his own cousin killed so he could do just that. She paid little heed to these nasty rumors. He may be a sly one but she doubted he would've killed his own cousin over a woman when he could have any he wished. Lord Matheus may have been a vile man, but he'd also been gifted with exterior beauty and grace of movement. Though not as much as Sir Ayjay...

"What's in this thing?" Sir Ayjay suddenly asked, pointing to his mug. A flush had appeared on his cheeks. He looked relaxed and jovial. How handsome he was with his fine hair raked back in shiny waves. Despite the bruise on his high forehead, he was stunning.

"It's mead, honeyed wine," she replied, grinned when he downed his mug and expectantly looked around for a servant to fill it once more.

"I usually don't drink alcohol but this is *good*."

His smile reached his eyes for once. Marion was again reminded of her blatant lie and his willingness to follow through with it instead of the public humiliation that would surely be her lot should he decide to stop the charade. He winked at her, which caused a shameful stitch of thrill in her sex. She'd almost forgotten how it felt to be desired.

Of its own accord, her mind played tricks on her and painted an image as vivid as it was wicked. She imagined Sir Ayjay's supple hands on her, his decadent mouth kissing her everywhere...how good it would feel to have a man such as him make love to her.

Marion shook the vision away to concentrate on her meal. But thoughts of food quickly escaped her when she caught Sir Ayjay's ardent gaze on her. Shockingly, he angled his knee so it'd touch hers, unseen under the table, and proceeded to rub it very, very slowly and gently.

Goodness...

The heat of his touch produced a wave of frissons down her spine. As much as it wounded her pride to admit it, should he make advances to her, she would do nothing to stop him, may even encourage him. Perhaps her lie about their coming union had turned on her and now the man wanted to claim what was due him? She could think of many things worse than bedding Sir Ayjay.

As he kept rubbing his knee against hers, heat spread from her belly to her thighs, embarrassing heat that left her feeling flushed and...*vulnerable*. For the first time since Johannes' death, she was finding the sight of another man arousing. The sudden realization left her feeling lightheaded. Intellectually, she knew that after close to five years, she was allowed—even expected—to find another man and remarry. No one

would demand she forsake the rest of her years. But to again feel desire and *desired*, made Marion want to rush about, lose herself in work, run and ignore the liquid heat gathering between her trembling thighs.

She rose so suddenly both Hugo and Sir Ayjay started.

"I am terribly weary," she announced in a voice sounding anything but. "I shall take my leave."

After bidding both men goodnight, she was perplexed to see their visitor standing as well then sitting back down when she'd taken a few steps away. Such an unusual man. She remembered his attempt to clean the mess he'd caused in his chamber after he'd spilled the pot, how he'd pulled Hannah to her feet and after having failed to take the cloth from her hands, how he'd stood around looking highly apologetic while the young woman cleaned him. No man she knew would react this way.

No man she knew made her pant with longing either. The awkward chain of thoughts that had made her practically flee from the great hall plagued her still. *Sir Ayjay's hands must be so skilled and that wicked mouth...*

Her hunger reached alarming proportions. Walking only accentuated the pressure coiling between her legs, tightening her lower belly and making her breasts ache with need.

As soon as she reached her own chamber, Marion ordered a bath, quickly dismissed Hannah for the night then undressed by herself. Steam rose in thin ribbons when the lads brought it up and a long, contented sigh escaped Marion when she sat in the copper basin. Matheus' slap still stung her cheek. The brute. She'd let him unnerve her again. How she loathed the man.

Her predicament—of her own making—loomed over her. How would she extirpate herself from such dire consequences? She'd lied to Matheus, but more importantly, she'd lied to her people. And if Hugo had already forgiven her, she doubted the rest would. She wasn't sure *she* forgave herself for dragging an innocent man into her schemes, for lying and being such a coward. Yet the alternative to marrying Sir Ayjay—which she couldn't do because he would leave soon—meant Matheus. She couldn't bring herself to even think of sharing the same roof, let alone the same bed.

Marion knelt in the bathtub as she ran the washcloth over her belly, realizing what she was doing only after a few leisurely passes forced a long sigh from her.

"What have you done to me, my foreign lord?" she murmured, gripping the edge of the tub with a hand while the other lingered on her belly still.

The warmth from the water didn't manage to relax her, on the contrary, it only accentuated the pressure threatening to make her a lusting madwoman. Her hand shaking, Marion ran the washcloth along her inner thigh, higher so she could press her palm against her sex, which throbbed its need at her. Parting her knees slightly, she closed her eyes.

Images of Sir Ayjay promptly filled her mind's canvas with his body and hers, entwined and woven together in a tapestry of carnal knots, each more vivid and

decadent than the next. That she could envision such endeavors – with a man known to her – shocked Marion. It also thrilled her. She was a widow but still a woman, by Lord, and had needs.

“That I seem to be fulfilling,” she whispered, smiling to herself.

With the heat from the water and her rising excitement flowing through her tired frame, Marion allowed herself the rare luxury of a private, sexual diversion, something she used to indulge in much more regularly than she had of late.

Her knees shoulders’ width, her free hand tight around the tub’s rim, Marion brought the washcloth fully onto her sex, let the heat soak for a moment before she began a slow, circuitous route from one inner thigh to the other. Each pass over her nether lips brought her closer. Imagining Sir Ayjay’s long hands, she lingered over her cleft, readily found that special place, which ached with urgency, and used her middle finger to rub it. Slowly at first then with more insistence and vigor, she circled her pearl. When the first cramp heralded her impending release, Marion arched her backside. With a partly stifled moan, she let go of the last few days’ events, the tension and turmoil her guest had caused, the confusion and razor-sharp desire he evoked in her. Signing, her eyes closed, Marion climaxed.

As usual, she regrettably couldn’t hold on to the mental fugue that had allowed for a quick escape from her worries.

And they’re accumulating.

A shiver forced her to wash quickly and slip into her chemise. Perhaps her husband’s family’s offer of finding a nearby convent would be the least offensive solution. But ending her days cloistered among other destitute and useless women didn’t appeal to her. With her sex still happily pulsating, Marion unbraided her hair and raked her hands through it.

Despite the punishing levies, she’d managed the castle’s affairs relatively well, had handled the wool trade beyond anyone’s expectations. She suspected Lord Matheus’ real intent was to get his hands on the wool and not her. Her husband’s family had shown much patience and allowed her to keep the reins on at least this, if everything else had passed to Matheus. Perhaps they realized she’d become quite skilled at it and were afraid they’d lose precious coins should she leave Sargans. But they had offered her a convent. Perhaps she wasn’t as prized as she’d imagined.

A convent would kill her. She was a woman of action.

Yet what actions were there to be taken? What could she do aside from holding on for dear life as she’d done for the past few years? Nothing had changed, no new options would be forthcoming.

Not true. Something has changed.

An image of Sir Ayjay flashed in her mind.

What if...?

The sudden thought shocked her. It was so outrageous... She couldn't. What would he think of her? What would she think of *herself*? Still...

"But what if Sir Ayjay were to *stay*?"

Should Sir Ayjay decide to stay, her troubles would be all but solved. He was obviously waiting, expecting, for someone to come for him. Among the many strange words, she'd garnered at least this much. But what if meanwhile he decided he enjoyed life in Sargans? Could she perhaps aid in his change of heart? Should he find something, someone, in Sargans worth staying for...

She had to *convince* him to stay. If the smiles and the winks were any indication, he already had a penchant for her. Perhaps she could harvest that field while sowing the seeds for the next crop. Could she do this? For the first time in years, Marion felt hopeful.

"I *can* do this," she said to the ends of her unbraided hair.

While they waited for his people—however long it would take—Marion had to make sure by the time they arrived, Sir Ayjay would've decided to make his life at Sargans.

She wouldn't lie to him again, wouldn't twist truths either. The shame still burned her cheeks. But she would do anything in her power to keep him at Sargans. Should Sir Ayjay leave, he'd take with him any hope of salvaging her people's future...and her own.

Needled into action, Marion slipped her robe over her chemise, her shoes on her feet and silently padded to the door. She should turn back and hide in bed. A fever must have taken hold of her without her realizing it. She wasn't about to try to seduce a stranger she'd met that day, even if he'd been at Sargans for two days prior to his awakening. She couldn't be doing this.

But she *was*.

Heart beating madly, she pressed her ear to her door and waited. Judging by the low-burning candle, the meal must have ended a while back. Her lips firmly pressed, she pulled the door inward, poked her head out and mentally chastised her lack of courage. But should people discover she visited Sir Ayjay ahead of the official "ceremony"—how her lie shamed her—they might think less of her and of *him*, which was much worse. Cook might take the cleaver to his head instead of hugging him.

A single torch had been lit down the hall. The trembling glow did nothing to dissipate the various threatening shadows crawling along the corridor, dogging her steps, spilling into crevasses and irregularities between the stonework. Hems of both robe and chemise in a hand, she padded toward the largest guest chamber, thanked her good fortune she met no one on the way and rapped her knuckles twice on the thick panel. Had she waited to think about her actions, she would've lost her nerve. Better to act and not think at all. Lady Marion meant to seduce a man tonight and nothing short of a catastrophe would stop her. Not modesty and surely not the embarrassment gnawing at her.

Sir Ayjay didn't respond.

Looking both ways, Marion knocked again, louder this time.

Please, open the door.

After a while, she lifted the lever and found the door unlocked. Not bothering to wait for consent, she pushed it in, rushed inside then noiselessly closed it behind her. When the bolt was slid, she turned and leaned back against the door, expecting to find Sir Ayjay fast asleep in bed. Instead, she spotted him with his eyes closed in front of the fire, sprawled in a copper tub, his back propped against a chair he'd dragged there. Both arms and one foot dangled over the edge. The soft snoring indicated he was asleep. He was so tall, he barely fit in the tub. The comical position forced a smile on her face. He looked much younger this way with his hair tousled and coming down over his forehead instead of raked back in a shiny wave. For a moment, she tried to guess his age and was horrified he might be younger than she.

What now?

She was by no means a virgin and had deeply enjoyed making love to her husband, but seducing a man sleeping in his bathtub was a novel enterprise for her. Well...

Marion removed her robe, let it slide to the floor. Shoes followed suit. Silently, she crossed the room to stand a few paces from the bathtub. Water reached just below his rib cage and afforded her a fine view of his sculpted body. Long, lean thighs that tapered at the knees before swelling out in muscled calves, a flat and hard belly, a wide chest where a fine growth of dark hair partitioned his front in perfectly symmetrical halves, wide shoulders where shadows played over his smooth skin... Marion enjoyed the sight of him more with each passing moment.

"I know this is just a dream," Sir Ayjay said suddenly, his eyes opening and focusing on her face.

A gasp escaped her. She clutched her hands together in front and waited to see how much trouble she'd just put herself in. Again.

But he didn't seem shocked or angered, only slightly befuddled. "Nothing will be here when I wake. Not the stitches in my head, not the lack of proper plumbing and unfortunately, not the gorgeous blonde in the blue dress."

Resisting the urge to turn tail and escape, Marion held his gaze. The thin fabric of her chemise left precious little to the imagination and allowed him a clear view of her breasts as they rose and fell with each tight breath. Though she didn't look down at herself, she could tell her nipples poked sharply against the linen. Remnants of her carnal interlude tightened her sex. Marion recognized the burning intensity of her desire for the man and it scared her, left her wondering to what lengths she would go to satiate it.

"Are you here for real?"

She nodded.

"Are you going to disappear if I touch you?"

She shook her head.

Sir Ayjay smiled as he patted the edge of the bathtub, indicating he'd enjoy her to come closer. She did, knelt near the tub and placed her hands on her lap. "You are beautiful."

He closed his eyes and smiled benignly. "Hey. You stole my line."

They shared a grin.

"I'm drunk, you know," he remarked with more lucidity than his words implied. She'd dealt with drunken men often enough and Sir Ayjay didn't look the part. "I might fumble with the bra straps for a while."

"Bra straps?"

His dark gaze slid down to her chest. "Oh but you're not wearing any. Part of the whole medieval theme, right? You're all taking this very seriously."

Marion remained immobile when he raised his hand and gently ran the back of his fingers along her cheek and neck. "You have nice hair. Women don't wear it long like that anymore. I love it."

Down her neck his fingers went, eliciting wave upon wave of shivers that tightened her nipples until they began to ache with desire. A single drop of water fell in the parted opening and coursed down between her breasts before ending its teasing journey in her navel. He must have sensed her excitement as well. Featherlight, the tips of his fingers brushed against her breast. A sigh escaped her.

Grinning knowingly, he sank his hand in the water, brought it out and angled it so his palm would face her. Fingers splayed, he pressed his large hand over her breast, not trying to squeeze or feel it, just let the water seep into the fabric so when he removed it, a wet handprint made the linen look almost see-through. His eyes narrowing, Sir Ayjay examined his handiwork.

"You have gorgeous breasts. Perfect breasts actually."

Marion swore she would faint in a dead heap on the floor. Carnal hunger threatened to make a frenzied madwoman of her. The heat of his hand still pressed against her wet breast, the contrast of cooling fabric creating the most erotic sensation. A pressing hunger pulsated between her legs, hunger she was growing desperate to appease. God, she wanted him. She scooted closer to the bathtub. His member proudly poked out of the water as though it too wanted to come up and watch. It glistened invitingly.

"I think I've developed a crush on you," he said, repeating the process with her other breast. He stayed longer this time and gave a little squeeze.

"I do not understand." Marion bit her cheek to keep from moaning. His hands were just as gentle as she'd imagined they would be. She wondered what he could do with his mouth.

"A crush. It means I like you."

“Then I have a crush on you as well.” Growing bolder under his hot touch, she dipped her hand in the bathtub and let water trickle down from his knee to his thigh.

A twitch at his jaw rewarded her. He licked his decadent lips. “Can I kiss your breasts?”

You certainly can, sir!

But for him to ask first – when he knew so well she’d grant his request – meant a lot to Marion, made her feel she had a choice, that he respected her and wouldn’t take unless it was freely given. Such an unusual, surprising man.

Panting hard, Marion raised herself on her knees and grabbed the opposite edge of the tub so her neck and chest would hover just in front of him. She could barely think for the pangs of hunger assailing her senses. She wanted him to touch her with his hands, his mouth. She wanted him inside and all round.

With deliberate fingers, he unlaced the first few rows of her chemise, parted the fabric until the dawn of her breasts appeared in the opening. But he didn’t try to denude them completely. Instead, he caressed her feverish skin with a single finger, traced the contour of her breasts, circled the nipples, brushed the sensitive skin of her neck but never once looked as though he wanted to part the garment wider and satisfy his obvious lust.

Marion meant to tug the opening wider for him but he pulled her hand away. “Nothing this good should come quickly. Let me work for it.”

She had to close her eyes for the sheer exhilaration choking her. Her arms shook from the strain of keeping her upper body suspended over his while he toyed with and tormented her breasts. Adding more water, he pressed handprints all over her front, around her waist, patting the fabric taut so it’d stick to her skin. She’d never felt so coveted in her life.

Unable to resist any longer, she curled her spine so she could taste his mouth. A faint trace of honey remained from the mead. Sir Ayjay suddenly wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her in with him amid a splash of cooling water and a stifled gasp. His mouth proved much more demanding than his hands as he greedily kissed her lips, her chin, her neck. Unable to move, she let him devour her throat and when he finally managed to part her chemise enough to denude a breast, his lips closed over her nipple and trapped it with enough force to make her groan shamelessly.

Sucking hard and with much noise, Sir Ayjay kept his mouth clamped over her while he scooted higher in the bathtub and even managed to kneel with her over his lap. She stood, stepped out when he pushed her at arm’s length and waited while he followed suit, kneeling in front of her.

“Don’t move, okay, just stand there.”

Water dripped everywhere on the floor. After a quick flash of teeth – that smile could set fires she was sure – he reached behind her back and fisted her chemise, plastered it against her front with his other hand, which molded her belly and breasts in quite a revealing way. His mouth covered every parcel of her as he licked, bit and

sucked. Hair as shiny as black silk glistened between her fingers when she raked them back over his head, unable to stop, wanting to fill her hands and face with it.

His fingers soon joined his mouth and trapped her rock-hard points, rolling them mercilessly, forcing a sharp little cry, which instantly mortified her. No one was supposed to know she was there. But when he pressed her chemise tight between her thighs, molded her sex with the wet garment and gave it a vigorous lick, all thoughts of propriety left Marion. Lord, what was he doing?

"Sir Ayjay," she began, bit the inside of her bottom lip when he rubbed a thumb over her sex before giving it another brisk swipe of his tongue. "What is...*ohh*."

"Shh," he replied as he urged her thighs wider so he could fit his palm in between and tent the fabric even tighter against her cleft.

When she looked down at herself, she saw through the wet linen how her dark blonde patch showed particularly well, especially considering Sir Ayjay was shaping it with his fingers, outlining even the slit. He kissed her there again. A massive shiver rocked her. She melted between the legs.

Pushing on her sternum, he forced her to backpedal until her thighs met the bed then he stood, kissed her deeply before giving her an extra push that sent her flopping back on the mattress.

With a wicked grin, he knelt between her legs and slowly, by measured increments, he raised her chemise over her knees. Her first reaction was to clamp them together. Sir Ayjay froze.

"You don't like that?"

"I am not sure what you are doing," she replied, hating the way her voice squeaked.

His eyes flared wide. "You've never had a man make love to you with his mouth?"

The thought triggered an assortment of vivid images in her mind. She shook her head but released the tension in her legs so he could part her knees.

"We don't have to," he murmured before giving her knee a quick kiss.

"I *want* to."

"I may be drunk but not completely stupid. All a lady has to do is ask."

While he raised her chemise over her hips, he leaned in and kissed her on the belly slowly, languorously, as though nothing else in the world mattered more. Gradually, his mouth traveled lower. After a while, he'd managed to squeeze a shoulder between her knees then another.

Marion closed her eyes. She'd never been so exposed in her life. To have a man kneel between her legs felt so odd and exciting and scary. When she felt something hot and wet graze her nether lips, Marion couldn't suppress a long moan. Her back arched. Inside her womb, spasms tightened her flesh. Her need flared.

"I promise you this is going to be good."

And it was.

Parting her even wider – this she couldn't watch and remained on her back with her eyes closed – with his fingers, he gave a long and gentle lick right over her engorged flesh. Pleasure spilled out of her. She wanted to squirm away but froze when he did it again then again. A wave of ecstasy swelled low in her belly. When he concentrated on her sensitive bud, flicking his tongue over and over before drawing it into his mouth and sucking gently, Marion knew the single most satisfying moment in her life. With a long sigh, she climaxed, spent her honey right into Sir Ayjay's greedy mouth. Harder, quicker, he brought her there again with his mouth alone until she was arching back and clawing at the bedclothes over her head.

Unable to take it any longer, she opened her eyes and caught him staring at her, a knowing grin on his glistening, wicked mouth. "Take me," she murmured.

"Not yet. I told you, something that good can't come quickly. And I like to play games in bed..."

Marion knew her face must have matched the shock she felt for Sir Ayjay beamed in a way that made her want to hide her face but watch through her fingers. That smile was so decadent and uninhibited. So *wicked*.

She forced her gaze to meet his. "What sort of games?"

Chapter Four

"The sort that brings a nice, healthy glow to a lady's cheeks," A.J. replied, trying not to look like a hyena zeroing in on a gazelle. Lady Marion was no one's little gazelle. But, hot damn, was she ever a cute, plump little goddess!

She smiled valiantly although he could tell she was nervous.

"Fun games. Nothing gross or rough, okay?"

After a small nod, she seemed to gather her nerve and lifted her chin. "Teach me these games from your homeland. I shall learn them eagerly."

"Attagirl."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Never mind," A.J. replied, giving her thigh a nice, long lick that closed her eyes.

A.J. couldn't believe no lover had ever eaten this gorgeous woman out. He couldn't decide if it was the "Lady Marion" persona talking or if the woman had truly never had a man make love to her with his mouth. Were men fools around these parts? Must have been something in the water.

All the better for him.

And damn if she wasn't the hairiest woman he'd ever been with! Compared to his last girlfriend, who'd had the Brazilian wax job down to a science, Lady Marion's cute pussy was covered with the most luxuriant golden fleece he'd ever been lucky enough to feast on. Although the thought of denuding all that precious, rosy flesh made him salivate. She'd look singularly appetizing with a shaven pussy.

Man, he was so drunk! Not pass-out-and-piss-in-the-closet drunk but tipsy enough to have fun. At least, he'd thought so until he'd gotten up from the dinner table and nearly tripped on his own feet. A pair of smiling maids had escorted him to his room, stripped him and sat him in the bathtub. The entire time, he'd just grinned like a loon.

That mead thing was great. And sneaky too because he couldn't taste the wine under the apple juice and honey flavor.

What would be a nice, easy game for "Lady Marion"? Something fun but not too wild. Judging by her reaction to his mouth on her pussy, she hadn't had the most varied sex.

"What about truth or dare?" he asked, knowing his smirk was giving him away. "Have you ever played that one?"

"Truth or dare...?"

He let her roll that one around in her mind for a while, enjoying the look of deliberation and resolve playing with her expression. Beauty such as hers, nature didn't often make.

"It works like this, you must choose a challenge—tell a personal truth or accept a wildly outrageous dare. Do you think it's something you'd like to try?"

A solemn nod made him want to laugh but he didn't. Climbing up on the bed, he lay by her side and caressed her belly.

"Okay, I'll start so it gives you an example of questions. Let me see... Truth or dare, have you ever had a lover kiss you there before?" He rested his hand over her mons and felt her honey seep onto his fingers.

"No, I told you already," Marion replied, blushing beet red.

"I know, I'm starting nice and slow here."

Lady Marion's chin came up again. "Do not start 'nice and slow' for my sake, Sir Ayjay. I am a grown woman."

Was she ever!

"No more Mister Nice Guy then."

Now lying side by side, A.J. rolled toward her and propped his head on his hand while his other rubbed her thigh slowly. "Truth or dare—you have to say which one you choose, right—have you ever had erotic dreams that woke you up and forced you to pleasure yourself?"

Despite the poor light, he saw her face go from beet red to a nice rosy pink. So cute.

"Truth. I have," she murmured, cleared her throat. "I have had such dreams, yes."

A.J. grinned. "You're always going to choose truth, aren't you?"

"It makes life much easier."

"But it's bo-ring. This is a game, it's supposed to be fun, not easy. Your turn. Make it a good, exciting dare." A.J. rolled onto his back and crossed his hands under his head.

"You always choose dare, do you not?"

"It makes life much more exciting."

Lady Marion sighed and shook her head as she thought about her question. Just to keep her on edge, he twirled his index finger in her hair, trapped a long lock and coiled it around and around.

"I think I have one," she announced. Her eyes sparkled in a way he hadn't seen so far. She looked so much younger this way. "Have you ever been surprised in a compromising position with a lover?"

"Hey, good one. What's the dare?"

She threw him a slanted look. "You must give me pleasure with your mouth."

Like a guy needed to think about this one!

"Hot damn, *dare!*"

Rolling on top of her, he kissed Lady Marion's breasts, belly then tried not to look too desperate for a taste of her pussy as he snaked a hand between her thighs and parted her slick lips. Already so wet for him. Sliding off the bed so he could kneel in his

former location, A.J. positioned his shoulders so she'd have to hook her knees on them, making her nice and wide for his mouth. He was drooling already.

"That's one excellent dare, Lady Marion, keep them coming and I'll do the same for you."

"Sir Ayjay!"

But she didn't seem to mind when he gave her glistening pussy a sharp lick that pulled her inner lips upward. She closed her eyes, lolled her head side to side. His hands shaking with excitement—she was one deliciously wet goddess—A.J. ate her as though his life depended on it.

Maybe not my life, but my sanity does.

When Marion's thighs began to cramp on either side of his face, he readied his tongue to receive her pleasure and groaned in male satisfaction when she spilled it for him. Accentuating the pressure of his mouth, really giving it to her, A.J. spread her with his thumbs and gave her his most enthusiastic performance to date. If the poor woman had never had it done before, he'd make damn sure she'd remember her first time.

He used his tongue like a cock and pumped it into her then his fingers spread her plentiful honey around to make her all glistening and ready for him. He was a fairly large fellow and always had to make sure his women were well lubricated so he wouldn't hurt them. Judging by the tightness of Marion's pussy, he'd have to be extra careful with her.

Leaving her panting and arching her back, he plopped down on the bed beside her and watched her ride the remains of the wave. She was so lovely this way, her cheeks flushed, her eyes closed, her lips glistening. He caressed her hardened nipple as he thought of his next question.

"Truth or dare," he murmured in her ear. "Have you ever made love to a man with your mouth?"

Her eyes flared wide.

"What is the dare?" she asked breathlessly.

A.J. knew his grin must have taken his whole face. *I blame the booze, Your Honor.*

"Oh."

Lady Marion looked down at his cock, seemed to consider it for a moment then came up on an elbow. "I accept the dare."

"Argh, don't make it sound so damn official. It's a game, you don't have—"

Lady Marion had just grabbed his dick as though she meant to choke it and knelt beside his thigh with a look on her face that told him if Lady Marion ever became pissed off with him, he'd run like hell.

"Just pretend it's ice cream," he offered half joking, half hoping. If she'd truly never sucked a man's dick, he'd be lucky to get a few tentative licks. But, hey, he was already luckier than he deserved just by being allowed near such a sweet woman. He wasn't about to complain!

Her chin set, Lady Marion leaned over, kissed the base of his cock, the sensitive skin of his lower belly and triggered a massive case of the “must fuck, must fucks”. It was all he could do not to pump his hips and dry-fuck her hand.

“Is this pleasurable?” she asked after flicking some of her gorgeous hair away from her shoulder.

After a quick nod that made her grin with a supremely feminine confidence, A.J. spread his legs so she could kneel in between. Keeping his cock in her fist still, she used her other hand to reduce his belly to a quivering mass of twitching muscles. Her nails were short but to the point, so to speak. *Jesus.*

A quick lick along his shaft made A.J. squeeze his eyes shut. She may be a novice in some things, but because he had this huge, juvenile crush on Lady Marion, whatever she chose to do to him felt like heaven. Even a simple little lick along the cock. And some of his girlfriends had been exotic dancers so he was used to all sorts of fun things done by all sorts of flexible, tanned and toned women. Surprisingly, none compared to the mix of freshness and determination Lady Marion displayed by choosing the dare when she could’ve wormed her way out with the truth.

“Jesus Christ!”

She’d just decided his dick was a nice, big sausage and she a starving lioness and shoved at least half of it down her throat. She coughed but went at it again, as if this were her personal challenge and she’d be damned if she was going to lose.

A.J. watched the top of her blonde head go down slowly, her hands working his skin downward in a rough but exhilarating way.

“You don’t have to...*ahh*, take the whole thing in. I’m a fairly large guy.”

Upward she went, his glans almost in pain when her mouth was no longer around it. “Shh.”

“Okay.” His voice had suddenly become squeaky.

Grinning, Lady Marion cupped his shaft between her palms, brought the skin down and kissed the length of him, from balls to glans, before wrapping her lips around and sliding downward. A.J. thought he was going to spontaneously combust. Or explode.

Trying to be as gentle as he could, he cupped her cheek and pushed up so she’d avoid triggering a considerable amount of embarrassment on his part. He’d never been so close to coming prematurely. And releasing inside this woman’s mouth was so out of the question.

She must have noticed the difference in him for she cocked her head. “No more games then?”

A.J. shook his head. “You’re... Whew...” He closed his eyes, swallowed hard. “Lady Marion, I’m just a man. I can’t be expected to be near a goddess and not fall apart. You know what I mean?”

She nodded.

“Come here, you little lioness you,” he growled as he encircled her waist and positioned her breasts above his hungry mouth. She hissed when he started to suck on her nipples. Hard.

He wanted to fuck Lady Marion with more urgency than ever before. What was wrong with him? Where was Mister Cool Lover?

A.J. stared up at her through the golden veil of her hair. “I want you.” The look on her face!

Shit.

Did they have condoms in medieval times? A.J. doubted it. Christ, talk about a mood killer.

“You wouldn’t happen to have protection lying around the room, huh?” He felt as dumb as he undoubtedly looked, a curvy blonde straddling him and he inanely asking for a condom.

Marion cocked her head. “Protection against what?”

‘Kay...

“Babies, you know, little things who cling to your pant legs?”

She grinned and A.J. forgot everything else for a good three seconds. How could a smile have such an effect on him? Women smiled at him all the time. Men so-inclined too, come to think of it.

“My time has not come yet.” She blushed and rolled off him so she could lie on her side.

Grinning like the moron he felt, A.J. nodded and ran his hands over her rounded hip. Those had never seen sunlight, he was sure of it. So pale.

He went back to his new favorite occupation...making love to this woman with his mouth. After climbing down off the bed so he could better savor her, A.J. kissed his way downward to her glistening curls. Stretching her wide and high, he anchored his shoulders between her thighs and licked her fine, rosy flesh until the muscles of his jaw burned then he licked her some more. She came again. When he was done with her, Marion was squirming and arching back on the mattress, her pink nipples calling him by name. He always answered his own calls.

Rolling and twisting a bud with one hand, he circled her clit with his other, the middle finger now used to the size and angle of her. A.J. added another finger and slowly, gently, penetrated her, went in deep to make sure there was enough room in her. *Ahhing*, Marion milked his fingers with surprising strength. He nearly came on the spot.

With one quick play bite on her breast, he leaned over her, angled his cock so it’d nudge her lips then using the utmost care, slid in. Her eyes flared wide and A.J. froze.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No,” she whispered before clamping her legs around his waist and bucking hard.

Whoa!

His knees buckled and he collapsed on top of her, almost sinking all the way in. A.J. was about to pull himself up on his hands when she dug her nails in his back and biting her lip, rolled her pelvis to take him all in. The urge to shove himself deeper nearly shredded his resolve.

“Whoa, Marion, not so fast. I don’t want to hurt you.”

She didn’t seem to hear or care.

Throwing caution out the window—both tiny and barred—A.J. pulled out to the ridge and thrust back in. She let out a sharp little keen that did wonders to his ego. So he plunged in again. Harder each time, giving her tight little pussy the good pounding Marion seemed bent on getting, A.J. anchored his elbows over her shoulders and really went at it. Long and powerful shoves, fierce quick ones, leisurely and deep ones. He gave her his all. Every inch and every ounce. He thought he was going to explode and reminded himself he wasn’t wearing a condom. After a push that arched her back and made her dig her nails in his skin, A.J. wrenched himself out of her clutches and fisted the base of his cock to keep the baby-making juice from switching hosts. He trembled violently as a climax of epic proportions ripped through him. Hot damn.

After a few moments of panting and trying to find saliva anywhere in his mouth—he was parched—A.J. gathered her close to him and rolled them both higher on the mattress so he came to rest on his back with her head nestled in the crook of his arm. Her plump, womanly form fit perfectly. A quick sniff-test in the armpit area confirmed he didn’t smell like a sweaty pig.

“That was delightful, ma’am.” His dick throbbed with unreleased need but he’d had worse.

“There is something I would like to ask you,” Lady Marion began, stopped then sighed.

“If it’s anything important, you might want to wait until you tell me. I’m still drunk and now I’m sleepy too. Sorry.”

He heard her chuckle softly. Though he couldn’t see it, he knew her smile was dimpled. How he’d ever lived without that sweet little dimpled smile escaped him.

Whoa, man. Settle down. You’ll be gone in a day or two, whenever someone figures out where the plane crashed. These things came with GPS transmitters, didn’t they? Some sort of “ping” would show on an air traffic controller’s screen somewhere and they’d come looking for survivors.

“Tomorrow, I want to go see that lake where you found me, okay?”

He felt her becoming heavier and guessed she’d fallen asleep. A.J. closed his eyes and followed suit.

* * * * *

A while later, he pretended to sleep as she gathered her clothes and left his room. He also pretended her departure didn’t hurt.

* * * * *

Marion watched Sir Ayjay struggling to mount his horse. He didn't look his usual fit and firm self but instead scraped and clawed ungainly into the saddle. If he hadn't been so tall, she doubted he would have made it at all. Marion was shocked to realize he had no idea how to ride a horse. The thought made her want to smile. Hugo, who'd already climbed onto his and veered it toward the road, didn't notice Sir Ayjay's less-than-graceful battle with the saddle.

"Do *not* say a word," Sir Ayjay muttered before giving an unsure little tug on the reins.

She shook her head then focused on the man's hands. Images from the night before, of his odd but thrilling attentions to her body, of his mouth against her sex and that decadent, lustful game of "truth or dare", made Marion shift in her saddle. To her embarrassment, remnants of a very pleasant ache forced her to tighten her thighs even more. She felt honey seep out of her just at the idea of his head between her legs.

He must have sensed her chain of thoughts for he turned toward her, spent a moment studying her before offering a wicked little grin that made blood rush to her cheeks.

She still couldn't believe she'd actually asked him to make love to her with his mouth. And that she'd done the same to him. Goodness!

After he seemed to finally manage a comfortable position, he fisted the reins, took a long breath, plastered on a very fake-looking smug smile then looked at her. Something in his dark gaze challenged her to comment. Underneath the smooth exterior, she recognized the steady, sharp glance of a predator. A mountain lion with its claws retracted was still a mountain lion. For the first time since she'd met him, she saw a darker facet of his personality, she saw the claws. Or more appropriately, she knew he had them.

"It is not very far," she offered with pretend levity. "We shall return before midday."

He nodded, shifted in his saddle and lifted his chin. "Lead the way, Lady Marion."

Marion resisted the urge to shake her head. Men and their pride. To save his, she made sure she rode in second so no one would see his tightfisted posture. "With your leave, Sir Ayjay, I shall let you bring the rear in case we are attacked."

"Attacked by what?"

"Highwaymen mostly. As you should know yourself, the roads are becoming less safe with each passing day."

Sir Ayjay looked around before brushing his hose. He seemed displeased by his physical appearance and picked at something on his thigh, rubbed it then gave up with a grimace.

They rode single file, followed the narrow path over the gentle crest then down into the valley. Harebells, in full bloom until the week prior, had begun to fade as had the

edelweiss. She filled her eyes and nose with all those sweet accents that would soon die away to make room for fall when her people and she would be working night and day to pile silage for the sheep to eat during winter and also to shear them all for the last time in the year. Some people enjoyed fall. She didn't. Not with the amount of backbreaking work...work that generated less and less income under Matheus' levies.

The lake came into view. Its quiet, sparkling water glistened like a carpet of gems. Marion chanced a quick peek behind her at their visitor and caught his pained look as he raised himself against the stirrups.

"This is where Thorins found you, sir," Hugo commented as he pointed down to a spot on the embankment. A deep groove marked the dirt.

Marion kept her horse at a leisurely pace as she navigated the path down to the lakeside. She dismounted hurriedly, came to Sir Ayjay's horse and pretended to cradle its face in her hands so it'd keep still while he swung a leg back over the beast's rump, slid to the ground and stumbled a step. With a pronounced neigh of irritation, the horse shook its head and pawed the ground.

"I take it you do not ride often in your homeland."

"No, we don't," Sir Ayjay replied, his black gaze settling on her and staying there for a long moment.

Hugo took them near the water's edge. "Thorins said you were lying there, facedown, with your pack not very far over by the trees."

Sir Ayjay barely looked at where Hugo was pointing and instead studied the ground, ran his foot along an unusual pace-wide groove in the dirt.

Bits of pale and twisted metal littered the place. Marion bent and picked up a piece. It resembled bits of twisted armor with strange little bumps at regular intervals. As though someone had sewn pieces of metal together then painted them white. Other debris she couldn't identify were scattered along the water edge.

Sir Ayjay crouched and retrieved what she thought were blackened tubular ribbons of leather with tiny markings on them. He showed them to her and sighed. "Bits of skin and wires. That's all?"

"What are these things?" she asked as she took the strange "wires" and looked at one end. Even thinner wires ran inside the larger one.

Sir Ayjay threw her a frustrated look. "Come on, *Lady* Marion. I think we can all stop pretending now. This is probably a gravesite."

"I do not understand. Is there something missing?"

"A plane, for example. And two pilots." Anger laced his tone. His eyes narrowed while he looked away.

She exchanged a quick glance with Hugo. Plain? Pie lots?

A look of confusion on his wide face, Hugo shrugged and planted his fists on his hips. "We are in the mountains, sir, too high for plains here."

“Christ, not plains, *planes*,” their visitor snapped, obviously annoyed. “Two men probably died around here. Maybe you should stop playing games.”

He unbuttoned both his strange tunic and undertunic and turned toward Marion. “Could you hold these, please?”

She hooked both over her arm as he removed his short stockings and shoes and began to unfasten his hose. Lord!

“Sir Ayjay,” she began, faltered. She’d seen it all before but still. “What are you doing?”

“The plane looks as though it crashed right before it hit the water. I want to go have a look at the...”

She didn’t understand the last word. It sounded like “rek-age”. She’d never heard it before but French wasn’t her first language. Neither was it his, judging by his thick accent.

With fluid movements, he slid his hose around his ankles, shook them out and folded them in half before offering them for her to hold. She took them, threw an oblique glance at Hugo, who rolled his eyes and crossed his arms.

“The water is cold,” Hugo said to Sir Ayjay when it became obvious their guest was going to enter the lake.

“That’s all right, I swim every day at the gym and their water isn’t heated. Plus, I’m Canadian.” The sharp tone made Marion hold on to his clothes a bit tighter. As much as she was loath to admit it, Sir Ayjay was intimidating in his ire.

It was Hugo’s turn to look at her and shrug in confusion.

Sir Ayjay’s lean and supple muscles rippled when he walked determinedly into the lake, right up to his thighs before hissing something she couldn’t understand. She thought she heard the word “God” and that “fok” word again. He must have been praying.

Marion drank in the sight of him, his wide and square shoulders, his narrow waist and lean hips. Those peculiar black undergarments—so shockingly adjusted—left precious little to the imagination! Such a glorious backside. Carnal hunger tightened her sex and the image of his naked form pressed against hers forced Marion to close her eyes and take a deep breath. How he’d worked his agile tongue on her, *in* her, had left her more lustful than she’d ever been.

Lord, she was already contemplating coming to his chamber again tonight, even hungered for it in quite wicked ways.

With a roll of his shoulders, Sir Ayjay dove into the lake. She’d never seen someone swim with such strength and grace. He cleaved the water with his arms, which he brought around over his head one at a time, his feet beating the surface with powerful rhythm, water frothing in his wake. The bracelet gleamed like liquid silver.

“They must swim more than they must ride horses where he comes from,” Hugo commented.

Heat rose to her cheeks. So Hugo *had* noticed.

She caught herself rubbing her hand over the still-warm bundle in her arms and stopped. "I wonder what he is looking for?"

She gasped when Sir Ayjay suddenly flipped forward, his feet the last thing she saw as he disappeared under the surface.

Marion rushed to the edge, stopped and paced impotently as ripples extended in widening circles where Sir Ayjay had disappeared. What could be taking him so long?

"Lady Marion," Hugo said, coming close and resting a gentle bear paw of a hand over her forearm. "The people must be told Sir Ayjay shall not remain with us for long."

"I know, my friend... I do not know what came over me." Shame flushed her cheeks.

Hugo squeezed her arm then shook his head when a few bubbles broke the surface where Sir Ayjay had dived in. "As much as I distrust the foreign devil, seeing him give Lord Matheus a good whip of the tongue felt—"

Sir Ayjay's head broke the surface. He panted hard as he swam back for the shore. Hugo offered his hand when the other man emerged from the water but Sir Ayjay ignored it as he grabbed the clothes from Marion's arm and angrily wrestled them back on.

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

He stopped, stared at her hard then barked a quick, mirthless laugh. "You're just going to keep playing the game, aren't you?" he demanded, buttoning his undertunic and drawing near. Water beaded on his chest and neck. "I have had just about enough of you and your employees' stupid games. There's probably a plane down in that lake with two dead men in it and all you can think about is your damn show. Well, I'm not playing anymore."

It dawned on her the strange grooves could perhaps be signs of a carriage going off into the lake. Good Lord.

"Was it your carriage you were looking for? Why did you not say anything?"

"A carriage? Christ, woman, get real. I didn't come here in a carriage but in a plane. A *plane*. That game is getting old fast."

"What do you mean? What game?"

"This whole place!" he replied, throwing his hands up. "This whole fucking place! You're just...Christ, you're making me want to kick something." He hooked his overtunic over an arm, looked down, took a deep breath and leveled his gaze once more on her. It cut right through her heart. The scorn was palpable.

"I'm leaving this place if I have to walk to the next town or village or whatever the hell is close by. I'm not waiting for the rescuers to find me. I'll be nuts by the time they do. So either you help me get back to civilization or you get the fuck out of my way!"

Hugo put a large hand over Sir Ayjay's shoulder and whirled him around. His meaty fist connected with her guest's chin and rocked him back slightly. She was shocked to see what little effect Hugo's usually devastating strength had on Sir Ayjay.

"Hugo, stop it!"

His eyes pits of black flames, Sir Ayjay dropped his garment and punched Hugo in the belly, effectively bent him in half. He seemed as shocked as her captain.

"Would you two stop this nonsense!" she yelled, pushing one away then the other.

"He is disrespectful to you, Lady Marion. He needed it!"

"Fuck off, Conan! You just bought yourself a place on the list of you jackasses I'm about to sue."

"I do not know what you mean," Marion tried with calmness she didn't feel. "Why do you think we are lying to you? What game? I have answered every question truthfully, tried my best to help you in any way I could –"

"Yeah, any way you could, right," he replied with a mean toss of his chin. "It still doesn't convince me you're all as oblivious as you'd want me to think."

"Oblivious?" By her side, she saw Hugo's triumphant smile cleave his beard. He knew what was coming.

"Oblivious?" she demanded again, stabbing an accusing finger into Sir Ayjay's chest. "How dare you...you stubborn mule, you anvil-headed, obstinate... I have half a mind to have Hugo throw you in the dungeon for speaking to me this way – after all we have done for you! Ingrate, foul-mouthed coxcomb!"

Clearly fuming, he yanked his hose closed, fisted the undertunic inside and pulled up the tiny plate that locked the front of the garment. After he roughly shoved his feet into the strange little stockings, followed by his shoes, he retrieved his overtunic from the ground – looking highly disgusted with the whole affair. Sir Ayjay leaned into her, his face hard, his expression glacial. Had Hugo not been present and looking ready to draw his sword, she would have taken a step back under the stranger's fierce appearance. The mountain lion had revealed his claws.

"I'll sue your organization for everything they're worth. You included." He threw an exasperated look at Hugo and cursed foully. "You can put the pointy stick away, man, I'm not the kind of guy who'd touch a woman that way."

In German, she told Hugo to leave the sword in its sheath. He did so reluctantly, muttering things about "cursed Italians" under his breath though both knew their visitor wasn't one.

Sir Ayjay turned his back on them, marched to his horse and fumbled with the reins as he tried to mount it while simultaneously keeping the overtunic from touching the beast. But the horse must have sensed his anger for it kept moving out of the way, forcing him to skip on one foot while his other was in the stirrup. After a few rotations, with the poor man nearly falling over several times, he pulled himself onto his mount and looked back at her. Gone was the wicked but friendly smirk, the easy teasing.

The ride back to the castle proved a silent, tense affair. Sir Ayjay rode in front, stiff in his saddle and bearing. His still-wet hair was raked back on his skull and gleamed with the smooth depth of obsidian. As soon as they traversed the courtyard, he swung a long leg over his horse and slid to the ground with slightly more grace than his first time. Smoothing his undertunic down, he didn't wait for her as he charged into the doorway leading to the main hall. She heard his shoes clacking on the slate floor.

"I shall speak to him," she said, dismounting and rushing after him.

"Lady Marion." Hugo drew near and leaned into her so none of the men gathering the reins to the horses would hear. He pointed to his temple. "He was obviously attacked on the road and I gather he was injured in the head. I cannot blame him for being out of sorts but I beg you to be careful around him."

"I know. It pains me to know there would be such people in our region. I wish I could get my hands on the ruffians who did this to him!" She shook her head. Poor man. "I shall show him the archives, the charts, anything to put his mind to rest until he feels better. Surely he shall see the truth there."

"My lady," said one of Hugo's guards. He rushed to meet them, a grin on his face. "Thomas has arrived, my lady, shortly after you departed. I put him in your study and had food and drink brought up to him."

Thank the Lord! Even Hugo beamed.

The men's grins proved infectious and she found herself smiling as well. Thomas would be able to convince a Greek to part with his gold so he would be perfect to prove to Sir Ayjay her words were true, that she was who she claimed to be. Sir Ayjay would have no choice but to believe her words. Although she did wonder why the man would doubt her. Where did he think he was, if not Sargans? Perhaps he remembered nothing preceding the attack, nor his reason for leaving his homeland.

Marion's spirits soared at the thought of conversing with the clever, lively Thomas. The wandering minstrel—as bad at the lute as he was with a flute but imbued with a wit that could cut through armor—could quote writers and poets in a variety of languages. Her long-time friend hadn't visited Sargans in several seasons.

Hopeful she could salvage the situation, she caught up to Sir Ayjay and placed a hand over his elbow. He stopped, turned purposefully to face her. His eyes narrowed as he looked at her hand. She hurriedly snatched it away.

"There is a man you must meet. He has just arrived and waits in my study."

"What would I want with him? If he's not a pilot with a phone and a plane, I don't want to see him."

She struggled with the foreign words and under the man's glare. "Thomas is extremely well traveled and learned, if a bit odd, but he knows many things from many lands. Please, Sir Ayjay, come meet him. And I shall show you our archives and charts and let you judge the sincerity of my words for yourself."

While he weighed her words, his gaze went from her eyes to her mouth and heat wafted out of her dress collar. As much as she wanted to slap his face, the memory of his lips on hers did wonders to her resolve.

"Fine," he snapped, breaking the spell.

Hardly able to keep up with his long legs, she escorted him to her study, opened the door and felt a wave of warmth and relief course through her as Thomas, looking unchanged and in full health, rose from his chair to greet her. His pale eyes flared to the size of coins when he spotted her companion.

"So this is the man who tossed 'Lord Asshole' out onto his ugly head? Please, let me embrace you. It was a long time coming."

Still as gangly as ever, Thomas crossed the room, his wispy blond hair floating around his head like spiderwebs, and wrapped both arms around a clearly stunned Sir Ayjay.

"Lady Marion," Thomas went on, relinquishing his hold on the stranger with obvious regret to give her an affectionate peck on each cheek. "Tell me all about it. I want every sordid detail."

"It is so good to see you again, Thomas, please meet Sir Ayjay. He is from..." she turned to her guest, suddenly lost of words. She'd never heard of his homeland and couldn't remember the name, though he'd already told her.

"Canada," Sir Ayjay finished, eyeing Thomas with an eyebrow arched high. "I'm a lawyer and if that's not scary enough for you, I'm a pissed-off lawyer who's had no coffee for the last two days. So unless you can find me a phone, I suggest you keep the hugging to a minimum."

Thomas' expression changed from conviviality to confusion then to amusement. "He is certainly no Italian, Lady Marion, as I was told, but a full-blooded Norman. And here I thought they had pushed them all off into the sea." He laughed.

A Norman, of course! That would explain the height and his muscular build. Why had she not guessed it sooner?

Sir Ayjay turned toward her and hooked his thumb at Thomas. "That's the guy who can help me?"

Marion swallowed hard. Verbal sparring hadn't been in her plan to enlist the minstrel's help in convincing Sir Ayjay of the veracity of her claims.

"Thomas, please, Sir Ayjay's party was attacked and is now missing his *carriage*," she threw a quick peek at her guest and noted the fury rising again, "his vessel might be at the bottom of the lake, some of his friends drowned and he has been injured. Do not mock him, just answer his questions." Her sudden desire to protect Sir Ayjay shocked and embarrassed her.

Thomas looked at her, at Sir Ayjay then back at her before nodding once. "Sir Ayjay, my humble mind is yours to pick. Ask what you shall."

After a pronounced roll of eyes, Sir Ayjay sank dejectedly in a chair and crossed his legs. "Fine, but I warn you I'm adding your name to the suit that's coming your way. You'll be lucky if I leave you enough to take the train home."

Thomas cocked his head and grinned. "He does speak rather curiously, does he not?" After a lethal glare from Marion, he patted the air in front of him and took another chair opposite her guest where he smoothed his green tunic and waited.

"Where are we?" Sir Ayjay asked. "Are there any cities close by?"

"Sargans and no. The closest 'city' is *Turicum* or Zurich as some call it."

"Zurich, good, so we're in Switzerland, as I thought. Where's the closest town with electricity and phones?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about. Why do you need these things?"

"Jesus, man, to call for help. To tell people where I am so they can come get me. Why do you think I want a phone?"

"People have already 'come get you'," Thomas replied, giving Marion a "your guest is a curious fellow" look. "What other people do you want?"

"Real people, dammit. Not actors."

A stitch of pain made Marion clutch her hands in front of her. Sir Ayjay's cutting words were obviously not meant to hurt her but they did. "Real" people indeed.

"We are as real as you are, Sir Ayjay," she replied with too much force to pretend she wasn't affected.

He looked at the ceiling, muttered something then threw his hands up. "I know you are. I meant 'real' people, as in not from around here, you know, people who aren't in on the big joke."

He'd totally lost her.

"What do you think this is?" Thomas asked through a mocking grin. "A farce? A play? Are we all jesters to your eyes?"

"Of course it's a play! What else is it supposed to be?"

Both Thomas and she exchanged a look. His pale eyes reflected her concerns. Her guest had knocked his head quite badly.

"You think we are all in a play, none of what you see now is real? *I am not real?*" she demanded. "After we...after everything my people did for you, treated you as an honored guest?"

"Oh for Christ's sake, would you stop acting like 'Lady Marion'? What's your real name anyway? 'Lady Marion' wouldn't sound very serious on a subpoena."

"Marion Werdenberg-Sargans is my real name, for the love of God!" Her fists were firmly on her hips by the time Sir Ayjay was standing.

Thomas stood as well and stepped protectively in front of her. "Why do you think Lady Marion is pretending to be someone else?"

"Because none of this is *real*. Come on, living like knights in the twelfth century, the fucking *Middle Ages*? Please! Nobody lives like that anymore, nobody takes a shit down a hole in the ground and they sure as hell use toilet paper, if you know what I mean. And the clothes, who makes his own clothes for real? Who. Lives. Like. This?" He looked around at the humble study.

Marion couldn't believe the man's outrageous nonsense. Anger replaced hurt. And to say she'd lain with him, was trying to seduce him into staying. He'd appeared so different at first but he was a man, just as all the others. Proud, stubborn and apparently demented on top of things.

"Everything around you is real, Sir Ayjay," Thomas began, seemed to be struggling with the expression on his face. It flickered between incredulity and amusement. "Why would you think it is not? Is this not real to you?" He tapped the floor with his foot.

Clearly seething, Sir Ayjay lowered his chin. "I'm not saying this place isn't real, I'm saying you guys aren't."

Despite her frustration, a wave of sympathy engulfed Marion. The poor, confused man. A thought occurred to her. "How long ago have you left your home, Sir Ayjay? Do you remember leaving? Traveling?"

Sir Ayjay undid the first button on his undertunic. His lips were pale again, as the day before when he'd complained of a great headache. "I need to answer that? I left Wednesday from Toronto, it's now..." He checked his bracelet, shook his head. "It's now Saturday and I have yet to see a goddamn cell phone anywhere. And I thought everyone had them in two thousand and six."

"Two thousand and six what?" Marion asked. He'd lost her again.

"Years."

"Years..." Thomas put in, leaving the word hanging. "I fail to see the meaning of that particular number. Two thousand and six years."

"It's the *year*, for fuck's sake!" Sir Ayjay snarled. "Do I have to spell it out for you? Here." He showed her his bracelet, where tiny numerals glistened below a minute layer of glass.

Before Marion could comment, Thomas said, "*Anno Nostrae Salutis* eleven forty-eight."

"Latin, eh? I can do Latin too. Memorandum and agenda. How about that!" Sir Ayjay spat a long string of what she believed were curses though she couldn't recognize the language. The "fok" word resounded again. "Eleven forty-eight, right? Ha. What else? You live here for real too?"

"Sargans has been my home since the reign of his Eminence Pope Innocent the Second. Since before the times of Gallus himself, I can trace my family back two centuries, something not even Lord Matheus can claim to and I shall not have some...some *Norman* come here and challenge my lineage in my home."

Thomas stepped back, shaking his head. "I cannot abide the sight of blood, Lady Marion. Please kill him after I have left." Turning to Sir Ayjay, he bowed. "You seem to think we would lie to you about time, as though anyone could. I do not know when you left your home—two days ago sounds like such a short time to be coming from so far away—but I can prove to you we are telling the truth. If you wish to see something very interesting, join me at the top of the tower tonight and I shall show you then. My Lady."

When the door had closed over Thomas, Marion crossed her arms and stared at Sir Ayjay, who stared right back.

"You really believe we're in the twelfth century?" he asked. His narrowed eyes bore into her. "Eleven forty something?"

"Forty-eight. We *are*."

Not only did he not look convinced, an expression of sadness and pity flashed in his black eyes, as though he were feeling sorry for her, the poor, silly woman who didn't mean to be so confused and who didn't know the seasons. Anger flared. "Let me show you something."

She marched across the study, yanked down a bunch of scrolls from the rack and sent most tumbling to the floor before grabbing the one she needed. Unrolling it onto the table, she hooked her index finger at Sir Ayjay then stabbed it on the parchment.

"What does it say, right here?" she demanded when he stood next to her, leaning slightly to follow her finger.

"I can't read it. What's that, Latin?"

"Do you not speak it? Are you not a lord?"

"Don't give me attitude. I'm already well past my limit. I stink, I'm wrinkled, my hair's a mess and I'd commit murder for a cup of coffee. I'm warning you, do *not* piss me off."

"The year, Sir Ayjay. It is the *year*, as Thomas has said to you. See? One, one, four and eight. Can you understand those words? Do I speak loudly enough?" She tried to curb the mockery in her tone too late.

"There's nothing wrong with my ears, they hear you perfectly now just as they did yesterday night when—"

"Leave my study, Sir Ayjay."

"With pleasure. But playing the simple-minded bimbo won't help you in court. I've cut through bullshit much better than yours."

Her palm had already connected with his cheek by the time she realized she'd slapped him. He barely flinched. "Slapping people seems to be contagious around here. I suggest you don't ever do that to me again. I'm not in the mood to be jerked around. Two men are dead, our plane has been missing for days. In a matter of hours, the place will be crawling with cops. Don't make your case worse than it is already."

Ours? Copse?

"Leave."

“Fine.”

Chapter Five

“Eleven forty-eight,” A.J. muttered as he angrily slapped his jacket across the chair. Christ he reeked! “Two days in the same damn suit. Plus a crash-landing, plus having my face stitched back together with sheep intestine, plus taking a shit in a pit, plus no fucking toilet paper or toothbrush, plus being stuck with a bunch of lunatics...and now I’m wearing *Eau de Horse* perfume. What else will go wrong?”

Someone was *so* getting sued for this.

He collapsed on the bed and punched the pillow just for good measure. By his golf bag, still set the way they’d been, were the various bits and pieces Marion’s men had found near the wreckage. They had no fucking clue what a crime scene was obviously. Didn’t their TV shows teach them not to touch a thing?

“Hey!”

A.J. flipped his legs on the other side of the bed and went through the junk. There was his MP3 player, headphones missing. *Useless now, Christ*. He dropped it back on the chair. A bright green plastic lighter caught his attention. *Must have been one of the pilots’*. A.J. tried it. It worked still. He pocketed it.

Who knew I’d be excited to get my hands on an old plastic lighter. This crash was turning into a bad mind screw. Foil sticking out from underneath a piece of broken plastic caught his attention.

“Oh yeah!”

With near reverence, A.J. carefully unwrapped the very last stick of gum from the crumpled pack and closing his eyes, put it on his tongue. For some reason, he put the empty pack of gum in his pants pocket. Mint, by God, *MINT*. Two days without a toothbrush...

A.J. spent the remainder of the day in his room, alternatively pacing and crashing down on the bed, or sitting in morose silence whenever one of the “maids” came around to poke around his room or bring him something to drink or eat. A.J. didn’t want anything but they wouldn’t leave without setting the tray down. He’d never seen actors so convincing. Never once out of character. Although he’d begun to change his views about things and now was convinced this probably wasn’t a play but a cult. Medieval enthusiasts his ass. He’d landed right in the middle of a Middle Ages anti-progress cult. Probably some brain-dead, bloodless name like “Order of the Alpine Resistance to Progress”. “Mountain People Against Indoor Plumbing”. Just his luck.

When darkness started seeping in through the parted curtains, A.J. shook out his jacket and put it back on. He’d need fresh clothes soon and there was no way in hell he’d be wearing a skirt as the men around these parts did.

An abrupt knock came to his door. He grunted in response and Marion entered. Her eyes were red but hard. He wondered if she were the cult leader or if perhaps that Matheus asshole was behind it all.

“Thomas waits for us at the tower. Please come with me.”

She turned, offering him a nice view of her curvy hips cinched by the belt. Those huge keys—totally period—clicked and clanged as she marched out without checking back to see if he was following. He was, of course. *Wouldn't miss this for the world.*

Very period-looking torches had been lit along the walls and gave off honest-to-God smoke that stung the eyes and throat. So they intended to die as young as real Middle Ages folks had. *That's commitment.*

Dark, damp and too-low corridors, more torches than he could count, slippery stone floors—he did *not* want to know why they were so slippery—until finally Marion took him to a door where a spiral staircase climbed into thick darkness. After she grabbed a candle and a small pewter dish from a wooden box on the floor, which he supposed had been placed there for such reason, she spent a while striking something against a walnut-sized stone.

“Here,” he said, taking the lighter out and offering it to her. When he lit it, she gasped and leaped back a step.

“How...?”

The look on her face!

“What?” he demanded, for some reason instantly annoyed. “It’s a lighter, it makes *light*. Well, fire, actually.”

“I can see that,” she retorted. Her hands shook. “I have never seen anything like it before.”

A.J. knew his smile wasn’t very nice. “Oh I forgot,” he whispered. “We’re not supposed to know about fire yet. *Shhh.*”

“Your vile tongue will get you in trouble, Sir Ayjay.”

“I sure hope so,” he replied as he lit the candle and pocketed the lighter.

“Be careful, the ceiling is very low,” she snapped before climbing the steps in a practiced manner. She kept the light high in front of her.

Too bad he had neither practice nor light. He must have bumped his head ten times as he climbed the unending series of maladjusted, worn-smooth-with-use steps, each one more treacherous than its predecessor. Except from burning his thumb, the lighter was useless as a source of light. His eyebrow burned and he still hadn’t been able to find a decent mirror to check it out. Muttering curses, he tried to keep the trembling glow in sight. And Marion’s delicious butt as well. Hips swung in a pendulum as she climbed, her long blonde tress swinging down her back. His palms began to itch at the memory of her soft body against his. It’d been one good lay. Too short, but good. And he’d been drunk. He could only imagine how great it would’ve been had he been sober enough to really give her all his attention. *And that tight little pussy, mm-mmm.*

"Here we are," she announced.

And there they were.

Marion set the pewter dish containing their precious candle down by another just inside the doorway so the wind wouldn't blow it out. A soft breeze caressed his unshaven cheeks as he climbed the last few steps. He wished he would've kept a piece of the gum for later. Raking a hand in his hair, he emerged onto a sort of square terrace surrounded by those thick things that resembled giant stone dentures with serious gaps. *Oh yeah, crenels.*

Thomas waited for them, sitting between two crenels. "Sir Ayjay, how good of you to come." He stood and made a beeline for A.J.

"No hug, man, just show me."

A quick grin confirmed he'd been about to do exactly what A.J. was afraid he would. "Of course. And fortune smiles on us tonight for the proof is already out and shining brightly." He pointed up with a long index finger.

A.J. looked up at the sky. A nice midnight blue sky with lots and lots of stars. Jeez. He'd never seen so many. And so bright. "Yeah, very nice. So what?"

"Are you familiar with *Ursae Majoris* and *Ursae Minoris*?"

"No."

He could tell Marion was though and it piqued his pride.

Thomas sighed and put both hands up, using his index and thumb fingers as a sort of square frame. "*Ursae Majoris*, Great Bear in Latin, is—"

"Part of a constellation, yeah, yeah, so I guess the other name you said is the Little Bear. It's all very nice but I know where they are, which is right there." A.J. pointed up and slightly north—or what he thought was north—but after searching for a few seconds, couldn't find either.

"Can you not find the bears, Sir Ayjay?" Thomas asked in a "closing argument" tone of voice A.J. didn't like very much. Sounded a bit too triumphant.

"They're right overhead, or at least the tail of the Little Bear is because it's the North Star." Again, he pointed to where he could swear the Little Dipper should be and found a cluster of stars but nothing closely resembling a dipper or a bear or anything else for that matter. *Where the hell is the North Star?*

'Kay...

A shiver raced up his back.

Thomas turned on himself, hands still upward. "Lady Marion, if you would."

She drew near and looked inside the "frame" made by his fingers. "Do you see *Ursae Majoris*?"

She nodded, gave a quick peek at A.J. and moved out of the way so he could play too. Muttering a curse, he leaned over Thomas' shoulder—who angled his chin slightly

so he could look at A.J.'s face—and searched for the Big Dipper. But Thomas' hands were much too low. No way the Big—

There it was. *Whoa.*

“And now for the Little Bear.”

Thomas moved the frame much farther than A.J. would've thought in search of the Little Dipper. And right there, shining bright, was the North Star, right where it should be at the end of the handle, only the whole thing wasn't at all where he would've expected it to be.

So the stars weren't in the right place. So what?

It's because I'm in Europe and not in North America, that's why the stars aren't in the usual place.

Thomas lowered his hands but continued staring.

Marion seemed to wait for A.J. to say something. But the thing was, he didn't know what to say. The stars were all wrong. Unless he was confused...

Yeah, crash-landed, got bonked on the head by hell knew what, got stitched back together using infected animal innards, probably got some brain-eating bacteria crawling around there...so yeah, I am confused.

“I've never looked at the stars from around here. Where I come from, they look different...”

It sounded lame even to him. A migraine was already trying to squeeze into his eye sockets and pinch his optic nerves. He grimaced and pressed the bridge of his nose. He was starting to believe stress really *was* killing him.

“Surely you do not come from so far away that the sky would be different,” Marion murmured, drawing near and placing a hand on his forearm. Her concern shined brightly in her big blue eyes.

He gazed down at her, shrugged because he didn't know what else to do then looked back at Thomas, who wore a sort of happy-sad expression. What was up with him?

“It doesn't make any sense. The North Star should be up higher, Christ, not down there.” He waved in a general southward direction. “And anyway, how come you know all about stars, huh? Are you Nostradamus or something?”

“I studied the celestial bodies with some of the monks from Saint Goddard because I needed to travel. In return for Lady Marion's long-standing hospitality, I passed on the way of the stars to her when I returned from Bologna. But who is *nostra damus*? ‘Our lady’? What lady?” Thomas threw a quick, worried glance at Marion.

A.J. meant to roll his eyes but it hurt too much. “Never mind.”

Marion shook her head at his curt tone. “Sir Ayjay, we *are* trying to help you.”

“You're showing me stars I know for a fact shouldn't be where they are. Even the sky is different. So help me what? Scramble my brain even more?!”

"See the truth, Sir Ayjay," Thomas replied with a sad smile. "You were attacked on the road to Sargans, left for dead, which is not surprising. Norman lords are not exactly common around these parts and surely your entourage drew attention to itself. You were lucky Lady Marion's men found you when they did."

A.J. felt like a mental patient trying to convince the wardens to let him out, that there had been some huge mistake and he hadn't really tried to jump off the roof or eat his neighbor's foot while he slept. *Just a big misunderstanding.* A nervous giggle tightened his throat. Christ.

Marion exchanged a look with her friend. A.J. pretended not to have seen it. He also pretended it didn't hurt that she thought he was a basket case. *Man, did I knock my head hard.* Everything usually was so clear. He felt his spine curve under the weight of his confusion and doubt and the killer migraine ratcheting up the pressure behind his eyes. Oh it'd be a good one.

"For what it is worth to you, Sir Ayjay, I am glad indeed Lady Marion has offered you sanctuary, at least until you are healed or your Norman countrymen come find you. And I shall be sad when they do." Thomas grinned as he patted A.J.'s shoulder. His fingers lingered before he took them away.

"My home is yours for as long as you shall require it to be," Marion said with a smile. A.J. thought resembled a pained grimace. "Perhaps you shall remember more with time. We could then send a courier to your homeland, warn them of their lord's whereabouts." She didn't sound too convinced.

Thomas nodded solemnly. They seemed to be having a good time convincing themselves he was a lost Norman lord with a bad case of the cracked pot.

She thinks I've lost my mind. They both do. Maybe I have.

A Norman. A fucking Norman! Weren't those supposed to be some kind of barbarians? *Hi, my name is A.J., I pillage and rape for a living. What about you? Oh in the beheading profession? Nice to meet you.*

"I bid you both good night," Thomas said before taking a candle with him down a few steps. "The stars do not lie, Sir Ayjay," he added, his disembodied voice ominous.

A.J. had to sit. Right now.

He collapsed where Thomas had been sitting, the stone still warm in places. A part of him had already begun to assess the situation, trying to turn it to his advantage as he usually did, to find the silver lining in this cloud...although he was starting to think this particular one was the mushroom-shaped kind. An internal debate muted everything else.

Eleven forty-eight they'd said. Fourth year of What's His Name the Pope. So the plane had somehow managed to leap back a few hundreds years. Ha.

What am I saying? You can't fly through time. This isn't the fucking Time Machine!

He swore he heard the theme music for *The Twilight Zone* floating around. Tudu-du-du, tudu-du-duuuu. Rubbing his eyes with his palms didn't alleviate the monster

migraine tightening his nape. And he knew for a fact there *weren't* any painkillers in the Middle Ages.

A.J. couldn't help checking his watch again. Eight thirty-four p.m., Saturday, August twenty-six, two thousand and six. "You know," he began slowly, embarrassed at the tremor in his voice. "This thing tells time. And it's telling me that either I'm losing my mind or you're lying."

Marion barely spared a glance at his watch, too busy looking at him with those big worried eyes.

"At least *look* at it."

He didn't know if it was the anger or the desperation in his voice that made her give a quick peek at his watch. Lady Marion looked uncomfortable to the highest degree. She clearly didn't know what to say.

"Look here," he said, pointing to his watch's face. "That needle tells the hours. There are twenty-four per day. And the long one here, it tells you the minutes. Sixty minutes for every hour. And over there, that's today's date. Twenty-six, zero-eight, zero-six."

She nodded, her expression grave.

A.J. wanted to laugh. She was a very bad liar. A thought came to him. "Oh I have something else." He fished around his pockets and retrieved the pack of gum. Smoothing down the crumbled foil on his lap, he showed her the factory date. "See? That's the date. Two, five, zero, nine, zero, six. Twenty-fifth of September two thousand and six. That's when what's inside goes bad."

Marion picked up the foil, looked at it with pretend interest before giving it back to him. He wanted to shake her and seriously considered it for a full two seconds.

"Okay, what about the lighter?" He fished it out, noticed how she drew back by an inch or so. "Can you explain this then? If it's not from my time? From the future?"

"No, I cannot explain it, nor can I tell you how the wind blows or why water flows downward. It is a device from your homeland, obviously your people are more advanced than mine in certain fields of study."

"Arghhhh! That's such a cop-out."

"I am sorry you see things this way, Sir Ayjay."

I'm losing my mind. The doc said stress was killing me one neuron at a time. Maybe I just lost a bunch. Maybe I'm going to start drooling soon.

A.J. sighed. "You're not as sorry as I am, I can tell you that."

"No, Sir Ayjay, I am greatly sorry for what happened to you. I wish I could catch these ruffians and hang them high." Her eyes blazed for an instant. "But what I am most aggrieved about is that you are not where you wanted to be... I...I do not know what else to say."

And I don't know what to think.

A.J. just looked at her, unable to say a word. That had to be a first. Speechlessness wasn't exactly part of his infamous personality. The Shark always had something to say about everyone and everything. The Shark, when he opened his mouth, made people either cringe or grit their teeth. It would seem The Shark had just lost some of its teeth.

Probably went the same way the neurons had.

Wasn't hearing voices a sign of madness too? Would Stephen King's Evil Nurse character get a sledgehammer and bust his ankles so he'd stay with them for a long, loooong time? He chanced a quick peek Marion's way. Maybe she'd already busted his skull instead.

"Perhaps it shall come back to you in time. The attack, I mean. Sir Ayjay?"

"I wasn't..."

Nothing to say. Not a damn thing.

Usually, he could talk his way out of most situations, had learned to do so early because of his small size—though it no longer applied—and had always managed to argue things back in his corner. He couldn't see how he'd talk his way out of this one. He looked up again, at those stars hanging a good quarter turn too much to the left.

What the hell was with *that*?

"Sir Ayjay, you can talk to me. I shall try to help if I can."

She sat beside him, the heat of her arm reaching his. In the lone candle's shaky light, she appeared ghostly, a blonde, plump little ghost with worried eyes and the most delicious mouth. He reached out and ran his thumb over her round cheek. The weight of his predicament bore down on him all at once.

White-hot darts of pain lanced behind his eyeballs. With a grunt, he cradled his head in his hands, hurt the stitches on his eyebrow. But he didn't really care did he? Pain was good. It meant he still had a few brain cells left.

I'll be stuck here for a while. Unless they already found me and I'm sitting in an adult diaper drenched in my own piss, fetal position and all, in a padded room somewhere. Maybe...

Fuck *maybe*!

What if Marion was real? She'd felt real enough as he made love with her. She'd felt alive, warm, genuine. Not the usual dolls he felt safe around, knowing they only wanted some fun and a nice gift, both of which he didn't mind providing as long as they didn't stick around afterward. He didn't know why people gave such a hard time to pretty women who weren't interested in any but the most superficial things. There wasn't anything wrong with that. They were perfect for shallow guys such as him.

But Marion...he wouldn't mind if she stayed a while.

She's gotta be real. For my sanity.

What if there wouldn't be any phones, rescue teams and police? What if no salvage operation to hoist the plane out of the lake got there? What if he wouldn't see his friends again, though he had precious few good ones but plenty of so-so ones? No more

coffee, hair gel and toilet paper either. This time he laughed for real. He laughed because he was afraid to start crying.

"I think I hit my head pretty hard," he murmured as he gazed into her eyes the color of a clear winter sky.

A spike of pain in his head made him squeeze his eyes shut. A full-blown migraine was presently taking residence behind his eyeballs and forced his jaws together. Christ, he'd commit every major offense in the book for a triple-strength painkiller right now.

What if he had, for real, been thrown back in time, right in the Middle Ages? How did one get back to the future? Should he wait for another storm, stand on top of the tallest tower and play chicken with lightning strikes?

Murmuring soothing words in a language he guessed he should start learning soon, Lady Marion wrapped her arms around his neck and brought A.J. to her, pressed until his forehead rested against her generous chest then just held him without a single word being said. The heat of her amplexity engulfed him and he found himself wrapping his arms around her waist and holding on tight, like a man about to drown, lose himself and his world. Lose his mind.

As shocking as it was, his migraine receded. They usually lasted much longer than this. The beat of her heart was loud and rhythmic, a soothing constant in his upside-down world and if he'd indeed lost everything he'd known, at least he'd found this much.

"I want mead," he said, his voice muffled by the wool dress. "Lots of it."

* * * * *

Marion sat in her study the next morning having spent the night dreaming about a dark-haired man with gentle hands and a wicked mouth. She hated admitting it to herself, but in a selfish and shameful way, how Sir Ayjay's people wouldn't likely be coming to get him fitted perfectly in her hope of convincing her confused Norman lord to stay. She wished she could restore his memory, could help him get his bearings back. She hadn't had the heart to comment on his bracelet's ability to "tell time" nor his little piece of crumbled decorative parchment or his fire-making device, preferring not to encourage his turmoil by appearing interested. He'd looked so desperate. It had broken her heart.

Meanwhile, she'd make sure he felt at home at Sargans. It was the least she could do for him. As for the marriage... Marion sighed. She'd have to find a way to tell everyone the truth without losing face. Or losing Sir Ayjay.

But what if they were to marry for real? It would take care of everything. She enjoyed spending time with the man, had already been intimate with him. He clearly felt something for her, even if only on a carnal level. They could live in Sargans together, even sleep in separate chambers if he refused to share hers. Marion looked up at the ceiling and cursed. What had gotten into her? Using wily tricks to keep a man

was beneath her. She was a woman of action, not underhanded tactics. She'd ask him outright to marry her and hope for the best.

A soft knock interrupted her thoughts.

"Yes."

As soon as she saw Sir Ayjay enter the study, Marion knew he was in a foul mood. His usually perfect hair stood on ends, his eyes were bloodshot and his hands shook as he rearranged his undertunic collar.

"Morning," he muttered.

Confused, she cocked her head. "Yes, it is indeed morning."

With a scowl, he sank in the chair in front of the cold hearth and leaned back so he could rest his head. "You know what I want?"

Marion shifted behind her desk as his words elicited a stab of need through her belly and sex. She knew what *she* wanted...him.

He must have caught the subtle change in her for he cocked an eyebrow, even managed a faint, mocking little smile. "That too. But I was thinking along more everyday things like fresh clothes, a shower with enough water pressure to drill a hole in my skull, a nice clean shirt with razor-sharp pressing and, for Christ's sake," he pinched the fabric of his hose and snorted in disgust, "I want pants with one vertical crease not forty horizontal ones. I want clean drawers. That'd be nice. You can just turn them around so many times. A cup of coffee. Oh and I want to shave. I don't mind a five o'clock shadow but this is getting ridiculous."

He sighed.

Trying not to laugh, Marion stood from behind her desk and joined him by the cold hearth. "Coffee? What sort of drink is it?"

"The kind that wakes your brain. Mine is asleep, just like my ass." He shifted in the chair, raked a hand in his hair and grimaced. "Great, Elvis hair too."

She laughed without knowing why. "What is an 'elvis'?"

"I'm not sure anyone knows."

Such a strange man.

Her mirth faded when she recalled the coming day's event. "This is the day of our Lord. Lord Matheus expects us to dine with him tonight. But I can go with Hugo alone if you desire."

Sir Ayjay grinned a malicious smile. Again, she was reminded this mountain lion indeed had claws. Sharp ones. "Oh no, you're not taking all the fun away from me. I'm looking forward to it actually. I work so much better when I'm caffeine deprived, hung-over and wearing dirty clothes."

"I can do little about some of your requests but I can help you with the clothes, especially now that Thomas is here. He is well traveled and knows all the recent cuts."

Sir Ayjay threw a suspicious glance at her. "*Recent* cuts...? Ha!"

"I thought perhaps you would enjoy having garments made for you. My stitching is good. Hannah and I made all of my clothes." Marion smoothed the dress over her lap. She caught Sir Ayjay's hungry gaze on her thighs. A frisson of arousal tightened her nipples. Perversely, she hoped he could see the effect he had on her while at the same time, she prayed for inner strength...she would need it tonight to face Lord Matheus. But since Sir Ayjay had claimed he wanted to be present, the prospect no longer horrified her. It merely terrified her.

"Handmade clothes, aren't I just the luckiest guy..." he muttered, stopped abruptly then straightened in his chair. "Sorry. Your clothes are fine, I'm just not used to these *cuts*." He stood.

"Right now?" she asked, joining him by the door.

He nodded. "I'll go wash up first but if you don't mind, I'd like to get my hands on clean clothes as soon as I can. Before I start attracting flies."

His derisive tone made the fine hairs on the back of her neck rise. But she had to remind herself the man was lost, far from his home. She wondered if all Norman lords were as eccentric as this one was. Not only his clothes and strange ways but how he spoke and thought. No man she knew of would demand to use the ladies' privacy area.

"Very well, I shall send for you in a little while."

While Sir Ayjay returned to his chambers, she rounded up Thomas, who sat in the kitchen, sharing his most recent tales with a grumbling Cook and Hannah, whom she sent to get Sir Ayjay and gather the cloth necessary to fit his tall body.

They met in the day room where light was the best. Sir Ayjay was already there and looked highly suspicious when Hannah arrived carrying a bundle of dark blue wool. Marion experienced a stitch of melancholy when she spotted the cloth. It had been Johannes' favorite color.

"There," she pointed toward a narrow door that led to a small chamber where they stored sewing and weaving supplies. "You can change in there while we prepare the cloth."

"Too far. My head will explode first."

His hair still wet, he removed his wrinkled clothes, only keeping the adjusted underthings on. Hannah flushed beet red while Thomas made no pretense to look elsewhere. She swore she saw admiration in his pale eyes. But she'd always had certain beliefs about her jaunty, voluble friend's penchants. And truth be told, their guest was a fine specimen!

When Sir Ayjay turned and stood in front of the long and narrow window, she couldn't help taking a moment to admire his strong and lean form, the way sunlight caressed his raven black hair and eyebrows, made them look almost indigo. With a sigh, she spread the cloth between Hannah and herself and draped it over his shoulders.

"He is so long," Hannah whispered in German as she tried to fit the man's legs but running out of fabric well above the ankle. "We'll need more, my lady. Much more."

Marion agreed with a nod. "Please get the rest and go through the trunk in my chamber as well. Boots, belts, anything. Surely something can fit him."

Hannah nodded solemnly before rushing out of the room. Even Thomas threw her a cautious look. She'd just offered to go through Johannes' affairs to fit another man. But why waste all those fine garments? He wasn't coming back. She'd made her peace with his departure long ago—the poor man had suffered enough from the black lung before passing on—and realized she couldn't afford to grieve his passing any longer. Not with Matheus circling like a vulture. Plus, Sir Ayjay was alive and present and needed clothes on his back. His smooth and powerful back, so soft and lean... Marion shook her head.

"I heard about the special event tonight," Thomas remarked, a sparkle of mischief in his pale gaze. "I would very much enjoy attending as well."

Marion grinned. "Lord Matheus would not be so pleased."

Sir Ayjay seemed to snap out of his dark musing and crossed his arms over his chest. "Oh? He doesn't like you either?"

A look of utter bliss came over Thomas. "Matheus loves himself the most and has many works of art displayed throughout Ragatz bearing his resemblance. He did not appreciate my ballad about his tastes."

Sir Ayjay snorted. "His castle is named Rat Ass?"

Thomas and Marion both laughed long and hard. Finally, when Sir Ayjay's smile had begun to dim slightly and confusion to darken his gaze, Thomas shook his head. "Not 'Rat Ass', although I shall call it so from now on. *RAhg-Atss*."

Hannah returned with her arms full of clothes and bundles of cloth. Marion helped her set everything on the tapestry trestle and sifted through the many things. Thomas sat while both women dressed, wrapped and draped bits and pieces over Sir Ayjay, who showed remarkable patience for a man. Not a single sigh or roll of eyes. Marion even suspected he was enjoying himself.

"This is very nice wool," he said appreciatively, rubbing the cloth between his fingers. "Is it from here?"

"Yes. We spin it here at Sargans," Marion replied, pleased her guest would recognize fine wool when he saw it. "We also dye and cut it. Our cloth is very prized."

"No wonder."

The look he gave her would have melted the snowy cap right off Mount Galen. She felt herself blush.

Finally, after much work and adjustments and several of Thomas' suggestions, Sir Ayjay stood dressed in a fine dark blue sleeveless tunic over a gown of the same cloth, both cinched by a brown, studded leather belt matching the supple boots. Fitted hose showed his impossibly long and muscular legs. A raw linen undertunic provided perfect contrast to the dark garments. He looked magnificent. Hannah and Thomas

joined her as all three stared at Sir Ayjay, who looked down at himself, pinched the hem of the knee-length gown and lifted it slightly.

"This is so *gay*."

Marion clasped her hands together and agreed with a hearty nod. "Is it not? The color is particularly vivid. We used twice the amount of woad on this batch, did we not, Hannah? And put only a small measure of madder root. That shade of blue befits you admirably."

"I meant...never mind." Sir Ayjay shook his head sadly.

Marion helped Hannah put everything back in order but kept an eye on Sir Ayjay as he walked around the room, trying his new clothes for fit. She'd never seen such a graceful yet well-built man.

"Sir Ayjay, you shall leave every woman swooning in your wake," Thomas commented.

Their visitor arched an eyebrow while a roguish grin tilted his mouth. "Just the women, huh?"

Thomas blushed. "Hannah, my dear, I shall help you with all this." He rushed to the maid's side and both shared the pile of leftover cloth and other pieces lying around.

When they were alone together, Sir Ayjay leaned against the wall to look out the window.

"Is something troubling you?"

"I need to vent."

"You need to 'vent'?"

"Somewhere outside, nice and open, where I can drive some balls. I need to *vent*."

Whatever "venting" and "driving balls" meant for him, he needed it sorely. She accompanied him to his chamber where he retrieved the strange pack Thorins had found lying near the lake. She'd finally get to see what it contained. Weapons most probably.

After they stepped outside and crossed the courtyard—under many admiring stares—she took him up along the rocky ledge, past the sloping pastures where grazed the sheep that produced the wool for which Sargans was renowned. Long grass undulated in gentle waves with the soft breeze of midafternoon. The hem of her dress in hand, she stopped for a quick glance at the snowy peaks surrounding them. Below, the river separating Sargans from Ragatz and Lord Matheus' fortress resembled a ribbon of silver silk. She took a deep breath.

"You must love it here," Sir Ayjay commented. He put the pack on the ground and leaned it gently on its side. Whatever lay inside was precious to him.

"I do. Although I am not from Sargans but a neighboring burg to the north, I adopted it the first day I arrived to meet my future husband." The charismatic Johannes and she had quickly discovered many shared interests. He'd been a good, attentive

husband, despite their inability to produce children. He had never blamed her nor had he endured anyone who did.

"When did he die?"

"Four, almost five years ago. Black lung took him. He was in such pain at the end, the Lord taking him came as a boon to us all, including him." She crossed herself.

Sir Ayjay nodded. "You must miss him."

She had for a long time, had missed her friend acutely. But looking at this strange man and remembering the softness of his touch and the mirth in his dark eyes, she couldn't honestly say she missed Johannes any longer. Or not as sharply anyway. How strange.

"Sometimes I catch myself not thinking about him for long periods. I no longer miss him the way I did, even though I loved him dearly. That wound is healed. Come," she went on, pointing to a plateau about a hundred paces or so to their right. "From what you said, I know the perfect place for you to 'vent'."

He shouldered his pack and followed her up the narrow ledge until they reached a grassy stretch relatively flat and level.

His wide smile rewarded her. Sir Ayjay nodded several times. "Perfect."

She watched him as he set the pack against a boulder, pulled something down which made a slit appear over its covering then slid a metal pole out. He straightened, swung the pole over his shoulder and looked out at the vast lush valley stretching below their feet.

"The wind might be a problem, but it's something no one can control."

He fished around the pack, snaked his arm completely in the top opening then pulled his hand out. A box and a small pointy item she couldn't see clearly were in his hand. He put it between his lips and carried the small box a few paces closer to the edge, set it on the ground. Marion drew near. Small white balls in neat rows filled the box. He picked one ball, retrieved the little stick he'd put between his teeth and planted it in the ground. A moment was needed to balance the ball onto the stick's blunt end. He stood, backed a pace then widened his stance.

"Why don't you go stand over there, Marion? You don't want to be behind me when I swing. I have quite the wingspan with these arms."

Marion backed away then waited with bated breath. What could this ritual be about? Sir Ayjay spent a long time lightly tamping the ground with his feet, back and forth, moving a heel by a hair or so. Such meticulousness. He wrapped the "handle" end of the pole in both hands, laced his fingers together then rolled his shoulders. Marion resisted the urge to tap her foot. What could require so much preparation? Then Sir Ayjay looked out over the edge, squared his shoulders.

Something was about to happen.

Moving his torso, he twisted up, up until his arms pointed almost all the way back behind him then with a fluid movement, he brought the lumpy end of the pole down with much speed and force and hit the little white ball.

The dry *CLAK* reverberated around them.

He shielded his eyes with a hand and followed the ball's incredible flight high and far until she couldn't see it anymore.

"Is this an important ritual in your homeland?"

"It's like a rite of passage," he replied, clearly proud of himself. "It separates the photocopier room from the boardroom, gophers from partners. Until you master this game, you're not good enough to meet the boss."

She didn't understand a word he said. But looking at him, his cheeks flushed with pleasure, his eyes twinkling, she could appreciate how important this custom must have been for him.

Then he shook his head and laughed heartily. "The look on your face."

He was making light of her! She put her fists on her hips. "It is only a game, is it not?"

He nodded, still chuckling. "It's called golf, and this right now is called 'driving balls'. But sucking at golf *can* make you lose an interview. Believe me."

He "drove" a couple more balls before he stopped, threw a slanted look at her and offered the handle end. "Do you want to try?"

Marion shook her head. "I would not know how to."

"I'll show you, you'll see, plus, women are good at it because you have to use your head and be patient. Guys tend to stink at both."

"But *you* seem very adept at it."

"It's because I'm special." He winked at her.

Sir Ayjay, the one who'd woken in her guest chamber and had charmed maids and *châtelaine* alike was back in full health. She enjoyed her Norman lord much better this way than the touchy, irritable man he could be.

"Come on," he urged, reaching for her wrist and gently guiding her to him. "Place your feet like mine, about shoulders' width."

Marion felt her cheeks flush when he stood behind her, snaked his arms along hers and wrapped his large hands over her own, creating a cocoon with his firm and fit body. His entire length pressed behind her. Heat seeped through her dress and tingled her feverish skin. When he leaned over and angled his chin above her shoulder, Marion closed her eyes to savor the moment.

You must ask him.

She cringed when she thought about asking Sir Ayjay if he would consider marrying her for real. He'd know it was only to get rid of Lord Matheus. But then again,

she would enjoy nothing more than spending time with her visitor. Especially since his departure wasn't so imminent or even assured.

"Hold the club this way, see," he said in her ear, pulling her back into the moment. "With your fingers interlinked and the thumbs extended downward. Now relax your shoulders. Spread your feet a little more. That's it."

"This tool looks very costly."

A chuckle made the fine hair tickle her ear. She shivered. Lord she wanted him.

"When I first started, I couldn't even afford the box of balls. But yeah, that set is expensive."

"It is something you value," she replied, nodding.

"It's the first thing that was really mine. It means a lot to me, especially this one, with the titanium head. I'd be crushed to part with it."

He nudged her feet wider apart with his. Her backside fit perfectly at the junction of his thighs and she tried to focus on the little white ball at her feet but failed miserably.

"Now look at the ball, nothing else. We'll try to take a swing, all right? Breathe in."

She held the handle of the "club" in a death grip when he guided her arms back and high, although not as high as he'd gone since she stood quite a bit shorter.

"Now swing and breathe out," he murmured in her ear.

His longer arms provided the perfect anchors as she swung the lumpy end of the pole at the ball. To her immense satisfaction and shock, she actually did it. She hit the ball with a satisfying TWAK.

They watched it arch in the air, though not as far or high as any of his and land below, amidst the grassy mounds.

"Isn't it the best sound?"

His lips touched her earlobe when he spoke, creating a long shiver down her back. Relinquishing her hands, he snaked his up her arms, over her shoulders then down her sides, until they rested on her hips.

"It's all in the hips." Sir Ayjay squeezed them for added emphasis.

"And Lord knows I have plenty of those," she countered with pretend levity.

"You mean '*thank the Lord* I have plenty of those'. There's nothing more delicious than curves on a woman."

When he kissed her on the neck, Marion shivered violently. "Sir Ayjay..."

"I'm not the best mountaineer around, but I'd say we're far from everyone else."

"We are. But..."

She was ready to melt on the spot for the thrill coursing through her. Her attempt at seducing him the night before last flashed in her mind's eye. He'd been so skilled with his mouth. Although she'd held her own with *hers* as well! She felt her cheeks heat up even more at the memory of taking his sex into her mouth.

“But...?”

“It is barely past midday,” she replied, looking around and fighting off an attack of the giggles. Widows did not giggle. “And we are *outside*.”

“Then we’ll keep most of our clothes on. What do you think? *Mm?*”

She felt his gentle fingers along her braid, softly tracing its length, weighing it before wrapping the thick coil over the shoulder opposite the one occupied by his mouth. His lips created a thrilling pattern of heat and silky touches over her skin. She nodded her assent.

“I know I shouldn’t be doing this,” he remarked between kisses below her ear. “Without protection or anything, but damn, Marion, I keep having visions of you in that bed. You tasted so good.”

A violent shiver coursed through her body, from nape to heel.

His tongue, so hot against her skin, traced the sensitive dip below her ear. “I want you again.”

“As do I.”

She did want him again, harder than anything else she’d ever wanted before. Pushing the thought of what she meant to ask him under the surface, she let her head rest against his chest and closed her eyes. This could be the very last time she was ever intimate with Sir Ayjay. Should he refuse her request, she’d be tasting Matheus’ embrace instead. She doubted he’d be as skilled. Or as tender.

Chapter Six

The way she pushed her butt up against his crotch nearly made A.J. throw her down and attack her. And damn it if she didn't act as though that was exactly what she wanted!

He spotted her looking around again and realized making love outside wasn't high on her list of cool things to try. She was so different from his "regular" girlfriends, such a novice when it came to sex, yet in a way, she was much more willing to try new things than any of his previous, *veteran* flames, who'd been content with their old tricks. A.J. wanted to laugh at himself. As if Marion were merely a flame. More like a wild fire blazing through tinder dry lands.

But he had just the thing for his reserved companion.

"Wait right here," he whispered before nipping her lobe. She gasped.

Out of the golf bag, A.J. pulled the umbrella and flipped it open. Twirling it around to show to her—her eyes couldn't possibly get any bigger—he brought it down and stabbed the narrow handle into the ground then angled it so it'd rest against the grassy slope. Four feet of perfect cover.

"How's this? Better?"

"You are so considerate, Sir Ayjay," she replied, grinning.

"Give me an ulterior motive and I'll show you consideration!"

When she drew near, A.J. knelt and wrapped her plentiful hips with his hands so he could bury his face in her belly, sniff the perfumed wool to his heart's content. Damn she smelled nice. Like lavender and fresh air. He felt her snake her fingers in his hair and gently rake it back, playing with it and messing it up. She had to be the first woman he let mess up his hair. Anyway, they usually didn't care much about his hair, too busy commenting on the size of his "caseload" instead. Har har.

Speaking of which, Marion was running her hand down inside the opening of his shirt then tilled the skin on her way up. A.J. shuddered and looked up into her face. "Damn it, Marion, you're going to make me lose my mind."

She didn't seem too upset or worried at the prospect and merely cocked her head. The wonderful braid slid from her shoulder and dangled over her belly, reaching down to his face. He closed his eyes and breathed her in. But already his senses were burning for more than just a quick sniff. His palms tingled, his cock pushed against the stiff woolen hose. Quickly, he took his boots and belt off and slid the tunic thing off him, got tangled in the multi-layered affair and started cursing. Warm hands announced Marion was helping him get rid of the stuff. He emerged from the linen and wool clothes with a pronounced roll of his eyes.

“That wasn’t very seductive.”

Marion chuckled. “I find you seductive all the same.”

Wearing only the wool hose, A.J. felt much better equipped to deal with the gorgeous blonde standing in front of him. After he looked up into her face, he snaked a hand under the hem of her gown, slid up along her calf and when he reached her thigh, he saw her eyes change. They darkened, narrowed. A dimple appeared by her delicious mouth. Staring at her hard, willing her to look only at him, he caressed her thigh, the inside of it, then ventured higher until he met her pussy. *Whoa*. No underwear!

She was already wet for him. Good woman.

With his hand starting a slow, back and forth movement, A.J. grabbed her other hand and kissed the inside of her wrist. Fingers unhurriedly circling her drenched cleft, he dipped inside and spread her lips so he could penetrate her. A deep quiver in her belly announced she enjoyed this quite a bit. That and the profuse amount of juices seeping out onto his fingers.

“You’re enjoying yourself, huh?”

She nodded before closing her eyes.

“Spread your feet a little bit.”

A small step outward allowed A.J. to squeeze in a shoulder. Lifting the hem of her gown high over her knees so he could hook her leg over his shoulder, A.J. gripped her hip and anchored her pussy right in front of his face.

“Sir Ayjay,” she protested before clamping her mouth shut when he licked her denuded thigh.

“You were saying?”

She sighed. “Nothing at all.”

Making sure not to overbalance her, A.J. spread her lips wide so he could eat her properly, could lick and nibble and flick her bud until she’d melt for him again. He still couldn’t shake the images of her from his mind, how she’d writhed beneath him, how she’d encircled his waist and bucked hard against him. He’d wanted to fuck her hard but had been afraid to hurt her. She was built of stronger stock than he’d first guessed.

“Touch my hair again,” he urged, sighing loudly when she grabbed it in fistfuls.

With her leg hooked over his shoulder, A.J. could really devour her, as deep as he could, although not as deep as he’d want to. He’d love nothing better than growing a ten-inch tongue to match his cock and fucking her with his mouth. The vision of her hips pumping his face made him squeeze her thighs hard. She transferred the violence back to him by pulling his hair so he’d press his face harder. Well, the *châtelaine* had some grip!

When she began to roll her pelvis hard against his chin, A.J. knew she was ready for more. Making sure he angled her right, he pulled against the back of her knee until she had to lace her fingers around his neck to keep from tumbling over. With an abrupt gasp, she landed on her back, right under the umbrella. Meanwhile, A.J. forced her

thighs apart by crawling right on top of her. Man he wanted to sink in, just take her then and there. Never mind foreplay! But he had to make sure she was wet, very wet, so he'd fit in.

"Oh Sir Ayjay, how wicked this is." She grinned widely as she let him yank the dress up over her waist to denude all that divine, pale skin. Her rosy cleft glistened invitingly. Fuck his dick, he wanted to taste her again. And he did.

Marion arched back when Sir Ayjay dove for her sex again, stretched her wide, wide enough to make it burn. She no longer cared as she gyrated her pelvis so his wicked mouth would devour her more deeply, more forcefully, until a series of little cries made her clamp both her hands over her mouth. He looked up at her and grinned before sinking his tongue into her slick cleft again. Oh the rapture!

But she wanted more than his tongue now, she wanted him, all of him, the magnificent shaft, so large and hot and smooth. Marion sat and tried to pull the man up to her so she could fist his crotch but he pushed her back down on the ground and pinned her there with a large hand over her sternum. Through the dress, he squeezed her breasts, found a nipple and pinched it hard enough to make her gasp and bite her lip.

"I want you," she murmured, somewhat still self-conscious that they lay half naked outdoors like animals. The large dome-shaped contraption shielded them nicely enough though, at least. She'd never seen anything quite like it. The thin, black shiny material was stretched over a metallic skeleton and converged into a single stem, which he'd planted into the ground so the thing wouldn't be blown away.

When he bit her sex, Marion cried out. Almost immediately she released. Sir Ayjay, growling and stretching her flesh taut, greedily drew her honey in. His mouth glistened as if he'd just drunk mead. A wolfish grin made her stare. Lord he was beautiful kneeling there between her thighs.

"You know what I'd like?"

Marion shook her head, unable to speak as she watched his eyes narrow even more. To add to the lust clawing at her, Sir Ayjay made a big affair of licking his upper lip while he toyed with her sex.

"I'd like to see your gorgeous ass when I fuck you, that's what I'd like."

Oh and he meant it exactly how he'd said it too, the foul-mouthed man! Marion could hardly contain the wicked words, let alone the act itself.

"Have you ever had that?" he asked, giving her cleft a pronounced lick.

She arched back with the wave unfurling through her loins. "Have...have a man bed me from *behind*?"

Sir Ayjay dislodged a thick strand of hair when he nodded. "It's very, very nice for the woman when it's done right." He grinned. "And I *can* do it oh-so right."

She believed his boasting. Although she did want to try the unusual position, wouldn't that make her less respectable in a way? Marion looked down at the imposing bulge in his hose and wondered how it would feel to have Sir Ayjay enter her thus. Heat spread to her engorged nether lips. He wouldn't hurt her. She'd come to believe this about him if nothing else.

He shook his head. "It's not a milestone or anything, Marion. Never mind my poor man brain, just make love to me whichever way you want." With that, he threw himself backward and landed flat on his back, arms and legs spread wide. "I'm yours."

Marion couldn't help it. She laughed. "I should like to try this odd taste of yours."

Sir Ayjay looked up, muscles over his belly played and shifted with the effort. "Are you absolutely sure? Because if you're not, then I'm not getting near your fine ass."

"I *am* sure. Let us try."

He stood on his knees and slowly undid the drawstring of his hose, the entire time staring at her unblinkingly. Marion couldn't look at anything else but his perfectly symmetrical belly as it emerged from the hose then at his swollen manhood when it sprang from its confines and bobbed heavily over his thighs. Such a massive thing. It was a wonder she could contain him at all, from any angle. "First, lie down on your belly."

Sir Ayjay helped untwist her dress as she went down onto her front, thighs shaking with excitement and apprehension as she looked back to watch what he was doing. After lifting the hem of her dress over the back of her knees, Sir Ayjay smiled in a greedy sort of way, as though he'd found something highly valuable and had no intention of sharing.

"Your legs, they're so...mmm."

He soon had his mouth all over the back of her legs, the mix of teeth and tongue creating the most tantalizing sensations right up to her backside. When he pressed inside her ankles so he could kneel in between, Marion had to bite down hard to keep from moaning her pleasure at him. And he hadn't even touched her for real yet.

Lifting the hem of the dress only as needed, Sir Ayjay kissed and caressed his way upward, behind her knees, between her thighs.

"I love your skin," he said between kisses. "It's so soft."

His fingers reached the juncture between her legs. Marion hadn't realized she was so wet for him until he slid his finger over her sex then round and round, before slipping inside. The gentle incursion forced an "*ahh*" of satisfaction from her. She grinned behind her sleeve.

"Oh you liked that, did you? Wait until you get the real thing."

"So humble."

He chuckled as he slipped his finger out, found her pearl with the ease of the skilled and proceeded to rub it delectably hard. Marion found that her backside rose as if moved by unseen forces. She arched her spine to receive more of Sir Ayjay's unusual

brand of lovemaking, even spread her legs without the need to be asked. He was such a bad influence on her.

Bad in an exciting way!

“Damn, Marion, I’m not going to last long if you keep this up.” With a snarl, he used his entire hand to caress her cleft.

He lifted her dress up over her waist and bit her cheek. With a cry on her lips, Marion meant to turn but only moaned when he leaned over and licked what portion of her sex he could reach. Throwing respectability to the wind, Marion climbed onto her knees but kept her chest against the ground so Sir Ayjay could work properly.

“Oh you wicked...”

Marion gasped when he seized her cheeks, pulled them far apart and literally attacked her exposed flesh, licking, nibbling, sucking loudly. Because she’d already released moments before, within heartbeats her sex was pulsating with the precursors of a violent climax. She wanted him. So badly.

When he slipped a muscled thigh between hers, Marion was more than ready to have this skilled, light-touched man do anything he wished to her.

“Do you still want this?” he murmured in her ear while his finger entered her slowly, worked her essence around. “You have to be sure.”

Marion twisted so she could look at him in the eye. “I want you this way. Take me before I make a fool of myself.”

Sir Ayjay’s grin nearly split his face in half. “You won’t regret it.”

Kneeling behind her, anchoring her knees on either side of his, he rubbed his glans around her sex, gathered her juices while his hands caressed her backside in circular motions. She could feel the tension coiled in his muscular body. He was keeping himself in check with unyielding self-control.

With surprising ease, he slid inside, only by a finger or so, then pulled out so he could resume his former activity and rub her distended pearl with his shaft. Pleasure was building up. Marion curled her spine in what she hoped would be an inviting fashion.

His hands on her backside dug in. “Marion, if you want this to be gentle, you have to stop torturing me.”

A sense of power engulfed her. That she could so easily overwhelm such a strong man made her feel feminine and strong but more precisely, it made Marion feel important. To him.

Sir Ayjay slid in again, deeper.

Marion was about to voice her encouragement when a surprising stab of sexual gratification poked her in the belly, flared outward, engulfed her sex and distended backside.

“Ohh...”

And when he entered her, this time with a precise but sharp thrust, Marion cried out. His large hands encircled her waist, even bunched her dress so he could use the fistfuls of wool as counterpoints to the movement of his hips. She hadn't expected the depth of rapture this unusual—wickedly so—position would bring. Despite his warning, Marion couldn't help curving her backside up, bucking back against his hard belly. A cry rose to her lips again, one she tried to suppress. Failed miserably. As if spurred by her vocal support, Sir Ayjay added force to his push.

"Marion, damn, *damn*," he snarled as he drove in deep. She felt the wool of his hose rubbing against the back of her thighs.

"Take me, take me," she heard herself groan to her complete shock and embarrassment. Where had this all come from, this sudden urge, this frenzy?

A pronounced tilt of his hips made her arch back, another moan of bliss escaping her. She couldn't even control herself!

He did take her. To the jagged peaks of ecstasy, up beyond to the stars to heaven itself. Marion groaned her satisfaction, she cried it out and murmured it into the grass under her. And while Sir Ayjay worked his delicious body into hers, joined their flesh and bodies, all she could do, *wanted* to do, was receive his skills and hope it'd never end. He'd been right. It was *very* good.

After a particularly deep and powerful thrust that raised her knees off the ground, Sir Ayjay stilled. Yet there were no pulsations to indicate he'd released. Had he found no pleasure?

"Have you—"

He'd just flipped her on her back by the crook of a knee. Marion rolled over, pulled her dress up to make some room between her knees. Some lady she'd become!

"You thought I was finished, huh?" he teased, panting, his agile mouth doing wonders to the inside of her knee.

"I must admit...I did."

He smiled his predatory grin again. "Not nearly, my dear. Not with you."

Knowing pleasure beyond words would soon ravage her body, Marion spread her knees as wide as they'd go and reached down so she could touch his chest, his sculpted belly, attention he repaid with a thumb over her throbbing pearl. Marion had to lie back down where she writhed without one stitch of awkwardness. And to say she'd only been intimate with the man once before. What was he making of her?

"Is that good?" he asked, knowing full well the answer. "Huh?"

Marion nodded.

Without further ado, he scooped her up over his lap and took her.

The depth of his initial thrust felt cordial enough and she realized he hadn't pushed as deeply or as hard as he probably wished. Given his size, he was being ever careful. Thoughtful man. Although Johannes had always been tender with her, she'd heard tales of how men could be very brutal in bed.

Sir Ayjay grimaced when he sank deeper. "Ahh. I'm close, Marion."

"Let it come," she replied through her teeth. Good Lord, she wanted him to make love to her in every way possible.

Wrapping his muscled arm over one of her thighs, he straightened her leg so it would stand up against his chest while her other he wrapped around his middle. Muscles banded, he tilted his hips forward, took her more deeply.

Fire lanced at her belly. Marion let out a long whimper of rapture, which seemed to bolster Sir Ayjay. Biting his bottom lip, he pushed in, this time in a swift and profound thrust that tore a cry from her. He froze instantly, looked worried.

"More," she murmured through her teeth. Lord she wanted more. More!

She'd become insatiable in the span of a few days. Dreams of Sir Ayjay peopled her dreams, plagued her nights, while her days were spent gazing at him in wonderment and desire. Her Norman lord really had changed her, in ways he didn't even know.

Unlike his penetration from behind, he wasn't holding back now. Still clutching her leg upright against him, he twisted hard against her, stretched her sex, distended her channel until she thought the fire would burn her whole, but instead of pain, exquisite fulfillment spread through her. Another wave loomed over her. It darkened her vision. Stars popped behind her eyelids. And while Sir Ayjay shoved himself in, in a sudden and powerful sequence of burning stabs, Marion reached down on either side of her and grabbed at the grass. Anchored more solidly, she withstood his ferocious lovemaking. Each potent drive forced a keen from her.

"More," she urged. She didn't care what this made of her. She wanted Sir Ayjay to crush her to him, wanted him violently.

Leaning forward, he trapped her leg over his shoulder, the other pinned beneath his great weight then bent until his face loomed over hers. His eyes never leaving hers, he retracted then bore down, using his considerable stamina and vigor to extort shameless cries of fulfillment from her. His deep voice joining hers, he pushed in, branding, claiming, crushing her until his face twisted in the throes of pleasure, he abruptly pulled out and climaxed in the grass beside her. Marion unhooked her leg from around his shoulder and let him arrange himself.

With a long sigh, he collapsed beside her and rolled onto his back. His member still pointed proudly.

When she could talk again, Marion cleared her throat and tried to fight the grin tugging at her lips. He twisted his neck to look at her and smiled himself.

"Your ways are peculiar, Sir Ayjay, but very...pleasurable." She felt herself blush.

"I aim to please. You should see what I can do with some strawberries and honey. Mm-mm."

The image of how he'd use these foods—in even more wicked ways, undoubtedly—made Marion want to fan herself. Perhaps they should try this some day.

He plucked a blade of long grass and brought it to his lips. The way he pensively chewed on it made her wonder about the chain of thought occupying him. What sort of life had Sir Ayjay left behind, she wondered.

"You must miss your home terribly."

He shrugged, which made his proud shaft bobbed gently. Though it didn't seem to want to relent anytime soon. "Well, yeah, I do, but at the same time, I don't miss the stress, the traffic, oh and all those cell phones. Plus, not many people will notice I'm gone anyway."

She had no idea what any of these words meant, but he did seem as though he missed none of them.

"Shall your friends not wonder what happened to you? Shall your people not wonder where their lord has gone?"

"Oh that's right, the Norman Lord thing, pfft! They'll wonder only when my parking spot stays empty. They'll be so damn glad to park near the door. They won't miss me."

"Shall they not? I cannot believe this. Surely they shall miss you." *I would.*

"Nah. I don't have that sort of friends." He suddenly looked as if the notion bothered him. Or pained him. He arched back so he could look into her face. "This feels like a vacation...only a fool would miss work. Plus, there's excellent company here."

The lascivious grin with which he graced her made her swallow hard. "I shall endeavor to make your stay here as pleasant as possible, Sir Ayjay."

"Don't worry for me, I'll be fine." He rolled onto his elbows and transferred the blade of grass from one corner to the next. With his tongue alone. Heat like a fever reached her cheeks.

Already? She'd just lain with the man only moments ago. Her sex still throbbed, for goodness sake!

"You though, you worry me."

"How so?" she asked, unsure if the sudden look of interest she saw in his eyes bode well for her or not.

"Well, there's the little matter of The Right Honorable Minister Tightbutt chewing at your heels."

Such a vile tongue on a man so handsome!

He reached out so he could run his knuckles on her cheek. The mark had faded but not the sting of shame it'd brought with it. Matheus had slapped her in front of everyone. The brute!

"What are you going to do about him?"

It was her turn to shrug. She rolled onto her belly as well, formed a steeple with her hands and rested her chin on it. By her side, Sir Ayjay leaned sideways so he could kiss her shoulder. So affectionate. So skilled. What woman wouldn't want to spend the rest of her life with such a man?

You must ask him.

The frightening task ahead blew icy breaths down her neck. What if he said no? Then again, what if he said yes?

"I saw that same look yesterday, right before you slapped me," Sir Ayjay remarked casually. Yet she could feel the tension coiling between them and hated it.

Marion had never been one to shy away from responsibility. She took a long breath. "Sir Ayjay, we have met only recently and you are not attached to this region."

She felt him stiffen beside her. "It sounds like a Dear John letter."

"Pardon me?"

"Not important, go on."

"Well, I know you are not from this region and nothing keeps you here. You are free to leave as you wish of course —"

"Just say it, Marion."

The hard tone didn't bode well for her question.

"Should I marry, Lord Matheus would have no choice but to leave me alone."

Sir Ayjay's eyes flared wide. He snorted in laughter, seemed to rethink her comment then grimaced. "Argh, hell, Marion, please don't. It's not right. I can't... I *can't*."

She nodded, even if inside she wanted to cry and hide her face in shame. To ask a man to marry her and be refused... A woman shouldn't have to ask this of a man. She never should've considered it and faced her trouble head-on instead. Already she regretted involving a foreign lord in her affairs. But this rebuttal felt like a blade across her heart. Making sure her chin didn't shake — she wanted to cry — Marion nodded.

"Of course, I understand completely."

"I don't think you do," he replied, spitting out the blade of grass.

Kneeling, he wrestled his garments on, fumbled with the belt before finally managing to pull himself together.

Marion did the same, rearranged her dress and hair. Her hands shook. So did his, for that matter.

"I'm not the marrying kind," he began, spat something in his language before grabbing her by the shoulders and putting his face very near. She kept her gaze stubbornly away from his. No need to see the scorn in his eyes on top of making a fool of herself.

"Please, Marion, look at me."

She did, noticed how no scorn shone in the dark eyes but misery. This surprised her.

"I don't belong here. I can't get involved in something like this. It'd change a whole bunch of things, screw everything up. But I'll find a way to get him off you, okay. This,

I promise. We could go to your husband's family and make our case. I *can* do that. I'll do everything I possibly can to help you keep Sargans. I just can't marry you, Marion."

She nodded.

Yet the sting of rejection didn't fade.

Chapter Seven

Damn his chin itched. Shaving with a knife wasn't fun. Oh they called it a razor, he called it a *knife*, a big, honking hunter's knife he'd had to put to his own throat. The thing was sharp though, at least. With a bit of help from a blushing maid – weren't they all – he'd managed not to gouge himself. Good thing he didn't have sensitive skin.

Never mind a horse, I'd give my kingdom for a razor!

Twelfth century Europe...

He still couldn't wrap his brain around it. Nor could he think about Marion's request that he marry her for real without having a bad case of the cold feet. The pain in her eyes when he'd said no. What jerk would say no to such curvy little goddess?

A chicken-shit bastard with no balls, that's who!

He threw a sneaky peek at her as they rode toward Earl Asswipe's estate. Damn, she was beautiful! And *brave*.

A.J. couldn't imagine asking something so personal and being turned down. It must have hurt like nothing else. He'd be too much of a coward to ask himself even if he *did* want to marry her. Which he of course didn't. Right?

Right?

The thought of their spending the rest of their lives together should've scared him into packing his bags – which he didn't have – and heading for the road – which he didn't know. But no, nothing. No fear, no feeling of having a choker around his neck. Did it mean he was considering it but too stupid to know? But how could he marry Marion? He didn't belong. He was from somewhere else. Some *time* else!

What a cluster fuck!

Someone somewhere was having a lot of fun at his expense. Maybe it was some sort of demented reality television show? Hell knew there were a lot of those around.

Tune in folks as we watch a lawyer slowly lose his mind when he wakes from a crash to find himself in what he thinks is medieval Switzerland. Sound of applause and canned laughter. Don't miss next week's episode – surgery without anesthesia!

A.J. chanced another quick peek at his companions as they rode to meet Baronet Woman Beater of Pouffyland for supper. Marion wore a stunning high-collared, long-sleeved indigo dress, and Hugo his usual medieval dude apparel and that big sword he liked waving around. Both appeared stoic but he could tell nerves were gnawing at them. Marion, for one, scowled at her hands as she rubbed them repeatedly on her lap. He wouldn't mind doing it for her.

Hey. Pull you dick back in your pants. You said no to her. So hands off.

And Hugo, well, he was scowling as well but it was his usual expression. Unless she'd told him and it gave Conan another reason to be pissed off.

His situation alternately pressed in on him when he considered the truth behind Thomas' and Marion's crazy claim and then lightened as denial surfaced once again. He couldn't be in eleven forty-eight. It was impossible on so many levels he couldn't even begin to explain it, not even to himself. But then again, maybe the plane had been struck by lightning and passed through a sort of time rip or something, to crash land somewhere in the Alps, almost one thousand years before it'd taken off.

Talk about jet lag!

A.J. found he couldn't froth himself into anger or despair as he considered life around him. There were worse things than having a woman such as Marion showing him around her world. A.J. shook his head.

But it won't happen now 'cause you said no. You gotta give a guy some time to think about these things. I wish she wouldn't have sprung this one on me. Dammit.

There were three hypotheses to explain his situation. No, actually, there could be four thousand, but he was just a lawyer, not a theoretical physicist and so would just deal with the three he could wrap his humble brain around.

A. He really *had* gone back in time – no matter the how and why – and would have to live with it. There would be no helicopter or search and rescue mission.

B. Some medieval fan-cult led by a blonde curvaceous bombshell had found him and was intent on keeping him, which, as much as he thought he was being a moron, didn't manage to make him that worried. Or...

C. Reality television was playing with the geek *du jour* and generating dismal ratings because Alexandre-Jean Bernier might be a reviled lawyer, a handsome guy and – let's face it – a smart puppy but he wasn't a puppet who enjoyed having its strings pulled and tended to dig his heels in.

In the words of Sherlock Holmes or some other smart old fart, when you've dismissed the moronic, whatever is left has to be the truth. Or something like that.

So chances were, hypothesis A was the right one. Or B. *Please don't let it be C.* A.J. looked down at himself and cringed. He was wearing a *dress*. He couldn't be seen on TV this way.

"Is everything all right, Sir Ayjay?" Marion asked as she deftly maneuvered her dark brown horse closer. He wished he could drive – er, *ride* – his horse as she did. It looked so easy to her.

"I'm just thinking how I've probably lost my mind." He rolled his index finger by his temple.

"Would it be easier if you believed you had lost your mind?"

His lawyer brain kicked into high gear. *Loaded question. Deflect and obfuscate.*

Was she referring to him turning her down or just the general feeling of all-purpose insanity breathing down his neck? Did she really want to know or was she just asking?

Women were like that, they asked a ton of questions, sometimes not even trying to get an answer. A.J. looked at her, spotted the wounded pride but nothing else. He was a big-shot lawyer, dammit. He couldn't just tell the truth. What would that make him? An inexpensive, idealist law graduate?

Fuck. It used to be me. Back when I took cases based on merit.

Marion patiently waited for his answer. *Argh, Christ, just go with the truth and damn the torpedoes.*

"Yes, it'd be much easier. I could just pretend you and Thomas are right and that I've gone back—"

He looked at Hugo, who kept staring straight ahead. "Hey, your folks won't try to burn me at the stake, will they? If they hear my story? 'Cause I'll be a Norman then, no problem."

Wouldn't that make for a grand finale on any reality TV show? *Live tonight, a witch burning! Tune in and watch the lawyer burrrrrn!*

Despite the pain still lingering in her eyes, she laughed and shook her head as if saying, "there, there".

He'd never been the kind of desperate soul to need people's laughter in his life, but right then the lovely sound made him wish he could be witty and amusing just for the pleasure of hearing Marion laugh. Especially after he'd made love to her then turned around and pushed her away.

Oh what's this strange feeling in my stomach? Like a worm twisting around? Is this it, guilt? Was he feeling guilty? Him, The Shark?! It'd sure be a first. His colleagues would want to take a picture of that. Keep it for later.

Marion turned her face away and the grin died. With a sigh, he followed her gaze forward.

So that's Lord Asshole's porcelain throne, A.J. thought when he spotted the massive fortress—Castle Rat Ass—perched precariously along a steep ravine. As much as he hated to admit it, the place was kind of intimidating. But he'd walk around with a mullet before he let it show.

"No trumpets or anything?" he commented out loud.

Hugo rolled his eyes. A.J. noticed the guy did so a lot and wondered if he kept it just for him or if Conan the Barbarian did it to everybody else.

"Lord Matheus hardly thinks of us as worthy of trumpets, Sir Ayjay," Marion replied, a sardonic smile playing at the corner of her oh-so-succulent mouth.

He wanted to kiss that mouth right then and there. But Hugo did have the pointy sword on him and continually looked ready to use it at a second's notice. Did he sleep with the thing?

A.J. was so, so glad when they finally reached the stone bridge and were led under the...

Upside down picket fence thing...?

Oh yeah! A portcullis!

His butt throbbed. He had to admit the “dress” was mighty comfortable though, compared to the wool suit he’d been forced to relinquish. It was nice not to have his package all squished up inside sports boxers. And those boots, so supple and light.

A trio of young men grabbed the reins to each of their horses and waited while the guests dismounted. Try as he might, A.J. only managed not to get his foot stuck in the stirrup by pulling it out a tad too early and sliding off with much less grace than his companions. But he was getting better at this horse thing. At least, the beast had stopped trying to twist around and bite his knees.

“Lord Matheus sends me to greet you,” said an older man with a snow-white mustache and beard. A skinny version of Santa Claus without the red outfit. Or a giant garden gnome without the hat.

The trio followed their guide as they proceeded through the colossal fortress where silence reigned supreme. A.J. looked around at the tapestries hanging on the walls, most of them hunting scenes with unfailingly as the main character a stern-faced Asshole the First himself. No wonder Thomas hadn’t been able to resist commenting on the artwork. Even A.J. wanted to write a ballad about it. Something entitled “Ode to His Puckered Lordship”. A snort of laughter escaped him.

“Is something the matter?” Marion asked under her breath.

“I was admiring the *artwork*.”

Even Hugo smiled.

When they entered a massive dining hall where a long table had already been set and laden with food, A.J. tried his damndest to subdue the appreciative whistle. Half the rainforest was there, stained a dark glossy russet with decorative stonework at every angle in the room. And throning high in the center of the far wall was the largest stained-glass window A.J. had ever seen outside a church. A minivan could’ve driven right through without touching the sides. Now that he studied the circular window, he noticed how it too bore the lord’s likeness as he stood over a sickly looking dragon that could’ve been a cross between a twisted gecko and a stumpy iguana. Its expression reflected more perplexity than fear or pain as the man’s sword pierced its belly. A.J. wondered if Thomas had seen that one.

Complete with three-quarters of every fowl species known to man posed in an elaborate, pouffy assemblage, the table had more dead animals on it than a mural-sized *nature morte* painting. The only thing missing on the table was the pig with an apple in its mouth. Yuck. And he, the budding vegetarian.

“Stingy but it’ll have to do I guess,” A.J. muttered through his teeth.

A wide door opened across the hall and Sire Dickhead himself stepped through, wearing a dress as well—thank God for small favors—and flanked on either side by a pair of accountant-looking weasels, one of whom he recognized as the reader of the scroll. A.J. silently applauded the move. *Make your entry after everybody else is there. Smart. Too bad I’ve seen it – and used it – plenty of times before.*

“Sir Ayjay, I have been looking forward to this meeting. I believe you have already met my scribe Otto,” he indicated the balding man to his left. “Please allow me to introduce Sargans’ family notary Sir Emery.”

He heard Marion take a sharp breath and wondered what the family notary being there could mean other than some impending legal brawl. He loved brawls! And with recent events and insanity tickling the back of his head, he was looking for a good pissing contest to take his mind off more serious things...such as his growing crush on his hostess and his turning her offer down.

Matheus must have caught the admiring look in A.J.’s face as he gazed at the giant stained-glass window.

“Ah, I see you can recognize fine things,” he said with a sly look at Marion. “This particular work comes from Italy. Exquisite, is it not?”

He’s not referring to Marion as a thing, is he? That couldn’t be left unpunished.

“What’s that animal?” A.J. asked, crossing his arms and cocking his head theatrically. “The one that looks befuddled at the bit of metal pointing out of its belly? Is it a lizard?”

“Perhaps there are no such feats of chivalry in your homeland, Sir Ayjay, but it is a *dra-gon*. A most fearsome creature only the strongest men can tame.” Another wily glance at Marion.

A.J. swore his blood pressure went up a notch. *Whoa, man, keep it business.*

But he vowed to take a few strips off the man just for being rude to the lovely lady.

He bared his Shark smile. “Lord Matheus, I can’t say the pleasure of this meeting is mutual but I do look forward to a bit of verbal cut and thrust. I swear I’ll try to limit the damages as much as I can.”

Matheus laughed heartily, shaking his head. “This bodes very well. I love a worthy opponent.” Turning to Marion, he bowed slightly. “Lady Marion, a vision as usual.” Hugo only received a curt nod.

A.J. felt like poking Hugo in the chest but abstained from showing Marquis Hairy Sack any division in the ranks.

With a quick curtsy, Marion replied, “Lord Matheus, we are honored by your invitation.”

Like hell we are! A Machiavellian laugh almost made it past A.J. He caught himself in time and just smirked.

“My thanks, good lady. Please,” Matheus went on, waving his hand at the small zoo on the table. “Let us sit and enjoy ourselves.”

He sat at the end of the table, a weasel on either side. The medieval Stooges.

Marion chose the chair next to Otto’s and Hugo sat on her right, which left A.J. to sit across her, beside What’s His Name Notary. But before he circled the table, he put his hand on Marion’s backrest as she looked about ready to sit.

“Allow me,” he said, suave and just dripping with unctuous gallantry. “A man shouldn’t sit while a lady still stands. That’s how we do things at home.”

She seemed surprised in a happy way as A.J. pushed her chair in then sat across from her.

Matheus watched the exchange with a dark, envious look in his eyes, for which A.J. congratulated himself. There was nothing like pushing people’s buttons.

A large poultry being occupied A.J.’s attention for a while as he tried to see what it’d been. Spicy smells emanated from all the exquisite food and saliva pooled under his tongue. *The jerk knows how to set a table, that’s for sure.* Although A.J. thought there were just too many carcasses lying around. Just one dead bird would have sufficed. Was that a *swan*? Jeez. What next, Bambi? Disgusting.

“I was just telling Sir Emery how the lovely Lady Marion had finally found herself another husband. He was quite shocked, as I was.”

A.J. kept his face a composed mask of “You’re a cockroach and I’m about to crush your exoskeleton insectoid ass with my designer shoe”. *Or should I say period boot.* Whatever.

He hoped Marion wouldn’t let on and tell them all he’d turned her down, that she was “up for grabs”. He didn’t want to marry her—unless this was some residual denial—but would prefer to choke on the swan than let Lord Crotch Crickets think he’d won.

He turned to gauge Marion’s reaction. None. Flatline. She only stared at Matheus as if she’d played this game before and wouldn’t be dragged down in the dirt again. Hugo looked as though he wouldn’t mind rolling in the dirt with the guy but A.J. guessed being captain of the guard didn’t allow for much airtime with Matheus. So the bearded giant only seethed in palpable rage.

Sir Emery cocked his head like an owl would and set his piercing gaze on Marion. “Perhaps Lady Marion is unaware the family’s blessing must be obtained first before she is to make any such decision.”

Ah, now we have a reaction.

“As I have told Lord Matheus, a woman’s heart is not dictated by words inside a moldy book but by her own choices.”

While Sir Emery only shrugged noncommittally, Matheus shook his head as though he were scolding a child. “I fear your work is cut out for you, Sir Ayjay. May I suggest a firm hand?”

“The kind of firm hand you put to the lady’s cheek two days ago, you mean?” A.J. replied with much more force than he intended. Matheus’ expression reflected the slip. The smug look on his face just about killed A.J. But Sir Emery *did* look horrified at the implications and stared at their host.

Keep it cool, A.J. chanted in his head. That’s exactly what the jerk wants, a reaction.

A.J. forced a perfectly aligned, post-braces smile and narrowed his eyes. “Different country, different mores, Lord Matheus. Where I come from, men don’t treat women badly unless they want to spend a lot of time masturbating, if you know what I mean.”

“I am afraid I do not.”

“Give a few tugs...?”

Matheus arched an eyebrow but shook his head.

“Oh come on, you guys do it too around here. Polish the rocket. The five-knuckle shuffle.”

A.J. swore he heard crickets in the background.

“Spank the monkey, choke the bishop, play puppet master. No?” Giving up decorum, A.J. pumped the air in pretend masturbation.

While Matheus roared in laughter, Marion flushed purple while the two weasels coughed politely behind their hands. Only Hugo managed to keep his cool and stare down at his trencher, his chin trembling with repressed laughter. A.J. could tell he’d defused the situation quite well.

The Shark was back in control.

“Sir Ayjay, Good Lord,” Marion snapped. The glare on her would’ve melted a chunk off Antarctica.

He grinned wider, tried to send the message everything would be good if they played it cool. She must not take her own messages for she frowned at him before sitting up straighter in her chair.

As long as she plays the game, he kept chanting to himself. He wouldn’t be able to digest the smug brute’s triumph...nor the thought of his hands on Marion, for that matter.

After their host carved himself a chunk of whatever dead animal lay in front of him – goose, judging by the length of its neck – everyone else dug in the food. Servants must have been waiting for a cue he didn’t see for a pair of them passed around the table serving a deep red wine A.J. had no intention of drinking. It resembled blood too much. Didn’t they have any of the mead thing?

The tense, stifled meal reminded him of his first real interview, back when he still fought for the good side and chose his clients according to the merit of their cause instead of their pocketbook. He’d dined with the stuffy, practically senile senior partner in the hopes of getting a job that would actually pay the bills. His mom’s illness had carved a substantial groove in his bank account. It was the excuse he’d given for himself to change tactics and go only for rich clients. *Pay Mom’s doctor bills*. Ha. Bullshit. He’d kept on doing it even after her death.

Matheus indicated the meal was over when he wiped his knife on a serviette, sheathed it and crossed his fingers in a steeple. *Ah*, A.J. thought, *the “let’s get down to business” pose*. He sheathed his untouched knife as well – couldn’t believe he’d been convinced to wear it in the first place – and waited.

"Tell me, Sir Ayjay, what title do you hold exactly?"

"Valedictorian. Why?"

The weasels seemed duly impressed. Matheus only arched an eyebrow. "I have never heard of such a title. What is the size and tenure of your holding?"

"I'm afraid I'm not following your chain of thought." *Here, chew on that.*

"Your tenure, your assets. Are they sufficient?"

"What are your parameters?" That always got people thinking hard and fast. It meant nothing. It seemed to work with Son of a Bitch Rat Ass. Poor, dumb bugger.

Matheus huffed a quick breath. His cheeks darkened nicely when he leaned forward in his chair. "Have you fortune and title, sir?"

A.J. snorted in disgust. "Oh. You want to know how many camels I own? Please, this is so pedestrian. But out of the goodness of my heart and to demonstrate my good manners, I'll tell you." Adopting an air of utter ennui, he went on. "Let's see, because the dollar was up by a few bits, I've recently invested about a hundred grand in commodities, you know gold and the likes, but that was after I upped my take on bonds—they're up to four point nine now, and my financial advisors have been harassing me nonstop—and since I've always believed in having a diversified portfolio, I bought an obscene amount of tech stocks and a couple more properties by the lake. If you factor in life insurance and the several carriages I own, I'd say I'm worth quite a lot of your—"

"My thanks, Sir Ayjay," Matheus cut in. It was A.J.'s turn to apparently ratchet up the other's blood pressure. Revenge was indeed sweet.

"You're being defensive," A.J. put in sweetly. He rested his elbow on the table and waved his hand around. "All this talk of assets is so linear. Don't you think?"

Matheus looked directly at Marion as though A.J. hadn't spoken. "You seem to have found yourself a foreign lord as voluble as he is wealthy. I *would* offer my congratulations...but I am afraid I cannot."

"What do you mean?" Marion replied, half coming out of her chair.

"Your dead husband's holdings, including Sargans and its chattel, belong to me, and as such, I decide which ones stay and which ones can be sold or bequeathed or in this case, given away in marriage."

Before A.J. could take a breath for the extra acid remark—oh and there was one with Turdface's name on it—Marion had stood to her full height, which might not have been much physically, but hot damn, she could've been a six-foot Valkyrie barreling down the hill with a sword above her head screaming, "*MEN ARE PIIIIIGS!*" Even A.J. was stunned into silent awe.

"I am *not* chattel, Lord Matheus, but your cousin Johannes' *widow*."

"Do not use such tone with me, woman!" Matheus snapped, threw a quick glance at the family notary before pinching the bridge of his nose. He forced a glacial smile on. "As much as I regret interfering in Sargans' affairs, it is clear you cannot choose a

proper husband for yourself. No disrespect meant, Sir Ayjay, but I cannot allow Lady Marion to marry outside the canton."

"How dare you decide for me," Marion snapped, both fists on her hips, eyes committing every known felony in the book. "What sort of—"

Matheus shot to his feet. The chair went clattering back several feet. "Enough!"

Silence settled in the room.

Breathe, A.J. chanted to himself. *Breeeeathe*. It was getting difficult when all he wanted was to choke the bastard.

"I think, Lord Matheus," said Sir Emery, "allowing Lady Marion to choose a husband who is both acceptable to her and her station does in no way interfere with Sargans' affairs..."

King Shit Chute narrowed his blue eyes at the old man. "Are you implying I would not know what is or not acceptable for Sargans? My own cousin's home and widow, which the family has entrusted to me?"

"What do you propose?" Emery replied, looking slightly cowed.

"I shall marry Lady Marion. Both Sargans and she already belong to me. I am a Sargans myself and so our children's blood would be pure. Although I doubt our union would produce any since Johannes never seemed to be able to plow that field."

Fuck breathing.

Both Hugo and A.J. jumped to their feet. While the bearded man glowed with rage and yelled things in their native tongue, A.J. used his courtroom voice to be heard. Moving by Marion's side, he clasped her shoulder.

"Perhaps the reason for the childless union is something completely out of anyone's control and while we're talking procreation and descendants, I don't see any children running around here either. What, Matheus, couldn't seem to 'plow' your own field so you have to steal another man's? Need to sharpen that blade, do you? Getting dull with age and need to start beating women around to get it up again?"

A look of fury deformed Matheus' face. He leveled an accusing finger at A.J. "I shall not stand here—"

"I'm not done yet, dipstick. Lady Marion has already made her decision and I won't stand by while you straight-arm her to the altar. And you," he went on, rounding on Emery. "Why don't you grow a pair and put that asshole back in his place!"

"Lady Marion," Emery began tentatively, coming closer to her and taking her hand. "Johannes was a dear young man and I would hate to know he looks down on me with less than kindness. Do you really want to marry this foreigner over Lord Matheus?"

It occurred to A.J. only then this whole thing was getting very real, very fast. She'd have to give an answer right then and there. For a few seconds, she looked up into his eyes and stared. Time must have stopped. The urge to check his watch and make sure was strong.

He couldn't let her go to such a piece of medieval shit. He just couldn't. The mere thought of his hands on her probably unwilling body just about killed him. A migraine of cosmic proportions chose that very moment to grab his brain and give a few squeezes. Christ.

Marion stared at him while he wrestled with the mental monster that wanted to chew his head off.

"Sir Ayjay is not—"

"Sir Ayjay," A.J. cut in quickly before she handed his balls over to Matheus. "Isn't the kind of man who'd force a woman to marry him. I've asked her, as a gentleman should, and she said yes."

There goes the rest of my sanity.

A look of shock, bewilderment, confusion then wonder flashed in quick succession in her expressive eyes. She turned to the notary and nodded. "I *do* want to marry Sir Ayjay."

Looking as though someone had just announced the swan had died of scurvy and the duck of gangrene, their host shook his head, clearly disgusted. "Then I have no choice but to challenge you for Lady Marion's favors."

An assortment of reactions from everyone else, ranging from shock to disbelief and quite a bit of horror—especially from Marion, who rocked back on her heels and put her hand to her mouth, made A.J. want to demand, "What?"

He snorted a mirthless laugh. "What are you saying? You're challenging *what*, exactly?"

"You."

"Ha! That's a good one. I've never heard it and hell knows I've heard them all. Challenge why exactly, I might add?"

"Do you not understand what a duel is?"

"Oh now you're just begging the question! It's pathetic, even from you."

Matheus circled the table and put a hand on the hilt of his sword, which made Hugo twitchy as hell. "I challenge *you*, Sir Ayjay, in a duel for the right to marry Lady Marion. Is this clear enough for you?"

A.J. knew his laugh sounded cold and cruel but he couldn't help it. The *blasé*, cynical demon perched on his left shoulder reared its horned little head and nearly fell off because it laughed so damn hard.

"A *real* duel? Are you fucking nuts? This has to be the silliest, most juvenile thing I've heard...and I spend a lot of time in court, dude. What else, a pissing contest? A *duel*? Ha! Two grown men actually going down in the mud and swinging pointy sticks at each other when the woman has already made her choice? How's that supposed to make sense?"

A look of hurt and wounded pride filled Marion's blue eyes. Now *this* stung. It really did. A.J. tried to ignore the demon on his shoulder and its call for a good bit of fiery legal rhetoric.

"What, Sir Ayjay?" Matheus asked waspishly. "Is the lovely Lady Marion not worth at least a duel to you? Shall you not fight for her honor?"

Hugo took a threatening step forward. He said something that sounded a lot like, "*You wanna get hurt? Which way exactly 'cause I'm ambidextrous?*", probably offering Matheus a taste of his sword. A short exchange erupted between the two men, with Marion trying to be heard before finally raising her voice. If it made Matheus curl his lip in disgust, it had quite the effect on Hugo, who slid his sword back in its sheath and stormed out of the hall. A door clattered somewhere outside the room.

"Lady Marion isn't a bone dogs get to fight over. I won't demean her just to stroke your inflated ego. And I think this meal is over."

He gave his arm to Marion, who took it with none of the pride or thrill he'd seen when he'd pushed her chair in.

Ouch.

"You cannot walk away from a duel, Sir Ayjay, and I care not what mores you are accustomed to. Here in Sargans, *real* men fight for the things they covet."

"*Things?* Someday, dude, I'm telling you, someday men like you will have it coming across the teeth. It'll be called emancipation and it'll put pigs like you back in their sties. Too bad you won't be there to see it."

Matheus drained his goblet then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Two days. Then I shall take what is mine with or without a duel."

"Ha! Don't you have a dragon to smite or something?" He left before Matheus could add something that'd force A.J. to consider using his fists to settle the argument. He'd never needed to resort to brute force and wasn't about to start now. Not because of Monsignor Scumbag. Fuck, he could eat three of him before breakfast!

Outside, A.J. tried to ignore Marion's chilly posture as she mounted her horse, flicked the reins and rode over the bridge the next second. She didn't even look back. Hey.

"Marion!"

What was up with her?

A.J. was about to claw his way onto his own horse when Hugo grabbed him by the collar and spun him around. A fist in the face made him see stars.

Ouch, shit!

After running his tongue over his teeth and finding nothing missing, A.J. shoved the other man back. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"You have dishonored Lady Marion, you foreign bastard!" He cocked his fist for another one.

A.J. decided getting pummeled to death wasn't part of his life strategy and took a swing himself. He caught Hugo on the jaw – and, Christ, did it ever hurt – but the big man lurched back a step, his eyes flared wide with shock.

Oh not used to another big guy having a go at you, are you, huh?

"I've had about enough of you people using me as a punching bag," A.J. snapped, raising both fists in a fake boxer guard when the big man looked as if he was coming back for more.

But the fight seemed to have left him. He shook his head. "You do not deserve her."

As much as he tried to argue, A.J. couldn't help thinking Conan might have a point. He deserved a shallow, superficial woman, one who went for clothes with the shiny tags, cars with the sparkly crests, guys with the expensive suit and not too much conscience. Guys like him. Backstabbing, two-faced, cynical assholes who treated commitment as if it were an open pustule oozing green stuff.

He *didn't* deserve Lady Marion. So Hugo was right... Now did that ever suck!

Chapter Eight

How could Sir Ayjay have wanted to marry her but not defend her honor against Lord Matheus? She knew he came from far away... Still, the way in which he had refused the challenge hurt her much more deeply than it should have. The scorn, the ridicule.

Why had she expected anything else? She'd used him after all and lied to everyone else in pretending he would marry her in the first place. He'd been gracious enough to pretend with her for a while—to get in bed with her or not mattered little since she'd wanted it herself. Then he'd even claimed he would marry her, despite his refusal earlier in the morning. As she rode home, Marion gritted her teeth against the tears burning her eyes. Where had her simple life gone?

Without the duel, the charade was over. She had to face the reality of Matheus' offer. His *claim*.

She felt like a fish trying to pull away from the hook, even if it meant leaving a piece of itself behind. The lord's hands on her, his mouth, his...

Marion shivered.

News spread like a foul stench as soon as she reached Sargans. Without waiting for anyone, she jumped off the horse as she crossed the gate and rushed to her study, hoping to drown her pain in work as she usually did. Once there, she shouldered it opened and let it clatter closed behind her. She leaned against it, her eyes squeezed tightly.

"It is not you to run away," Thomas said, rising. His pale eyes narrowed as he drew near. "What happened with Lord Asshole?"

Tears were falling before she could stop herself. Lean and strong arms encircled her shoulders. She rested her head against his chest, both hands clamped to her mouth to stifle the sobs. Despair threatened to close in around her. Lord, it hurt.

While Marion hiccupped and stammered through her tale, she felt Thomas' body stiffen with anger or something else, she couldn't tell.

"I loathe myself, Thomas. I do not know what came over me, I blurted out the first thing that came to my mind. All I wanted was to get rid of Matheus." She knuckled her eyes and nose. "What have I done?"

"A mistake, no more. We all make them. Lord knows I have."

His gentle voice soothed her nerves and if it couldn't give her hope, at least it gave her some peace.

“Although I am not really surprised Sir Ayjay would have refused the challenge, I still find it annoying he would pretend to marry you but not have the courage to defend you. I shall endeavor to shed some light into his pretty, dark head.”

Marion shook her head. “No, Thomas, please do not confront him about this.”

He cradled her face in his long hands and put his forehead against hers. “You only meant to protect your home.”

“I meant to hide behind him, that is what I meant. I am a coward.”

“Shh, of course not. Matheus is vile enough to use his governance to force you into his bed. You must use every tool at your disposal.”

“Sir Ayjay is not a tool.”

“I—”

A soft knock interrupted Thomas.

“Lady Marion,” Thorins said when she opened the door. He held a folded piece of parchment in his gloved hand. “Lord Matheus’ courier arrived shortly after Hugo and Sir Ayjay to deliver this. His lordship insisted the courier stay to wait for your reply.”

“I shall find our Norman guest and speak to him. Lady Marion, please give me a short while to change his mind.” Thomas patted her shoulder.

“I do not think—”

Thomas drew nearer, set his pale gaze on her. “Let me speak to him. Give me time to help him see the right path. He has feelings for you, everyone can see it. One only needs to *help* him accept them. Should I fail to talk some sense into Sir Ayjay’s charming but hard head then I shall admit defeat and hold my peace.”

She shrugged noncommittally. Her friend seemed sad for a moment then he took his leave.

“My thanks, Thorins. I shall send for you when I am ready.”

The blond man nodded, seemed about to say something but clamped his mouth.

“Anything else?” she asked.

A look of anger flashed in his normally jovial green eyes. He coughed, looked upward as though searching for divine support then shrugged. “My Lady, I would gladly take up the challenge in your name, although I am not of noble blood...I would defend your honor to my last breath. Lord As—” he stopped abruptly, cleared his throat and grimaced. “Lord *Matheus* has no right to demand this of you. It is indecent.”

Marion’s eyes welled with tears, which seemed to shock Thorins. “My thanks. Your words touch me deeply. But I fear Hannah would not take kindly your defending another woman’s honor.”

Thorins smiled. “No, I daresay I would be in a world of pain. But my offer stands just the same, Lady Marion. I am yours to command.”

“And I command you to live happily with Hannah and have many children as wonderful and cheery as you both are. Now I fear I must read this before it burns in my hand.”

He bowed and left her to face Lord Matheus’ latest demand, for surely this was another.

She broke the seal with her thumb. Within moments, she hurried to the closest chair and collapsed in it.

“That flea-bitten coxcomb,” she breathed. “That...that *asshole!*”

How could he sleep at night? Her impotent rage translated into the parchment flying across the room. Bits of broken wax clicked on the floor. The levies would be doubled to two tenths of any and all Sargans earnings, even from the wool, which he had never touched before.

First Sir Ayjay had refused to defend her honor—even if she could not really blame him, it still hurt—and now Matheus, that villainous, abhorrent gudgeon, was forcing her into his bed through the most despicable means possible. Marion fought the great lassitude threatening to overwhelm her, sending her tumbling into despair and misery and powerlessness, lost and alone and instead gritted her teeth and forced her spine straight.

Two choices offered themselves to her. She could either wait and hope Sir Ayjay would change his mind and decide to fight for her, which did not bring the hope it should for Lord Matheus was a master at the sword while she doubted her visitor even owned one. As much as her honor and pride were injured, she could not in good conscience expect a stranger to resolve a long-standing conflict between Matheus and herself. And what if Matheus injured her guest? The image of a wounded Sir Ayjay left her cold and shaking. With her handsome Norman lord and any help he could have offered out of the hunt, she was left with only one person able and willing to help her. Herself.

Her second choice, the least of two evils really, rested with herself and her ability to resolve her own problems. She had tried to avoid the inevitable long enough. She would have to grab the devil by the tail—literally—and “give a good tug” as Sir Ayjay had so scandalously put it.

Matheus meant to starve her out of her home. By Lord, he would not succeed. She would not *let* him.

Sitting at her desk, Marion composed herself, pulled a sheet of parchment closer and wrote a quick note, which she gave to Thorins who stood outside silently glaring at his feet.

“Would you give this to Lord Matheus’ messenger?” she said, proffering the sealed note, which he took with an expression bordering on barely suppressed violence. He clearly meant to speak but she cut him off by raising a hand. “That shall be all. Please make haste and tell Hannah I shall need to get ready for the road at first light tomorrow.”

The horror on his face spoke volumes. She ignored it. Much work awaited her this day for she would be leaving her home. If Matheus thought he would be acquiring a soft-spoken, docile little wife, then Lord help him!

* * * * *

“You have not answered your door all night, Sir Ayjay. How cowardly of you.”

“Oh no you don’t,” A.J. warned Thomas as soon as the lanky man stepped in front of him to block his path. It was enough he’d had nightmares all night, visions of Marion trying to fight off greedy men’s hands. A.J. had woken up about twelve times. He hadn’t needed the woman’s friend to get in his face on top of things. Anyway, ignoring the door was easy compared to ignoring his conscience.

Driver in hand, A.J. walked around him. “I don’t need shit from you too. It’s enough that everyone is looking at me like I’m the devil.”

“Are you?”

“Ah, for Christ’s sake!” A.J. whirled around and leveled the butt end of the driver in Thomas’ direction. “What do you want me to do? Get chopped in half by some demented jackass? Marion isn’t a piece of meat guys have to fight over! I don’t fight over women. Never had to, never will.”

“Why? Is she not worth it to you? Any man here would gladly do it in your stead.”

“Would *you*?” A.J. demanded as he rolled the sleeve of his tunic up over his elbows.

“Without a doubt.”

“Yeah, right.”

“You do not believe me?” Thomas countered, his narrow chin coming up.

“It’s not you talking, it’s the Testosterone Disease. I have it too, but luckily my survival instincts trip my alarms earlier so I can avoid big heaps of stupid. You know, like rushing headlong into trouble, pissing contests. Death-causing guy stuff like duels.”

A look of confusion spread on Thomas’ face. He shrugged, threw his hands up and glared some more.

A.J. had had just about enough of people staring at him all the time. He had something to do and wouldn’t stand around being bullied into facing a madman with a sword. “Look, as much as it burns me to think about Matheus’ hands on her—and believe me, it burns my ass like nothing else—she’s a grown woman and can make her own decisions. She’s managed to keep him away for this long, I’m sure she’ll find a way again. I’ve offered to marry her, for Christ’s sake, and it ought to be enough to ask from a man!”

“A fine speech, as I have come to expect from you. Is this typical Norman behavior?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That for a Norman, a people I thought slightly more *robust*, you seem to favor words over actions. Sometimes one cannot talk one’s way out of trouble. I should know.”

“Leave me alone with that Norman shit. And I’m sure you *would* know all about causing trouble, now wouldn’t you? So are you going to stand in my way all day? Are you going to challenge me for the right to cross the courtyard? Should I go get my fucking sword?”

A look of anger flashed across the man’s pale eyes. “And where would you be going at such an early time while Lady Marion might be preparing to head into the dragon’s lair? Are you leaving or merely hiding?” Thomas pointed at the golf club.

“Into the dragon’s lair or the iguana’s tank? She’s not going anywhere, you and I both know it.”

“Do not underestimate her willingness to do what must be done. *She* does not rely on words alone.”

“Piss off.”

“Gladly. Shall you tell me where you are going? Or should I dog your steps?”

“I’m looking for a place with a good view of Rat Ass castle. Do you know any?”

A.J. weighed the box of balls, hoping he’d have enough. The entire ride back the day before, he’d been getting increasingly angrier, much more so than he’d ever been in fact. Not just angered...enraged. *Where had that come from?* Side effects from the concussion, no doubt.

“What sort of view?” Clearly, he’d piqued Thomas’ curiosity.

“A view of the front, where the great hall is.”

“We shall need horses.”

“No, not *horses*, plural, *a* horse, singular. You’re not coming with me.”

“Yes, I am.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Suit yourself. I don’t care.”

“And therein lies your problem.”

The mordant in the man’s remark cut A.J. deeply. He *did* care. About a lot of things. Marion first and foremost. He just didn’t want to get skewered by Lord Asshole. Argh, what a mind screw.

“Just take me there and keep the sarcasm to a minimum.”

Mounted once again—something he’d come to hate with a passion—Thomas led him along the road they’d taken the day before, only after about half an hour veered off toward the hill to their left, leaving the tall grass behind and entering the forest of spruce clinging to the escarpment. After a while, Thomas dismounted and “parked” his horse by a thick copse of young birch trees. A.J. maneuvered his own mount beside that

of Thomas', awkwardly patted the beast's nose – it *was* very soft – then pulled his driver out of his belt. He'd looked like quite the moron with the club slid in his belt as a sword and the box of balls tucked between his legs. Ha.

"We must climb up to the boulder, do you see it?"

"I may not have the biggest heart but my eyes work just fine," A.J. snapped, for some reason needing to vent on Thomas. Nothing better than a target who could throw a few good ones back.

A snorted reply made him roll his eyes. They were acting like an old couple.

After a while of climbing, pulling and clawing at the denuded roots, the pair reached a grassy plateau overlooking Ragatz Castle. More a fortress. Amber dawn light hit the façade at an acute angle.

"Is this the sort of view you wanted?"

A.J. narrowed his eyes and nodded. "Not quite four hundred yards, in direct line of sight, with no tree line to speak of. Perfect."

"What do you plan to do?" Thomas asked, now openly curious. He sat and pulled a blade of grass, which he tucked in his mouth. "I must admit my curiosity almost equals my abhorrence at your revolting behavior with Lady Marion."

"Hey, get off your high horse," A.J. snapped as he walked to the ledge.

"You speak in a strange way, Sir Ayjay. I have already dismounted."

"You know what I meant."

"No."

A.J. wanted to sigh.

After ripping fistfuls of grass, creating a nice, two-foot-wide "driving green", he planted the tee, let the club rest between his feet then tested the wind with his face upturned and nodded. Just perfect.

"What is the –"

"Shut up."

A.J. tamped the grass with his feet, took a few deep breaths through his nose, trying to visualize the little ball flying, flying and landing in its mark. It was a big, stationary mark he could see from where he stood. He was sure he could get it right. A quick peek revealed he had eight balls left. It ought to do.

Muscles relaxed, hands wrapped around the handle, he aligned the butt of his driver right along the ball, got a feel for the breeze, the weight, the angle. Anger bubbled just beneath the surface. He'd never been so damn...frustrated. Angry, furious, scared. Yeah, scared.

It was all his fault, Lord Anal Retention. That fucking...

"Breathe."

"I am."

"Shut up I said."

Thomas grumbled something in that language A.J. was *so* going to learn if only to put the guy back in his place.

Think golf. Think Sunday afternoon on the course, the nice sun, the look on people's faces when they see my drive for the first time.

The first really outrageously expensive thing he'd bought in his life, the wood, steel and titanium monster of a driver made other players laugh. That is, until four hundred yards of ball shut them right up.

Using his best golf commentator voice, he cleared his throat.

"The fourth hole has a really difficult pin placement just fifty feet from the front of the green and right behind a chunk of the Alps. The pressure is on. If Bernier manages to place the ball...well, they can start taking his measurements for the green jacket, Bill. Har har."

He swung.

Fuck yeah!

"He neilt it rayt an the sweet spot!" A.J. yelled in a bad Scottish brogue that would've shamed his partners. "Wha ae whuisher, laidies aind gainttlemen! A canna belev it!"

The ball arched far and high, perfectly centered and aimed right at Rat Ass castle. With any luck, it'd reach its mark and make him a petty, smug but oh-so-satisfied man. He didn't hear the sound but saw the ball hit the mark.

Ooohhh, revenge is so sweet, baby.

Behind him, he heard Thomas' exclamation of amazement.

"Sometimes, you have to hit them where they'll hurt the most," A.J. remarked acidly before putting another ball on the tee. "And it's my specialty."

You can take the suit off The Shark's back, but you can't take the golf out of his blood.

"I am starting to see you in a whole new light, Sir Ayjay. I believe there is hope for you yet."

A.J. turned toward Thomas, bared his most arrogant smile and returned to driving balls.

After he'd emptied the box, every one at least four hundred yards of perfect drive, A.J. sat on a boulder near Thomas and balanced the driver across his knees. "Spill it."

A look of feigned outrage flared the other man's eyes. So obvious.

"You should meet the challenge."

"I've already offered to marry Marion. Why can't it be enough?"

"It would be under...let us say *normal* circumstances. But with Lord Asshole, nothing is ever normal or simple. Lady Marion deserves a man who shall defend her honor, not just make her happy."

"I don't make her happy. I make her confused and angry." A.J. rubbed his cheek where she'd slapped him. It'd been two days but it still stung. "Hell, I make myself confused and angry."

"He is a vile man, Sir Ayjay, do not doubt for a moment he would shy away from forcing himself on Lady Marion."

With the sudden "holy shit my heart is exploding" shock of a cold shower, Thomas' remark made A.J. tuck his head low between his shoulders, his teeth clenched, his fists balled over the golf club. The guy *had* slapped her in front of several people, there was no telling what he'd do if no one was around.

"That was a low blow."

"Sometimes, one must hurt them where they shall hurt the most," Thomas replied, not a hint of mockery in his face. "You know I speak the truth."

"Yeah, speaking of truth, you know I'm no Norman."

Thomas shrugged. "You are a strange one, granted."

A.J. sighed. "Do you have any idea how ludicrous, how retarded this all is for me? I'm not from around here, I'll remind you. And even if you don't believe me, I'm not from eleven forty-eight either! Men don't go around and poke each other with swords when they want a lady bad. They go to a jewelry store and fight with the guy behind the counter who's overcharging them. Or they go to her parents' house and pretend they don't want to kill the pimple-faced cousin who keeps asking to touch their nice car. Men jump through hoops, sure, but they don't stand in line to be chopped in half."

"Hugo and Thorins would be delighted to train you at sword fight. They are both very adept. There is still plenty of time to learn until tomorrow."

"Yeah, well, I'm not adept at using weapons." He pointed at the damn utility knife he was forced to wear. "To me, this is like running with scissors. Where I come from, you go to jail for carrying weapons. Unless you have an expensive and talented lawyer such as myself, in which case, you *don't* go to jail. But that's beside the point." A.J. stood.

"Lady Marion is willing to sacrifice herself for her people."

"It's her choice, not mine."

Cursing, Thomas rose and grabbed A.J.'s wrist so he'd face him. "Do you not love her? Have you no heart?"

"I like her fine," A.J. snapped, yanking his arm out of the other man's surprising grip. And here he thought the guy was an effeminate dandy. "What's up with you?"

"I would fight for the one I hold dear."

"Why don't you?"

Thomas barked a quick, mirthless laugh. "Because he has already shown his penchant. And it was not toward me."

"What do you – *Ohhh...*"

Speechlessness again. Damn.

He'd always suspected Thomas' tastes didn't involve the ladies, but to have another guy just about admit a crush on him. He didn't know what to do with *that*.

"Let me tell you what awaits Lady Marion," Thomas snarled as he angrily rearranged his sleeve. "Matheus shall force himself on her every time the mood strikes him. Willingness or no matters little. Should she fail to bear him children, he shall either send her to a convent, which I doubt because it would admit failure on his part, something he cannot abide. More likely, he shall have her killed or do the deed himself."

A.J. couldn't even look the guy in the eye. He knew his decision was made even before he spoke. What else could he do? Even The Shark would have trouble sleeping at night with that on his conscience.

"Christ," he spat, slipping his driver inside his belt like the stupid jackass he'd become. "I'll do it. But only to keep him away from her, okay. It's not as if I love her or anything. You got it?"

"I care not what reason you choose. As long as you do it."

A.J. didn't particularly enjoy the implicit barb he didn't care about Marion enough to defend her and only did it out of guilt. True in a sense. But it wasn't the only reason, was it? He really *did* like Marion. More than "liked" actually.

Okay, time to dissect that bit. Do I "like her" like her, or do I really, really like her?

The more he thought of her, the more he was convinced he really, *really* liked Marion. The image of her with another man—and a pig such as Matheus was just killing him—didn't sit well with him, neither did the notion of spending the rest of his life in medieval Switzerland without her around. The "without her around" bothered him acutely, in fact much more so than knowing he'd probably never go back home, never drink coffee or use decent toilets.

Hey. The strange feeling in the pit of his stomach, the churning weight as if he'd just swallowed a live squid, the sweat dampening his temples, the urge to put his fists in a guy's face... Where the hell did *that* come from? Was he having a heart attack at thirty-four? Or was it something else entirely?

He peeked at Thomas by the corner of his eye. "You're in love, right?"

Thomas gave a slight nod, looking unsure if he should smirk or grimace. "Such finesse."

"Well, are you or not?"

"I am," Thomas replied calmly.

The pained look on his face made A.J. want to pat him on the shoulder or something. Poor guy. But he kept his hand to himself just in case he sent mixed signals.

"Okay, so you're in love with someone—and the *someone* in question isn't feeling the same thing, right, we're clear on that—so how does it feel? As if you've just swallowed something heavy and it's sitting right here?" He patted his belly, right below

the sternum. "And you want to run around and jump and laugh, but at the same time you think you're going to die of a heart attack?"

"Your heart is attacking you?" Thomas replied, his eyes narrowed, his smirk firmly in place now. "You should be able to fend off such a small enemy."

Oooohh, good one. Full marks for sarcasm.

"Hey."

"Your words are weak and inadequate at best, my friend, which surprises me since you are usually so eloquent. I shall tell you how it feels —"

"You're not gonna sing are you?"

Thomas sniggered. "No, I shall not."

"Good, go on."

"Love is throwing yourself off a cliff knowing certain death awaits you. It is putting your hand in fire if you think it shall save your beloved pain or sorrow. Love is that knot in your gut you so ineptly described—the euphoria, the fear, the hope. It means heaven if you are fortunate enough to find it in your lifetime, and it is also an eternity of walking on broken glass should you mistreat or ignore it. Love is thrusting a sword through the belly of a man for putting his repulsive hand on...*her*, in your case."

A.J. nodded for a few seconds then he shook his head. "I'm not sure I got all of it, except for the last bit, which sounded much better than the cliff part."

"She would do the same for you."

"Argh, Christ, thanks for the guilt trip."

"I am well pleased if I have helped you."

"Har har. Funny guy."

So that was it, love, one big stew of emotions, *symptoms* of indigestion, heart attack and insanity? No wonder people used it to worm out of any and all crimes. One really *was* going crazy when in love. Alexandre-Jean Bernier. In love. Who knew?

Argh, fuck. Here we go again.

Tune in, folks, as the lawyer now attempts to keep his head attached to the rest of him when he challenges a master swordsman for the Lady Marion's honor! This should be reality TV at its goriest best!

Hurray for the ratings.

Chapter Nine

Marion refused to look back when she crossed the gate.

Dawn had barely poked over Mount Galen in the distance that she'd set out for the short journey across the river. She kept her face expressionless and her back straight as she rode alone toward her new home, having said few goodbyes in case she met *him*. But Sir Ayjay had been cloistered in his chambers upon returning from Ragatz. She wished she would've seen Thomas before she left though.

Most of her things would follow later that day, after Hannah had prepared everything. How she'd offer to follow her mistress to Rat Ass – dear Lord, he really was growing on her that man – Ragatz had touched Marion deeply. But she couldn't impose her decision on anyone but herself. She'd started the charade. She would end it. Still, relinquishing the ring of keys – the only concrete sign of control over her own life – to Hugo had pinched her heart.

As she reached the midpoint section of ravines and rocky escarpments on both sides, she thought she heard a faint, dry sound overhead that tickled her memory. Marion smoothed her dress over her lap and urged her horse a bit faster. No use dragging the unpleasantness any longer than it ought it to be.

When she reached the portion of road that turned into cobbles then the stone bridge leading to Matheus' fortress, she noticed how people walked around looking fearfully at the sky. She looked up herself, noted the beginnings of a bright, sunny day and shrugged. Some pointed to her and crossed themselves. She ignored them. Superstitious people.

A short while later, she approached the fortress per se and looked up at the sky again for in the courtyard people ran to and fro, using anything they could find as cover for their head. A man ran to her horse, nearly spooked it before grabbing the reins.

"Hurry, my lady, a foul sort of hail has been falling on us. Take cover!" He pointed his gloved hand at a covered porch where a cluster of women waited, occasionally poking their head out and looking up.

She was about to dismount when she heard Matheus himself roar in outrage across the courtyard. He appeared from around the keep, his hair flying wildly behind his head, waving his arms and cursing foully.

"What happened?" Marion asked of the man still holding her horse.

His tanned skin crinkled when he screwed his face in confusion. "The lord is beside himself –"

"Lady Marion!" Matheus yelled across the courtyard before making a straight line for her.

She hated to admit it, but he did look impressive and intimidating in his leather armor, wearing a scowl instead of the usual conceited smirk.

"Make haste!" he went on as he drew near, grabbed her wrist and tugged her behind him as he jogged back to the safety of the keep.

After he shouldered open the door, he jerked her beside him and, his hand an iron cuff, compelled her to follow him.

"Lord Matheus, would you please tell me what is the matter with you!"

He barreled through the wide doorway leading to the dining hall into which Sir Ayjay, Hugo and she had dined. Much more light than she remembered filtered into the large room. Thinking of her visitor brought tears of regret to her eyes. With a lift of her chin, she dug her heels in, which overbalanced Matheus and forced him to slow down.

"I demand to know what is the matter!"

He whirled on her, his hand raised. But at the last moment, he let it drop, released her hand then continued beyond the table to join a handful of servants hurriedly sweeping the floor while casting glances at their lord, who positively fumed and raged as he paced along the wall.

Marion finally spotted the difference in the room. The stained-glass window was gone, leaving a gaping circular hole in the middle of the stone wall. Glorious sunshine spilled in. Through the aperture, she could spot a sharp grassy outcropping in the distance.

Matheus bent down and picked something up, which he showed to his servants. Everyone shook their heads. He took his finding to her.

Marion readily recognized the small white ball in Matheus' hand.

"What is this?" she asked while trying to hide the smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. If Sir Ayjay had refused the challenge, he seemed to have managed a way to hurt Matheus nonetheless.

"A sort of ball, obviously, though I have never seen one such as this. A handful fell all over Ragatz shortly before you arrived. And some, well, you can attest for yourself." He threw her a venomous glare. "It looks foreign, do you not agree?"

She took the ball, rolled it in her palm before giving it back to the seething man. "I would not know. I am a mere woman."

"Do not toy with me, Lady Marion," he snarled under his breath, his hand once again closing around her wrist. "It is *his*, I know it is. That foreign devil!"

"I doubt Sir Ayjay would stoop to breaking your windows, Lord Matheus. After he so exclaimed at its beauty last night."

The first slap made her see stars, but the next, a vicious backhand, positively rattled her teeth. She stumbled back a step.

Without thinking, Marion cocked her arm and managed to land a good one before he caught her hand mid flight and held her there. "I shall not tolerate such behavior, Lady Marion. I suggest you get used to being put back in your place. As for now, you

shall be taken to my chambers and made to wait there until I am done with more pressing matters." He tossed the ball toward the servants, catching one in the back. The ball rebounded with dry little clicks against the stone floor.

"I shall have my own bedchambers, my lord, if that—"

He raised his hand and as much as she hated herself for it, Marion flinched.

"Much better," Matheus said, drawing close enough so only she would hear him. "I shall teach you how to bow to your man. And yes, you shall wait for me in *my* chambers. You are no virgin. Why should I wait to claim what is already mine?"

"We are not married yet. It is indecent."

"Just as harboring a foreign devil and letting him crawl between your thighs is—oh do not give me that affronted damsel look! I could see it on both your faces. But I shall show you the true meaning of having a man take you, a *real* man. And I look forward to being graced with the smile you bestowed on your visitor when you were here last."

"Hitting me shall not fulfill such fantasy, my lord," she replied through her teeth. Her cheek burned and so did her palm though she wouldn't complain about that last ache. Her eyes were welling but through sheer pride, she could keep the tears at bay. For now.

"Oh but it shall, my untamed, headstrong little lady. For should you fail to greet your husband cordially, with nothing but a grin and your pale thighs spread wide, I should take offense and perhaps vent my ire on Sargans."

"You are despicable."

His blue eyes narrowed to slits but he smiled. An ugly, predatory thing that made her shiver. "I *am* despicable and very *creative*."

"We shall see how creative you get with a dagger in your back."

Matheus only chuckled. "I cannot wait. Now be a good wife and wait in my chambers. You might even want to have a bath brought up, perhaps wash my feet?"

Rage curled her fists tightly. "Wash your *feet*?"

But Matheus had already rounded on his servants and loudly called for one in particular to escort "the lady" to his chambers. A look of sympathy, quickly subdued, flashed in the older man's eyes. After a bow, he bid her follow him and guided her up several flights of steps and into a wing where narrow windows let knives of sun stab in at acute angles.

Her stomach tightening by increments, Marion realized she had walked into a prison more formidable than she had first expected. The sobering thought of Matheus professing his "creativity" made her want to wash herself already and he had not even laid a finger on her yet. *Aside from the violence.*

She missed Sargans—she missed her guest—already. But there was no way around it. Sir Ayjay would not fight for her. She suspected he did not know how to use a sword—or ride a horse—and would not want to be forced to watch him be seriously injured. Probably worse. Her life, with Sir Ayjay's death on her soul, would not be

worth living. Letting Matheus crawl between her thighs would be much better in fact. She shivered.

And even if her guest chose to risk his life for her, he would not stand a chance. Not against Matheus, a master at the blade and a sly man. The lord would not stop at first blood. His obvious hatred for the “foreign devil” must have reached incalculable depths since he had destroyed the stained-glass window. As much as the conduct was reprehensible and infantile, Marion could not suppress the small smirk of satisfaction. Sir Ayjay’s ways were undoubtedly strange but she could not argue as to their effectiveness.

She had come so close. So close to finding a man perfect for her, one who would respect her and treat her well. And that he was too handsome and *skilled* for words only served to deepen her misery. But it was not to be and living in the past only meant more pain. She straightened her countenance when the servant brought her to a large, ornate door and opened it for her. She stepped inside, did not turn around when he softly closed it behind her. He must have done his utmost not to draw the bolt too loudly, but she did hear the faint click all the same as the old man was locking her into Matheus’ bedchamber. Her prison. Her new home.

* * * * *

“What the fuck do you mean, she’s gone?” A.J. blurted out, realizing he’d spoken in English.

All three men—Hugo, Thorins and Thomas—looked at him as though he’d just told them he knew of a virginal, honest lawyer living on top of a mountain somewhere and spewing divine legalese out of his ass...for *free*. He repeated his question in French, trying to replace the very satisfying “what the fuck” with something appropriate in the other language. Christ, some things just didn’t translate.

“She has gone to marry him because of this,” Hugo snarled as he shoved into his chest a piece of parchment A.J. was *SO* going to keep for later when he visited the ladies’ room again. It was the perfect size.

“What’s that?” He unfolded the note, turned it this way and that but couldn’t make sense of the weird, tight penmanship except the signature at the bottom. He knew just what to do with this particular spot. He’d put the note to good use. Lord Asshole. How appropriate.

Thomas took it from him and read it aloud. “I, Lord Asshole, firstborn son of Rolland and on and on...” Thomas’ eyes skimmed downward farther while he muttered stuff about lineage and uncles and acts of prowess. What? The turdface hadn’t included “woman beater” in his CV?

“Ah, there we are,” Thomas announced with a roll of eyes that made A.J. want to slap him upside the head.

“Come on, man, you’re killing me!”

“He is basically announcing he has doubled the levies to be taken from Sargans, which shall also now include the wool trade as well.”

Hugo spat something that sounded a lot like “fuck”. Was he finally getting through to these folks?

A.J. shrugged. “So what?”

Hugo’s face darkened to a scary, heart attack shade of red. He shook his fist in the general direction of Rat Ass castle. “He meant to starve her out of her home.”

“That bad?”

Thorins nodded emphatically. “We are not a rich canton, Sir Ayjay. Only with the lady’s strict control could we keep ourselves fed and clothed. To double the levies would crush us.”

“But why did she leave so early? Why didn’t she just wait a Goddamn minute until we got back?” A.J. fought against images of that jerk trying to force his filthy, scumbag, garbage-smelling hands on her. His heart pounded with increasing force and speed. Shit, maybe Hugo wasn’t the only one having a heart attack! It’d go well with the migraine suddenly pinching his optic nerves. He grunted and rubbed his temple.

“Why should she have waited?” Hugo spat. “So you could mock her further?” Of course, his hand was on his sword-thing right away.

“Okay, okay, I got the point. It’s essentially all my fault. Bad foreign devil, very bad. Now,” A.J. threw a narrow look at Thomas, “would any of you like to show me how to use one of those pointy sticks so I can shove it up Lord Asshole’s oh-so-tight arse? Or do I just go there and kill him with my bad breath alone?”

Three days without a toothbrush...and counting. Damn if he didn’t want one bad enough to fight over it. Even a used one would do.

If they acted any more shocked, Hugo and Thorins would resemble a pair of mimes. An image of the pair, faces painted white, wearing black leotards and berets – with the inescapable rose pinned to the chest of course – flashed in his mind. *Shit, I need painkillers bad. I’m having hallucinations.*

“You shall accept the challenge? You now wish to fight?” Hugo asked, clearly not convinced.

“No, I don’t *wish* to, it seems I just *have* to. So show me some moves.”

A.J. wanted to remove the leather belt but Thomas stopped him with a hand on his elbow. “You shall need all the protection you can carry, my friend. Keep it.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

Within minutes, the three had escorted him to a corner of the courtyard where he’d seen other guards practice their stuff, clang their swords together and strike a pose but mostly just talking, scratching and laughing. Only thing missing were donuts.

Once there, he had to put on a repellent leather vest thing with a padded front and sweat stains in the back. Arghhhhh.

They tied it to him extremely tight before Hugo shoved a rusty sword in his hand and slid his out of its sheath. His was much nicer. Hey.

“Have you ever fought in a duel?”

A.J. shook his head. “Don’t have them where I come from. We just sue.”

Both Thorins and Hugo looked a bit worried then.

“Then I shall show you the basic stance, like so.”

Hugo crouched slightly, his sword arm forward while his other was bent a bit over his belly. He flicked his wrist and brought the sword in a wide arc. A.J. tried to imitate the move, sending the sword arcing all right, only it wasn’t still attached to him and just flew right out of his hand. Shit.

“Try again, but do keep a firm grip,” Hugo said with a pointed look at Thomas.

A.J. spent at least an hour – he didn’t even need to check his watch as he was pretty good at guesstimating time and *did* work by the hour, on top of by the case – twirling his sword around. One time, he brought it down with too much force and ended up doing a face plant on the hard ground. By that time, people had come to watch the show. Great.

“Do you have another sword? This one sucks,” A.J. panted, rubbed sweat from his forehead with his sleeve...too late remembering how sweat-stained the thing already was.

“You have tried three different swords, Sir Ayjay,” Thorins replied as he tried to show A.J. how to do an overhead swing *without* going over backward and stumbling around like a moron. “Perhaps something smaller? Lighter?” Lighter than the last one he’d tried would mean he’d have to use a knife. The joys just kept piling.

Hugo just shook his head and spat something in the language A.J. was dying to learn.

“Hey, man, don’t you start! I’m doing the best I fucking can, okay!”

“Your best shall not be enough!” Hugo snapped back. Fuming, he whirled around and kicked at the barrel holding the practice weapons, sending it crashing against the wall where it broke in several pieces and spilled its content.

Thorins just looked at his feet while Thomas tried to tie the leather vest tighter around A.J. But the thing kept sliding down.

He could tell everyone was trying not to look too disappointed but the “Norman lord” wasn’t making a very good impression on anyone. There was a lot of shuffling feet, hand-twitching and talking to the sky. What did they take him for? Fucking Zorro? Conan? It hurt him, how they acted as though Marion weren’t coming back home. It really did, and he’d be damned if he was going to let them think that.

“He’s not keeping Lady Marion there,” A.J. said with deadly calm. “He’s *not* keeping her there and he’s *not* laying a finger on her either. You got it? And if I have to put my pretty head on the block, then I’ll do it. Marion is *not* staying at Rat Ass. In fact,

I'm going there today, dammit. The lady is sleeping in her own bed tonight, I can tell you that."

His little pep talk didn't seem to have any effect except on Thomas, who nodded solemnly.

They resumed their practice but it was becoming increasingly—and painfully—clear A.J. wasn't gifted for swordfight. He was already aching everywhere and hadn't even received a real blow. But, as Thorins had told him, A.J. had incredible reach and should use it to his advantage. Too bad he had no idea what *that* was.

There were just the four of them by then, with Thomas leaning against the wall and nervously chewing on his thumbnail. He suddenly brightened.

"Sir Ayjay," he said, coming closer and putting a hand on A.J.'s shoulder. He was doing that a lot. "We have been doing this all wrong."

"You think?" A.J. snarled, wiping sweat from his temple and snot from his nose...all with the same sleeve. His standards really were getting low.

"We have been trying to teach you our ways of conducting a duel, when we should have tried yours instead."

A.J. did his best Excited Chihuahua Face. "I know. I say we have a swimming event. I'll race him across the lake. Would that work?"

Thomas, clearly not getting it, shook his head. "I am afraid not, Sir Ayjay."

It was worth asking.

"So you mean, I'm to go there and argue until I'm blue in the face? Or rather until he's blue in the face? Because *that's* my way. I get in someone's face and I talk. I confuse them, I talk circles around them, I make them look up while I throw a sucker punch, I attack from behind when they're not looking or anywhere else I think I can sink my sly little fingers in and try to find the soft spot. And when I do find the soft spot, I stick the knife in." A.J. cursed and tossed the practice sword to the ground. He couldn't even feel his hands anymore—oh and he'd switched several times as he tried to decide if he was a leftie or a rightie with the thing. He still didn't know. "Something tells me backstabbing and character assassination won't help me against Duke Pustulcescence."

Hey, that was a good one.

Hugo and Thorins both seemed to be following Thomas' chain of thought. The first even looked happy...well, not really happy happy, but darkly satisfied. Um.

Thomas shook his blond head while he put his fists on his narrow hips. "On the contrary, my Norman friend. Your ways are foreign to us and shall be for his lordship as well. All we have to do now is find you a weapon you can use with your own strengths, your own ways."

"I don't have weapons, I told you we don't use them..."

Wait...

A nasty sort of smile spread A.J.'s face. He couldn't see his face right now—and the damn place didn't have a decent mirror for miles...*leagues*? Whatever. Oh but he knew

the one too. The Shark smile. Scourge of crown witnesses everywhere, bane of prosecutors, crown experts and tight-assed judges. That smile had made lady jurors fan themselves with legal-sized notepads. Yellow, of course. It had forced the prosecution to rethink its strategy a split second too late, obviously, as The Smile, if it was there, already meant A.J. had found the soft spot and was gleefully sticking the knife in, all the while thinking about his next outrageous purchase.

"If I can judge by the evil expression on his face," Thomas remarked, looking unsure as to whether he should smile or cross himself. "I think our guest has found his weapon. Pray tell us what it is."

A.J. joined his hands and cracked his knuckles loudly. Even Hugo cringed.

"You're right," A.J. said, grinning wider. "And it's called a nine iron."

* * * * *

Her face burned from Matheus' treatment and she suspected bruising had already spread. How embarrassing. Though the chambers were furnished with exquisite tastes, if a bit extravagant, Marion thought it was all very ugly and ostentatious. Too many rugs, too much woodwork, too large a bed. Her throat squeezed at the sight of the monstrous affair. She tried not to imagine herself in it but would have to face reality sooner or later.

"Once," she told herself firmly. *She would perform her duty only once.* Then he would have to tie her down to get anywhere near her. She would demand her own, would even resort to sleeping on the floor if he denied her private chambers.

How the man would be undoubtedly less skilled and much less tender than Sir Ayjay pinched her heart. Crossing her arms, she sat in a chair and tried not to fall in a sobbing heap on the floor.

While the sun had reached its peak and began its descent, a dry sound announced someone was pulling the bar to the door. She jumped to her feet and crossed her shaking hands in front, chin up high, shoulders back and wearing her least welcoming set of glares. And she could fashion good ones.

The door opened to reveal the man himself, looking even more frustrated than when she had seen him last.

"Dear wife," he said, bowing mockingly. "How adorable of you to wait for your husband before taking your clothes off."

The snort of incredulity had already left by the time she tried to subdue it. Matheus did not seem to enjoy it very much for his eyes darkened and without a word, he closed the door behind his back, stepping inside.

"Did he have to rip the clothes off your back, that foreign devil or were you already on your elbows and knees, waiting for him?"

"Lord Matheus! How odious!"

“Odious?” he replied, slipping sword and dagger out of the belt, which he removed and threw to the floor. “No, Lady Marion. Odious is you, a Sargans by marriage, spreading your legs for that foreigner, that...” He seemed to lack the proper word to express his disgust and just opened and closed his mouth a few times. “But not to worry, I intend to cleanse you of his seed soon enough. I would say, right this instant.”

He marched forward.

Even if she wanted to run and fight him back—the mere thought of his hands on her made her gag—she knew he would catch her eventually and be even more excited with the chase, so she denied him the pleasure and just braced for impact. He did seem surprised and disappointed when he grabbed her by the upper arms and back-walked her rigid frame to the bed.

“No fight in you today, Lady Marion? How unfortunate for I have plenty.”

His hand connecting against her cheek made a surprisingly loud sound. She had not even had time to flinch. Tears of pain and shame welled. Oh but she would kill him in his sleep, the pig!

“Much better,” he said, leaning into her and studying her flushed face and neck. His mouth was demanding when he crushed it to hers.

Pounding on the door made him snap back and curse foully. “What!”

The insistent thumping on the door did not relent and Matheus had to leave her and open it. Sir Emery stood in the embrasure. He looked horrified when he spotted Marion.

“Lord Matheus! What are you doing?”

“What do you want? As you can attest for yourself, I am rather busy taking what is mine.”

“She is not your wife yet, my lord,” a red-faced Sir Emery replied, trying to squeeze his way inside but failing to dislodge the much larger man. “This is highly objectionable and beneath a Sargans.”

“Get out of my chambers before I have you tossed out on—”

Marion spotted another man by the door, a servant judging by the liveries. He bowed low. “Men are here to see you, my lord, for the duel.”

Sir Ayjay? Impossible. The duel wasn’t until the next day. And even then, he’d already refused.

Despite her best efforts, relief flooded through her trembling body. Who could have taken the challenge? Sir Ayjay had clearly indicated he would not. No one else would be allowed in his place. Perhaps they were not here to fight but for something else? Some kind of barter? She really did feel like chattel.

“Even better, a bit of blood on my hands shall make it that much more exciting when I come back.” Matheus turned, winked at her then retrieved his belt from the floor. “You shall wait here until I dispose—”

“I shall not!”

“You want to see your lover die? Suit yourself, wife. I shall try to do it quickly so I can come back to this much more enjoyable duel here.”

She felt herself flush but forced her spine straight as she marched out of the chambers and tried to walk beside Sir Emery. The old notary looked clearly furious. But Matheus grabbed her hand and yanked her to his side. She had had just about enough of being pushed around and yanked her arm out of his grip.

They trooped back to the great hall where workers were finishing stretching a cover over the gaping hole of the broken window. Matheus threw her a venomous glare.

As soon as they stepped outside, Marion spotted him. Sir Ayjay towered over the rest by a good head, except for Hugo, and looked so handsome in leather armor. But as she drew near, she noticed how different he looked. As soon as he saw her, he left his group, comprised of Hugo, Thomas and Thorins, and marched in her direction. Their worried and angry faces touched her.

As he marched forward, Sir Ayjay looked so incensed no one tried to stop him when he walked right past Matheus and stopped in front of her. In his gentle hand, he cupped her cheek and leaned in so he could examine it.

She wanted so much to tell him she was fine, these were mere marks and would quickly fade but words left her as she lifted her gaze to his and saw the storm brewing there. Marion had never seen so much anger in Sir Ayjay’s eyes, nor anyone else’s. The cold fury left her both hopeful and scared. For him.

“He hurt you,” Sir Ayjay said simply, his head cocked to the side as he studied her face. “I’m so going to hurt him back.”

“Have you no sword?” Matheus sneered.

The man meant to put his hand on her shoulder but Sir Ayjay unexpectedly grabbed his collar and violently shoved him away. The lord stumbled back several paces, looking shocked, appalled, *worried*. Sir Ayjay snarled something in his tongue. Gone was the suave foreigner and in his place stood a physically imposing, furious man.

Matheus brushed his sleeve. “How dare you lay a hand on me, you foreign—”

“And how dare *you* lay a hand on her!”

Sir Ayjay’s deep voice rose to booming proportions, which shocked her since it was usually so smooth and rich, but it swelled now, seemed to come directly out of his chest and resonated in the courtyard. Even Matheus seemed taken aback.

Around them, people gathered, most looking highly uncomfortable with the situation. She could not help feeling sorry for these folks, who had to live with Matheus and bear his constant displeasure and ill humor. Hugo meant to approach as well, but Thomas put his hand on his shoulder and shook his head.

Turning his eyes back to her, Sir Ayjay’s entire countenance changed, eased down. He raked his hair back and pursed his lips. “Look, Marion...I don’t know what he did to you—I hope you’ll forgive me someday for being such a chickenshit—but I’m here

now, and if it's all right with you, I'd be delighted to defend your honor and kick his ass from here to Zurich. Will you let me?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice just yet. Could it be he'd found in his heart a small place for her? He had shared already how he had "a crush" on her, but she suspected whatever it was, it had changed somehow and with any luck, she would keep her peculiar guest with her for a very long time. That is, *if* he won the duel. And with Matheus, such feat would not be easy. Or free.

She grabbed his hand in both of hers, brought it to her cheek and kissed his palm. A look of delight and relief spread to his face. She noticed only then how he indeed bore no weapon except one of the golf sticks, which he had slid inside the thick leather belt as though it were a sword. Instead of the lumpy tip, this one ended in a metal wedge, which gleamed threateningly in the bright late-afternoon sun. She had seen what he could do with one of the strange looking poles, but against a sword...

Lord, it was all her fault. If only she had not claimed Sir Ayjay would marry her in front of Matheus, if only she had found something else with which to block the arrogant man. If only.

"Please, Sir Ayjay, I beg you, be careful," she murmured so only he would hear. "He is a very crafty one."

"I'm a lawyer." Sir Ayjay straightened to his considerable height. "They don't come any 'craftier' than us."

Chapter Ten

After they'd made room in the great hall—hell, they were going to be fighting indoors, in the dining room, almost like civilized men—and pushed everything against the wall, Matheus disappeared to get prepared obviously. Meanwhile, Sir Emery sat with Marion while A.J.'s posse stood around him, giving him last-minute advice.

Hugo rubbed his beard in a constant downward motion as he considered the "arena". "Do not let him nick you for he shall try to do this."

"...has no reach but is very wily. Beware of his..." Thorins tried to cut in.

"Should he dip his shoulder, that would mean he plans to thrust, whereas his—"

"Yes, do watch for his shoulder!" Thorins made the motion of slashing. "And his elbows, that should—"

Thomas raised his hand, which silenced both men. "Just remember the mark on Lady Marion's fair cheek, my friend, that ought to suffice."

And it did.

A.J. felt his blood pressure rising right away. The mark on her face... He thought he was going to go after the man right then and there, too bad if the guy was in his underwear. A.J. had never, ever, been so *enraged* as when he'd first seen the look on her face, the fear. The pain. Oh A.J. had been angry plenty of times. Angry at losing a case—as rare as it was, it still happened once in a while—angry at getting a speeding ticket or facing a prosecutor who didn't seem intimidated, angry with the idea his mother, who'd worked all her life to give him the best only to die in his arms days before he hit the jackpot... Yeah, that made him plenty angry. But to see Marion's bruised face, the awful purple mark on her jaw and the look of satisfaction on the bastard's face. It had almost been too much to take.

He wondered what his mom would think of the situation now, of him getting all huffy and puffy—and lovey—over a cute woman who made her own clothes. He felt himself grinning like an idiot. She'd *love* it. She'd think her son was being so brave and valiant and knightly. Ha.

"Gentlemen," Matheus called from across the hall. He was dressed all in black leather, fitting for the big villain he was. A.J. thought he resembled a cross between a biker and a sheriff of Nottingham on speed. He flicked his sword in a perfectly timed, graceful arc before pointing it directly at A.J. The tip didn't move an inch.

Whoa.

So after a quick glance at a fidgety Marion, who looked as though she were going to pull her dress apart thread by thread, A.J. slid the iron out of his belt, let it swing in a slow pendulum before making a sharp half rotation that made the wedge cleave the air

with an incredibly gratifying *whoosh*. It was Asshole's turn to look as if he'd just thought, *whoa*.

"Shall we start? You interrupted something very pleasant I wish to revisit." Duke of Dickheadedness grinned. "Pleasant for me."

Breathe, A.J. told his rapidly diminishing mental faculties. Testosterone did this to men, lowered their thinking skills. But damn if he wasn't pumped!

"Soooo," A.J. said, grinning like a hyena, "no grand speech or throwing of the shawl or anything? We just start hacking?"

A simple nod was his answer.

"Well, that's anticlimactic. But time is money, right?"

As they turned toward one another, Matheus and A.J. slowly circled the area, facing inward, walking sideways so as not to give an opening to the other. It only lasted a while though as Matheus charged right away, quickly and with precise movements. Shit!

A.J. barely had time to skip out of the way and swing the club. He hit the back of the guy's leg. His gasp of pain made A.J. grin wider.

"Hey, Earl Tadpole of Rat Assington, how does it feel to be the one getting hit? I bet you don't enjoy that." A.J. laced his hands around the handle, leisurely swung the iron as if he'd just hit a delicious ball right onto the green and winked. "You're probably wondering how such a little thing can hurt so much. Well, it's all in the swing—"

Matheus charged again, quicker and coming much closer to finding A.J.'s shoulder with his blade. The sword rang when it scraped the stone floor. Marion gasped audibly before putting both hands over her mouth.

A.J. felt like gasping too. Damn it'd been close.

Then a series of thrusts and slashes had him backpedaling furiously, twisting out of Lord Mad Cow's reach then letting the sword come way close to his face—way close—so he could drive the butt end of the iron between leather armor and armpit. He loved weak spots.

"What coarse tactic is this?" Matheus demanded as he cringed and backed several paces away. "Can you not fight like an honorable man?"

"I'm a Norman lawyer, man!"

Another swing made the guy roar in outrage and really lay it on thick. He attacked on A.J.'s right then low on his left, kept him skipping back to avoid getting his thigh slashed in two. So King Jackass meant for lots of first blood.

"I almost forgot, how did you enjoy my drive? Did you find all eight of them or just a few? White little balls, about yea big?" A.J. showed with his index finger and thumb the size of a golf ball.

The look on the jerk's face! Priceless.

"I knew such devilry was yours!"

A.J. had hardly finished nodding before Matheus had his sword coming in a direct line for the middle of his belly. He twisted sideways and cursed when the sword dug right in and punched out the side of him.

Ouch, shit.

For a second, complete silence reigned in the room. With a snarl, Matheus pulled his sword free, ripping out a good chunk of A.J.'s leather armor with the guard of his weapon. Right about then, he didn't mind at all wearing the sweat of a hundred guys before him. Thank God for those things!

While the man was busy getting rid of the torn leather, A.J. swung the iron in a wide upward arc. Matheus barely had time to arch back. That would've made for a nice bit of first blood right there. A nine iron under the nose. Too bad the rat was quick.

"I wish you would've had more than just the one window too. It was so much fun. Did it crash in one big piece or a shower of shiny bits? And the noise? Lots of it, I hope?"

"You talk much, Sir Ajjay, and fight very little," Matheus shot back. "Are you the same in bed?"

"Ha! You can't turn that shit back on me, I'm the pro here. You're just a guy who has to beat a woman senseless to get a date. Is it so they don't see how little skill you have? Huh? *Little skill, get it?*"

"Why would a man need skill when a belt shall do? I was expecting the lady to be slightly more *spacious* though, I confess, as she was previously married. Perhaps the men who crawled between her legs had 'little skill' as well?"

A.J. actually felt the grin slide off his face. He swore he could hear it crashing on the floor too. By the corner of his eye, he spotted Marion emphatically shaking her head no. Hugo snarled something as he made to pull his sword out. Even Thomas, Mister Cool Cat, looked ready to pounce.

"This is a duel, gentlemen," Matheus said waspishly. He leveled his sword at A.J. "Only the foreigner and I shall fight for the lady's graces...even if we have both already tasted them."

So this was how it felt to lose it. And, man, did he ever.

A.J. crossed the distance separating him from the loathsome, ingrown, nail fuff rapist of a piece of shit and swung his iron with everything he had. Once, twice, thrice. The wedge hummed loudly every time. No longer smiling, Matheus agilely evaded every one of A.J.'s attacks, sometimes managing to take a swing of his own. But mostly, he just tried to avoid getting his skull bashed in. Relentless, A.J. pursed Lord Dickwad across the large hall, anger fueling him as never before. After a particularly potent swing, his adversary barely had time to arch back before A.J. smashed the head of his golf club against the table. A chunk of wood flew out. His eyes wide, Matheus ran backward, his guard barely up. He didn't look so confident anymore.

“Not so tough now, huh?” A.J. demanded, ignoring his posse’s frantic call for him to stop. “You didn’t think I could actually beat the crap out of you with one of these, did you?”

Still, Matheus didn’t attack, only parried and sidestepped.

“You think you could just –”

“Sir Ayjay!”

Thomas’ warning had barely registered before A.J. finally noticed how Asshole’s shoulder had just dipped.

Was it supposed to be when the shoulder dipped that the guy was *about* to attack? Or right *after*? Or was it the elbow he should be watching?

Too late.

So I guess it was before.

His face going from the pretend alarm that had made A.J. land with the finesse of a ton of brick in the other’s trap, Matheus launched into a series of devastating thrusts and jabs that nicked A.J. everywhere. Oh shit. He’d been fucked with his pants on!

“You lying sack of shit...” he growled after quickly patting himself down to make sure he wasn’t bleeding.

Sneering, President Scumbag of Rodent Land made an impossibly quick and complicated twirl with his sword. “Did you think I would finish you so quickly, you poor, inept foreigner? No, I intend to make it last.”

When Matheus came at him like a vengeful storm, A.J. had to do some serious dancing to get out of the barrage of sword strikes with his clothes still on him. A nasty thrust poked him near the knee, but thanks to his long reach, the guy couldn’t come any closer without exposing himself. Had A.J. not been so damn tall, he would’ve had a sword sticking out of his thigh right about now.

The sneaky little shit!

Marion’s gasp forced him to take a quick peek at her. He noticed the bruise right away.

He had touched her.

He had...

Hurt, dude, hurt like you won’t believe.

Finally, A.J. landed a good hit on the guy’s thigh. With a roar of pain, Matheus skipped sideways, only to walk right into the iron’s next arc, which caught him in the side. A split second after the *whoosh* of the metallic wedge, the muffled *thump* when the club hit made everyone groan. Matheus sidestepped and raised his sword for a horizontal attack.

A.J. struck the sword and the sound of the nine iron against the blade triggered a godawful twang that nearly dislodged his teeth. The sword flew out of Matheus’ grip

and clattered to the floor several feet away. He looked at his gloved hand, empty, with open shock and hatred.

A.J. cranked his arms for another oh-so-deserved hit and buried the club's head into Matheus' side. With a snarled growl of pain, he bent in half. "I am...unarmed," he wheezed.

"And...?"

He wouldn't whack a guy in the head with a golf club but with what the bastard had done—or tried to do most likely—A.J. was damn well happy to make him hurt. He gave him another piece of nine iron, this time, right behind the thigh.

"Fuck that," A.J. snarled as he tossed the iron away and charged for the man, tackling him down.

Matheus clutched at A.J.'s arms and tried to twist away. Man the guy was strong. "This is not—"

The impact of two hundreds plus pounds of angry lawyer sent both rolling several times in a tangle of limbs and curses. A.J. used his greater reach to grab the man's tunic and yank him back.

A.J. cocked his elbow back. "You're *never* going to touch her again."

His fist collided with the despicable face with a sound A.J. vowed never to forget. Bones crunching. Some of *his* too, he suspected.

His hand throbbing as if his heart had suddenly been transplanted there, A.J. stood and yanked Lord Sphincter to his feet, which barely supported him. A trickle of gloriously red, wet, *BLOOD* dribbled down the guy's nose and seeped into his contorted mouth.

"First blood, dammit. Let's get the hell out of here."

He let the guy slump to the ground and walked toward Marion, who had jumped to her feet and was coming for him. The impact of her soft body against his made A.J. grin like a loon while her arms wrapped themselves around his waist hard enough to stop air coming in.

"Shit, I think I broke my hand," he managed to say before she pulled herself up and kissed him.

And it was worth every day of excruciating pain that's waiting for me.

Lifting her off the floor with a one-arm bear hug, he spun around once and deposited her back down.

Try as he might, he couldn't remember the last time he'd been so damn happy. And he hadn't even earned a cent either. Ha!

Everyone started talking at once.

"You have won the lady's honor, Sir Ayjay," Hugo cried with a heavy smack on the shoulder that made A.J. cough. "Well done!"

Thorins slapped him on the back then turned to Thomas, who was grinning and wiping his eye. A.J. gave the blond man a small nod of thanks. Without this one's insistence—okay, not insistence, harassment and volley of cheap shots—he never would've gone to Rat Ass in the first place and never would've known how much he loved Marion.

Whoa. Did I just think the L word?

"Taste it while you can," snarled Matheus as he climbed to his feet unsteadily. Everyone grew silent as they watched him rearranging his tunic. "For I shall see to it Sargans pays the price. When winter comes—"

"Nothing at all shall happen, Lord Matheus, for Sargans rule shall return to Sargans this very moment," Sir Emery said as he gathered himself to his full—oh what?—five and a half feet. His liver-spotted hands didn't shake when he clasped them in front. "Sir Ayjay has won the duel fairly, if a bit unusually, as can attest everyone here. And he shall be allowed to marry Lady Marion at their convenience. Full governance and control of the levies shall pass to them."

A.J. couldn't help himself and winked at Lord Salmonella. "It hurts, doesn't it?"

"And you shall hurt too, you foreign devil!"

"Now, now. Be nice. Don't forget I have a *looong* reach." A.J. hooked his thumb behind him at the round hole once graced with the man's prized stained-glass window.

While A.J. retrieved his club, took Marion's warm hand in his and made for the doors, Matheus hissed a long series of curses. After he wiped his nose and mouth, he looked at his bloodied hand and stared as if in disbelief then leveled his gaze at his rival.

At the door, with his grinning posse around him and Marion by the hand, A.J. turned for one last look at Sir Foreskin the First as he leaned against a table and massaged his chin.

"That was fun. Time well spent, I'd say. I'll send you the bill."

* * * * *

"What is a 'bill'?" Marion asked as she helped Sir Ayjay claw out of the sweaty leather armor and crumbled undertunic. In his darkened bedchamber, the setting sun poked timid rays between the window coverings. Clouds were massing to the north. Hard labor to prepare for winter would begin soon. Speaking of which, a whiff of sweat, so unlike what she'd come to expect from him, wafted to her.

He must have noticed her reaction for he sniffed his armpit and cringed. "Whew, man. I'd kill for a shower. A bill," he went on, sobering, "is the amount of coins I want in exchange for my work." He rubbed his index and thumb fingers together as if he were rolling something between them, but when she looked, she saw nothing. His other hand seemed fine, despite his complaints about the amount of pain involved in drawing first blood from Matheus.

Marion watched as the peculiar man sat on the edge of the bed and raked his hair back. A nasty bruise was spreading on one of his sinewy arms and myriad more on his torso. The sight of his naked chest and shoulders created shameful need deep in her belly. How could a woman not desire such a man?

“Did you really...?” How could she ask him the question without insulting his honor? He’d fought for hers. “Do you really have any intentions toward me or did you just wish to thwart Lord Matheus? Shall you not wish to go back...*home*?”

He arched a dark eyebrow as he stared at her. “I guess you’re allowed to ask, even if it’s a kick in the—” He cleared his throat. “Look, I’m not in the habit of repeating myself. So I’ll say this once and I hope your note-taking skills are sharp.

“I kicked his ass for several good reasons—I mean, with a guy like him, who wouldn’t want to smack him around? But while I was redecorating Matheus’ home with my wicked drive, I had a little chat with your friend Thomas and he told me something that stuck in my mind. He said if I loved you, I’d go jump off a cliff. Or set myself on fire first. Or something close to that.”

“Good Lord, Sir Ayjay, he told you such thing?” She was horrified at her friend’s lack of finesse. When had Thomas become so dense?

“I think he was going for figurative. Anyway, I hope he was. The main thing is, I went there for one reason. *You*. Nothing else. Not my honor, which I don’t have, and certainly not in a sense of chivalry, which isn’t something I’ll *ever* have. I was going to get *you* out of Rat Ass if it cost me an arm and a leg. No pun intended. I like you a lot...” He stopped, seemed to consider something before rubbing his temple. “You know what? What the hell! I love you. I want to marry you and if you think I’m just saying that, then fine, I can’t change your mind, but I’m sure—”

Marion drowned the rest under a passionate kiss. She pulled back, watched his widening grin. “You talk too much, Sir Ayjay.”

“I’m a lawyer.”

She meant to put her arms around his neck but he seized both wrists and pulled them away from him. “I’m not putting my filthy hands on you. I’d be afraid to give you scurvy or something. How about we get a bath?”

“*We*? Together?”

He nodded, his eyes narrowed with lust.

“Now?”

“Oh yeah.”

Her heart thudded arrhythmically for a while before she willed self-control back to her feverish body. “How wickedly tempting.”

His eyebrows wiggling made her grin.

While Sir Ayjay removed his boots and wriggled his toes in the rug by the bed, muttering something about dust “bonnies” between them, Marion sent for a bath. She didn’t tell the lads how two people would be sharing it—she still couldn’t see how both

of them would fit at once. Cook must have had boiling water ready beforehand because a moment later Hannah came back with the lads and set the bath in front of the blazing fire. She rearranged everything at least twice, occasionally throwing a sly look at Marion, who pretended not to have seen it as she went about organizing the affair. When the young woman had finished, a deep blush to her cheeks – the half-naked Sir Ayjay hadn't even tried to cover himself, for the love of God – she bowed and left.

Once alone with him, Marion could no longer pretend to be busy. Her hands shook as she looked at the steaming bath by the hearth.

"We don't have to do this, you know," Sir Ayjay remarked as he stood and tried to rearrange his hose but made a big mess of it. He sighed and gave up.

"I want to."

She did. She wanted to gaze at his exquisite body while he undressed and washed it. She wanted his hands on her and vice versa. She wanted *him*.

"Because I'm wearing *Eau de Pig Number Five* right now, you go first." He sat on the foot of the bed. "But don't worry, I'll help."

As if she had a fever, her skin grew tight and warm. She pushed a strand of hair from her temple and hooked it behind her ear.

"Starting with that gorgeous hair," he said, hooking his index finger at her and parting his knees so she could stand in between. She did.

Attentive, he lifted her thick braid, weighed it in a loose fist before raking his fingers through the ends so the different coils would come undone under his skillful touch. She'd never heard of a man who could handle a woman's hair so well.

"You are very adept at this."

He nodded. "Before she lost it all, back when my mother was ill, I used to do her hair. Well, I'm sure she would've preferred a daughter to do it for her, but all she had was me. So I read magazines, learned what to do, you know, went on the Internet. Then I'd get all those fancy products – the most expensive I could find too – and put it on her hair. She loved it."

"She was ill?"

He nodded. "She died of cancer." He seemed to consider something. "Cancer is like a plague, but you can't catch it from someone else. One day you're fine then the next you have it and sometimes you die. Anyway, I had to be careful because her hair was getting so fragile."

She could tell he must have loved her very much. Her heart swelled for him. "She was lucky to have you."

He shrugged. "I gave her enough trouble, the least I could do was make sure she felt beautiful near the end." His hand caressed the length of hair he'd just released from the braid and curled it around his finger. "Speaking of beautiful, Marion, I have to tell you, you're the most delicious-looking woman I've ever seen. You would've caused a riot where – *when* – I'm from."

Ah yes, his home in the *future*.

"You still think I'm from Normandy – which isn't that inaccurate, come to think of it, my ancestors *were* from France. But you still don't believe me...don't I look strange enough for you?"

She nodded. "You are strange enough, I guess, but to come from a time that has not happened..."

"Hey. It was a rhetorical question. You didn't *have* to agree with me."

Sir Ayjay seemed to consider something, shook his head as a calm grin spread across his features. Marion had never seen that expression on him before, so relaxed. Serene. As though he'd found something he'd long lost.

"But you know what, I think I'll go with that. I'll be your Norman lord if that will make things easier on both of us. Your folks already call me that, anyway. It's much better than "that foreign devil", that's for sure."

"Oh you have heard..."

"Hugo, yeah. But that's okay. I take good notes," Sir Ayjay replied, pointing at his temple.

They shared a quiet grin as he continued unbraiding her hair. When he was running his fingers through the entire length of it, her heartbeat accelerated.

"You're going to have to show me how this works. I'm used to garter belts, bras – front and back clasps – and everything else in between, but that kind of closure, I've never seen."

"It starts here." Marion lifted her arm so Sir Ayjay could unlace her gown. His face set in absolute concentration, he leisurely unlaced her garment, tugged at the opening to loosen it on the side then looked up into her eyes, waiting.

"Then I must pull it up over my head." She kicked off her shoes, lifted her arms and meant to squeeze out of her gown but he stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. He stood.

"As I told you before, nothing this good should come quickly."

His gaze on hers, he bent, picked up the hem of her gown and gently lifted it up to her thighs, waist, before he indicated with his chin she should lift her arms so he could slip the garment over her head. While the fabric hid her face, Marion took the opportunity to squeeze her eyes shut for a quick reprieve. She felt on the brink of madness. Tortured with immediate needs yet at the same time hungering for his slow kind of attention.

When he pulled the gown over her head and spread it on the bed, he turned back to her, his gaze sliding down her body, right down to her feet, before coming back up and stopping on her face. Through the thin chemise, her breasts pebbled. He seemed to have noticed for his hungry eyes lingered there for a while.

"I still can't believe you're all mine," he said with a sort of half-feral, half-amazed expression.

"I am all yours, Sir Ayjay."

He grimaced. "I didn't mean it that way." Tender, his fingers curled in and traced her bruised cheek. "I meant, I can't believe a guy like me could be so lucky. I'm not exactly a model citizen, Marion. I deserve someone like me, shallow and cynical. Not you. Not..." He stopped, shook his head. "Not a smart and lovely woman like you. A blonde goddess."

She felt herself blush. "I am hardly a goddess. Only a woman. And this woman wants you. *Now.*"

She meant to kiss him but he drew back. "Nuh-uh. After the bath."

He took her hand and guided her to the bath, which steamed still. With deft and steady fingers, he untied the thin ribbon holding her chemise together at the collar and parted it over her shoulders. His breath caught in his throat then resumed audibly. Marion thought she would collapse when Sir Ayjay slowly, by small increments, denuded her shoulders, her upper arms, before slipping the thin linen garment down below her breasts, which he caressed with his gaze. Yet he did not touch her. He let the chemise pool around her ankles.

Marion had to bite her cheek to keep from squirming. To stand so completely naked—and aroused—in front of a man felt exhilarating and frankly quite unthinkable only a few days ago. It had been a long time. Swallowing hard, she lifted her chin and stared at him through her uneasiness. If his eyes were any indication, Sir Ayjay enjoyed what he was seeing very much. A quick check to his hose confirmed it as his considerable member strained the fabric along his thigh. She couldn't wait to hold it again, kiss it, spear herself to it. The mere thought made her take a deep breath. In response to the sight of his excitement, honey gathered between her folds as fire spread through her body. A shiver shook her.

"Are you cold?"

She shook her head.

Holding her hand again, he helped her step into the large copper basin. Water almost too hot made her purse her lips, the fire's warmth licked her shoulder and hip and under the man's fiery gaze, Marion thought she would go up in flames. She meant to kneel but he shook his head. "I want to watch you."

She reached for the ladle but he took it from her hand. "I'm going to do that."

She only needed to eye the jar of soap. He shook his head. "That too."

"Shall I do nothing then?"

"You get to stand and just be the vision you are."

With the utmost care, he dipped the ladle in the bath and let a thin ribbon of water caress her from hip to knee where the rest disappeared under the surface. A sound similar to rain filled the room as water fell into the pace-wide bath. He repeated the process but started higher this time, up on her shoulder. The trickle of hot water followed her curves, hardened a nipple, caressed her hip before following the inside of

her thigh and trickling back into the bathtub. Sir Ayjay worked in reverent silence, his hands careful, his eyes not missing a detail. She had never felt so desirable. When she was wet everywhere, even between her legs, Sir Ayjay retrieved the jar of soap.

After a suspicious sniff, his expression brightened considerably. "Hey, this is good stuff. Olive oil, right? With..." He sniffed again, closed his eyes.

"Lavender," she whispered, her excitement choking her voice. She could barely breathe and kept looking down at herself to watch what reactions his attentions triggered in her.

He nodded. "Lavender, right. Not bad at all."

Nodding to himself, he tipped the jar over his hand and let a tiny amount out. Rubbing his fingers around, he seemed to get a feel for the soap before spreading it around her shoulders in small, circular movements. After her shoulders came her back, her breasts, to which he paid particular attention as he stroked around and around, weighing one while he washed the other or merely cupping his large hand over it and keeping it there. Her belly received the same treatment, a small amount of soap then a tender rubbing, and when he was beginning to reach down even lower, between her legs, carnal needs of every kind surged. The basest urges clawed at her. She wanted him to take her, claim her, in the bed, against the wall and even on her knees as he'd done while they made love outdoors. Outdoors! How wickedly exciting!

He was calm and considerate as he washed her sex and rinsed it with liberal amounts of water. Marion thought the man showed impressive self-control to merely wash her when he was—so obviously—aroused himself. Locks of hair had fallen over his forehead and temple as he bent in front of her then knelt. Putting his palm against her calf, he proceeded in massaging her leg, up and down and around. The heat of his skin radiated to hers. When he looked up and offered a quiet, lopsided smile, Marion thought she would fall to pieces.

"I hope you're enjoying yourself, because I can see myself doing this. A lot."

After a quiver tightened her belly and backside, Marion nodded. "I enjoy it very much."

When he abruptly leaned forward and licked her drenched cleft, she gasped.

"I couldn't help it, but I'll be good now."

"Oh I hope not. I should enjoy you to be wicked."

He looked up at her, the playfulness gone, replaced with raw masculinity. "How wicked?"

"*Wicked.*"

Feral and powerful, the hunger blazing in his eyes forced her to swallow hard. Excitement made her want to fist his hair and pull him to her sex. She so needed him there.

"You know what would be fun?" He ran a finger downward through her dark blonde patch. "To shave a bit of that golden fleece you've got going. Mm?" He looked up, wiggled his eyebrows.

"Shave down there?" Marion looked down at herself, tried to imagine the mound without its blonde tuft but couldn't. "Is it something women do in your homeland?"

"You should see a Brazilian wax job," he replied, laughing. "But yeah, it is something some women do. I've done it too."

It sounded strange but not too outrageous. "Shave it then."

Where had this wanton woman come from?

Sir Ayjay retrieved a towel and his razor, which he complained about, saying how he "sure missed his 'Jeelette'". Another new word.

With vigilance bordering on obsession, he stretched the skin along her mons and scraped a narrow strip of hair off. Marion watched fascinated as Sir Ayjay delicately denuded the skin on her mound until all that remained was a narrow, vaguely triangular stripe in the middle.

He rinsed her profusely, put the razor and towel on the floor and knelt back so he could admire his handiwork. "Delicious."

Marion felt her cheeks grow warm. She looked down, fought against the giggles that would make a fool of her and ran an index finger along the smooth skin. Not bad, all in all. "I think I shall like it this way."

"And maybe one day we'll go to Brazil." He laughed at his own jest.

He stood. "Now it's *my* turn." The grin he gave her this time had none of the lightheartedness it had previously but all of the passion. His lust practically burned her skin.

"Should I remove your clothes?" Marion asked, praying he would say yes.

He nodded as he spread his feet wider and hooked his hands on his narrow hips.

With fingers she was shocked to discover didn't shake, she unlaced the first few rows on his hose, gradually loosening the wool until his member tented it nicely. She smiled down at it. So glorious. Kneeling, she pulled the hose down around his ankles and helped him step out of them. Sir Ayjay stood completely naked before her and Marion could think of nothing else quite as beautiful as his lean, muscular form and the way firelight danced over his healthy skin. Dark hair partitioned his belly in perfect halves then again in horizontal sections before becoming a thin strip caressing his navel and running lower at the base of his manhood. It hung thick, almost threatening. She licked her lips at the memory of the ease with which it slid inside her. Marion was reaching for it when Sir Ayjay grabbed her shoulder and angled her away.

"Not now. I'm sweaty and dirty and not fit to be touched by a woman."

He stepped inside the large basin, water reaching barely above his calves.

"I wish you would have gone before I did, Sir Ayjay. The water would have been much nicer."

“Ladies first. And anyway, I’m so dirty that when I’m done, the water is going to be a toxic spill.”

She laughed without really knowing why for she had no idea what a “tok-sik spell” was. Ladle in hand, she brought it up to his shoulder and let a thin film of water course down his magnificent body. He shivered, muscles playing loosely under the surface.

Because he was so tall, he had to bend and rub water and soap into his hair and face then wait as she rinsed it off for him. Glistening water made his fit form a work of art in light and shadow. Marion was shivering from excitement by the time she’d rinsed the last strips of soap from his legs.

“Now,” he said, stepping out of the bath and shaking water out of his hair. “You did ask for a wicked man, didn’t you?”

With a gasp, Marion let the man encircle her waist and dip her backward over the foot of the bed.

“Still want it?”

“I certainly do.”

“Good, ‘cause I’m feeling wickedly horny right now.”

Marion laughed. *Horny?*

Chapter Eleven

When he told her to stand up and not move a muscle, Marion did, a feeling of anticipation firing spasms down her legs and toes. Sir Ayjay circled her, stopped behind so she couldn't see what he was doing. But feel it she did!

A large hand came around her and captured a breast. Then another joined the first. Elevated as pale offerings, her breasts tingled when he raised them, his thumbs circling her nipples before trapping them against the base of his index fingers. Marion gasped.

"That's good, is it?"

She nodded.

"Good," he replied in her ear. "Because I'm a breast man. And yours are the loveliest, softest and most luscious I've ever touched...or tasted."

Rolling her buds in his hands, he raised her breasts higher and brought them up in the center where he began to squeeze with more firmness until she had to bite her bottom lip to keep from moaning. The mix of sting and titillation shocked her. How could the line be so fine between the two? As much as she had enjoyed Johannes' touch, and even her own, she had not known it was possible that a man could bring a woman fulfillment through less-than-tender attentions. Yet Sir Ayjay's hands weren't rough, only more insistent. Much more.

"Wrap your hands around my neck."

Marion did, reached up high and laced her fingers at his nape.

Slowly at first, he caressed her flanks, her hips, before coming back up and pressing his large palms over her belly and squeezing her to him. Hot and hard, his member pushed along her spine. Rotating his hips in measured, lazy circles, Sir Ayjay gradually spread her feet with his until she stood with her legs about shoulders' width with the man plastered behind her accelerating his circles, adding a pronounced push whenever his hips faced squarely. Like snakes, their bodies wound round and round. Then he abandoned her hips so he could brush the tips of his fingers along her partially bared cleft, the freshly shaved skin allowing for heightened sensations. She would make sure he shaved her again whenever it became too thick. He parted her, dipped inside. Marion opened her mouth but nothing came out.

While Sir Ayjay kept his middle finger pressed inside her channel, he encircled her waist and held her tightly. "Keep moving," he murmured in her ear while his hips pushed hers from behind, forcing Marion to literally grind herself on his hand. And oh if the immodest activity didn't bring the utmost gratification!

"Keep going, slow circles, that's it."

His voice had hardened, thickened and held a trace of tension as he pumped his hips while keeping her securely crushed to him with an arm that barely allowed breath.

When he pushed his finger deeper, a shameless moan escaped her. He did it again. She replied to his forceful entry with a sharp buck against him. She felt him stiffen behind her.

"Do you have any idea how badly I want you?"

His growled question made her grin in pride, stroked the feminine sense of accomplishment. That she could make such a strong man abandon all decorum awakened her body as never before. She wanted things she couldn't even voice.

"Huh? Do you have any idea?"

"Show me."

"Oh yeah?"

Sir Ayjay's nip on her neck produced a sharp jab of thrill down her spine and coupled with his precise cadence in and out of her, triggered liquid heat that seeped out of her into his hand. Another finger joined the first. Marion dug her nails in his nape, pressed the back of her head against his chest. *Ohh.*

With both rhythm and intensity increasing, Marion couldn't help the low whimper rising up her chest, through her throat, past her clenched teeth. When she released her pleasure, Sir Ayjay rubbed her sex until it began to burn. Still, Marion said nothing. She didn't want him to stop.

"Lie down," he said as he released her and angled her shoulders so she *faced* the bed.

Marion confirmed with a look Sir Ayjay indeed wanted her in the prone position against the bed. With the height of it, she had to raise herself on the tip of her toes and use her arms to keep from collapsing. He stood behind her, his feet in between hers.

Coiling her hair loosely, he tickled her back and bottom with the ends of it. Marion chuckled and twisted, which seemed to elicit a sudden urge in him. He released her hair and plastered himself along her back, his member pressing against her cleft. The unexpected weight drove the air from her lungs in a great huff.

"I'm going to take you from behind again, Marion. But now I'll have all the time in the world to do it properly. Would you like that?"

She nodded, unable to voice the things swirling in her fevered mind. She wanted him to take her any way he wished, but above all, she wanted him to do it fiercely, to bring out the woman in her over and over, to make her moan and scream and kick and claw. Marion hungered for the man with an intensity that frightened her. When he lifted himself off her, she arched her backside up and waited.

"Oh no, not with this," he said teasingly, nudging her sex with his own, slightly parting it but not sinking inside as she wanted so deeply. "Spread them wider and you'll see."

Marion did, spread her legs as wide as she could while he stood behind her, bent over her while she waited in the most audacious posture she could ever find herself in. At least the last time, when they'd done it in the grass, she'd been wearing her dress. Yet she loved every moment of it. When something very soft and burning hot touched her high on the inside of a thigh, she knew he meant to love her with his mouth. Unable to contain it, she let out a long sigh.

"I knew you'd enjoy it," he remarked before spreading her backside and giving her cleft a solid lick.

She shivered.

"Again?"

Marion nodded hard enough to damage her neck.

With a deep chuckle, he indulged her. Then he did it again. His elbows now digging in her thighs so she'd keep them well apart, Sir Ayjay lavished her most intimate spot with luxurious passes of his tongue before digging his fingers behind her knees and forcing them wider apart, even tugging her down toward him.

"You like it, don't you?"

"I do," Marion replied, her voice muffled in the blankets. And all that bald skin on either side of her sex made it even more sensitive. "I do. *Ohh...*"

He'd just bitten her on a cheek. Hard. Coating her from mons to sacrum with her honey, the ever-so-skilled man pressed his tongue hard until she felt the supple penetration, the cordial incursion that made her gasp in sharp little cries.

"That too?"

She was about to reply she did enjoy his attentions very much when he brusquely pulled her down until her feet nearly touched the ground, her backside completely thrust up along the edge of the mattress. His shaft sinking into her made Marion sputter a quick curse. Like well-oiled leather, he sank in and retreated right away, leaving behind a burning impression of himself.

"Oh God..."

"Again?"

"Heaven, yes, again!"

She heard him chuckling as he anchored her by the hips and slid back in, this time slightly harder and deeper. He was so large inside her, her entry burned slightly. Marion bit hard and squeezed her eyes shut. His thick member rubbing against her pearl produced the sharpest sensations yet.

"Again, Marion?"

"Yes!"

"Harder?"

"Yes!"

In the name of everything that's holy, yes! she wanted to add, but could only moan incoherently as Sir Ayjay indulged her with the entire length of him, until she could feel his balls pressing at the juncture of her thighs.

His hands merciless against her hips, he took her hard. The bed creaked under his assault. That she had to bite the coverlet to keep from screaming like a banshee made Marion realize how much she loved the man.

Sir Ayjay pumped into her, he ground her sex, pushed deep enough to press against the end of her channel before retreating and plunging back in again, making sure he rubbed her nub as he did so, creating bliss bordering on delirium. When she could hold it in no longer, Marion cried out in the mattress. Behind her, he hammered away. Then he slowed and she couldn't help the faint feeling of regret he would be done so soon.

"Turn over," he panted, pulling out. Letting go of her hips, he helped her roll onto her back, keeping her behind right along the edge of the bed. His large hands on her knees, he spread her wide.

A healthy glow deepened his cheeks, neck and chest. His hair was in disarray and hanging partly over his eyes. But the look on his face was what made Marion freeze and take notice.

Sir Ayjay looked so untamed, so unlike his usually cultivated self. A mask of primal hunger curled his glistening lips, flared his nostrils, narrowed his eyes.

"I love to see you this way, Marion, all ripe and ready for me. I could do this all night."

She reached up over her head and fisted the coverlet. "Make love to me, Sir Ayjay, with your mouth, your hands, your..." she looked down at his massive member and licked her lips. "I want you to take me every which way you please. Even standing." She couldn't believe she'd just voiced her basest need to him.

He arched an eyebrow, mocking. "Even *standing*. Whew, my Lady Marion, how shocking."

When he chuckled, his abdominals pulled on his shaft, which bobbed slightly.

She had a sudden and uncontrollable hunger for it. She abruptly sat up and pushed him at arm's length. He must have understood for a wide smile pulled his lips to one side as Marion steered him so he'd replace her on the bed, only she wanted him to sit on it and spread his knees so she could stand in between.

"The little tigress has claws," Sir Ayjay remarked under his breath.

The look on his face when she fisted his shaft and thrust her hand downward!

"Now it's your turn to lie down."

He shook his head. "No, Marion. I'm going to watch you do it."

Oh but she would give him something to watch.

Leaning back on his hands, he spread his muscled thighs so she could fit comfortably in between and watched her like a hawk while she stroked his shaft up and

down then back again. She realized her juices coated his shaft and that it'd be the first time she'd do something like this, kiss a man's sex after it'd been introduced to her own, but the novelty, the sheer audacity made her feel more like a woman than she'd ever felt before. She wanted to try all these new things with him, trusted him implicitly to stop should she wish to.

Not that she did!

Marion leaned over so she could kiss the tip of it, the sides, the inside of his thighs, his balls, before she licked a languorous trail right from glans to base.

He squeezed his eyes shut. "Damn, Marion."

"Do you enjoy such attention?"

All she got was a curt nod.

Using both hands now – which still didn't manage to cover the length of him – Marion slid them both down to his base, trapped the skin there while she enveloped the tip with her mouth. A violent shudder tightened his muscled belly. Panting, Sir Ayjay opened his eyes while she was gazing upward to gauge his reaction.

A lifetime of poetry would not have conveyed all the feelings she saw roiling in the black orbs. And she knew her own expressed the same emotions as well. She loved this peculiar man, this foreigner who insisted on using the ladies' privacy area and who could use his tongue in the most wicked and stimulating ways imaginable. He was to be her husband and, Good God, she would not change a thing.

Making room in her mouth, she slid down low, her fists still tight around the base while she brought the end farther into her throat, deeper than she'd ever thought herself capable. He filled her completely, smoothly. Hot and hard, his member pulsated gently under her thumbs. She realized he must have kept himself painfully close to release without ever allowing it until she'd had her fill. Literally.

With near violence, she gripped his shaft, slid her fist up and down.

"I'm not going to last long," he warned.

Marion smiled in what she knew was an utterly indecent way. "I do not want you to."

His eyes flared. "I'll show you something. For now, just keep doing what you're doing, ma'am."

Her mouth and hands merciless aggressors, she pushed and pulled, drew and licked and ran her teeth threateningly close to the feverish skin, all the while keeping an eye on his face for the signs of his impending orgasm.

When his hand neared hers, she knew he was coming.

"Grab the base. Hard," he snarled through his teeth.

She did, clutched the root of his shaft with everything she had. He gasped but nodded.

A faint pulse pressed against her palm. How clever. "The seed stays inside."

He nodded, his eyes closed as he let the rapture show on his face. His panting softened, his shoulders relaxed. Still, Marion held on for dear life.

"You're choking it," he remarked with a smirk.

"Oh forgive me." She released his manhood and looked in wonder at the lack of semen in her hand or around his glans. Not a drop.

"Now," he added, his face undergoing a transformation. The ferocious light in his eyes was back. "We can play all night."

* * * * *

His remark seemed to have done something to the little tigress for she stood up straight, a look of anticipation tightening her mouth, the luscious mouth that had just made him explode, and while she remained unmoving, he could tell tension coiled in her curvy, plentiful frame. Damn he loved her form, all smooth curves and the palest skin. And such a delectable pussy—so rosy and tight for him and now shaved to a tailored strip. Just thinking about it made him want to pound into it again. He would. Only not now. He wanted to make her twist again first.

"You did mention something against walls, if I'm not suffering from transference here..."

She swallowed hard. "I did."

"Mmm, let's see." A.J. looked around at the bedchamber, gauging which wall would be best suited for the indecorous kind of fucking he was planning.

He finally settled on the portion of wall between the narrow windows. "Right there, my lady. That's the wall against which I want to make love to you." His attempt to modulate his speech to sound similar to hers made her grin.

"Oh I wouldn't laugh if I were you."

She sobered immediately.

With a small nod, Marion took his hand—not his bum one but the other...he didn't care what she said, it still hurt, dammit! But at least he could move it and realized it wasn't broken. Good thing because the likelihood of getting an x-ray was dismal.

She let him guide her to the portion of wall so close to the windows. Frankly, he was surprised she was willing to let him take her there. Luckily these were narrow and high along the castle's back wall, which opened onto the wilderness and not the interior courtyard. Although A.J. was so damn turned on, he would've fucked Marion at high noon on the highest tower.

Hey...gotta remember that for later.

"Back against the wall," A.J. said, placing his hands over her shoulders and pushing her until she leaned back between the windows.

Her eyes were round as coins. And he intended to make them even wider.

Entwining his fingers between hers, he brought her hands up over her head, put them against the stone wall and pressed himself against her. Hard. Her breathing accelerated. Just to tease her, A.J. ran his tongue over his upper lip while his gaze lingered down the length of her curvy body.

"It's what you wanted me to do, wasn't it?"

All she did was stare.

"Wasn't it?"

"Yes," she replied with much more aplomb than he'd anticipated.

Oh the little... "I do want you to take me right here, against the wall."

When he crushed his mouth to hers, shocking the breath right out of her, Marion peeled her pelvis from the wall and pushed against him. Damn if he pinned her right back! One of his thighs wedged in between hers. She made room for it. She was *made for* him. A perfect fit.

His hands never releasing hers, he devoured her mouth and throat, her shoulders, those devilish breasts that would make him lose his mind, breasts that he bit and licked so hard Marion let out a long whimper. When a hot trickle seeped down along his thigh, A.J. knew she'd come again. And he hadn't even touched her pussy yet! So responsive.

Unable to restrain himself any longer, A.J. literally hoisted her an inch or so off the floor with his thigh jammed between hers. Marion shamelessly gyrated against him, seemingly desperate to unleash the sex goddess within the lady. He wouldn't complain!

"Take me," she urged against his mouth. When she bit him on the bottom lip, he arched back and stared at her.

Planting their entwined fists wide against the wall and high over her head, A.J. curled his spine so he could sink in her and scoop her up. Did he ever!

With much more force than he'd intended, A.J. heaved right between her thighs, his cock thrusting in so deep he gasped as loudly as she did.

"Oh man, Marion, I'm so sor—"

His name came out in a loud moan, which filled the room. Marion cinched his waist with her legs and clamped down. *Whoa.*

"Again," she snarled against his neck while she bit and licked and more or less abused him in every way he liked to be abused. Especially by gorgeous women.

His arms burning from the strain of keeping her against the wall, nearly suspended, he wound his butt back for another stab, but this one he didn't even try to make gentle. He just pumped inside her tight little pussy as if his life depended on it. His work was rewarded with another whimper.

"Again, again, *again.*"

Growling and panting, A.J. pushed out, back in, worked his back and butt and legs to keep her moaning and lolling her head side to side. There had never been any other woman who had triggered such a massive case of the "must fuck, must fuck, must

fucks". He knew he was sweating like a pig and snarling incoherent words in English, but he didn't give a shit. She wanted him to fuck her against a wall, and he'd be damned if he wasn't going to give her the pounding she wanted.

Up higher, harder, A.J. took her then he took her again. He felt drunk. With lust, love, ecstasy. Hot damn! But as much as he was putting all his years of swimming into this workout, he was tiring fast. Yet she didn't seem to be.

"Harder, take me harder," came the growled command.

Who knew!

Oh he had just the thing for her, wicked little tigress.

When he deposited her to the floor again, she punched him in the chest. She actually punched him!

His hand around her shoulder, he drove her to the bed, spun her around with an abrupt twist then bent her over with a palm pressed between the shoulder blades. Marion didn't need telling and spread her legs nice and wide for him. Good woman!

"Climb up on your knees."

She did, literally jumped up on the bed and knelt. With the height of the thing, her glistening pussy was almost right in his face.

A.J. crouched and spread her cheeks with his thumbs so he could have a last sip before he rammed himself into her. And truth be told, he needed the short break!

Her cries rising, he ate her, fingered her and even ventured near her tight little anus, which glistened like a dewy rose bud. She didn't seem to mind. So he pressed the pad of a finger in. She froze for a second before arching her spine in a tight C that all but made him lose it.

After he hooked his hands behind her knees and yanked hard, which made Marion collapse onto her belly, with her ass sticking out over the edge, A.J. fisted his cock and rubbed her with it, in tightening circles that made her pant his name, before he drove in. His initial thrust produced a burning ring at the base of his cock when she gripped him. He knew he was a big guy but she seemed more than ready for him so he gladly obliged Marion. Inside, deeper, A.J. pushed. After he sank all the way to his balls—and hoping to hell he hadn't hurt her—he pulled back, waited for the effect and grinned when Marion twisted up to receive more of him.

A.J. had never, ever, let himself go so completely, ever fearing he would hurt his women. Experience didn't change the size of a woman's channel and despite some of his girlfriends being extremely skilled—*professionally* skilled—A.J. had always been careful. Not her. Damn, he felt as though she could take him all and then some. Her slick entry began to fist him and he knew she was coming and was doing so violently.

"That's it, Marion, let it out," he urged between thrusts.

When he himself experienced the first signs of climax—hadn't he just come not even an hour ago—A.J. pulled all the stops. "I'm going to come too, Marion."

"Come," she snarled with a quick peek behind her. "I want you in me."

As hard as he could, he stabbed his hips forward, snapped them back, pushed right back in, always harder, always deeper. Fire licked at his lower back, his legs shook violently, so did his arms and hands, which he kept clutched around her generous hips. With a violence that shocked him, he fucked Marion as he'd never fucked a woman before. And as cum blasted out of him in sharp little bursts, A.J. growled her name like a male roaring to the world his triumph, his primal male dominion over this sweet, sweet female but more importantly, he climaxed with the ardor and passion of a man in love.

Which he was, dammit.

Speaking of which, he was getting married soon. He didn't know when but it was soon. And a single thought blazed a path in his feverish mind. Well, two thoughts actually. One, he had nothing to wear. And two, he had nothing to give to his future bride.

Shit and double shit.

Chapter Twelve

“Ouch, shit, it burns,” Sir Ayjay snarled as Marion gently pulled the fine thread of sheep gut from his eyebrow.

The skin had closed nicely, though he still didn’t believe her without a long look in the mirror, which he termed “a caveman *cee-dee*”. Another word of his she didn’t understand. One of many.

“You look fine,” Thomas remarked with a particularly pronounced smirk.

She threw him a warning look.

The three sat in the day room where light was best for delicate matters such as removing Sir Ayjay’s sutures. He had complained the entire time.

“Do you mean I ‘look fine’ or I ‘look *fiiiine*’?”

Sir Ayjay seemed to be the only one to understand his own jest and chuckled as he put careful fingers to his eyebrow and wiggled it.

“You do look fine, Sir Ayjay,” Marion put in as she dumped the dried thread of sheep gut into the dish along with the small razor. The man had nearly jumped out of his chair and run away when she had approached with the tool in hand. “As fine as any Norman I know.”

He rolled his eyes. “Ah, yes, I’m a Norman lord. I keep forgetting.”

Marion shared a quick glance with Thomas, who looked as troubled as she was.

Sir Ayjay threw his hands up. “Would you two stop that? I’m here and I can *see* you.”

“My apologies,” she said right away, genuinely sorry she’d shown such bad manners. But every time the subject was broached, she couldn’t help her disbelief. And the poor man still couldn’t remember his attack nor had he accepted her many offers to revisit the place where it’d happened.

“Your claim is rather...*difficult* to believe, Sir Ayjay,” Thomas said with a shrug. “Would you believe me if I claimed to be from a time yet to come?”

Her future husband crossed his arms. “Of course I would.”

Thomas laughed before Marion could stop him.

“I *would* too!”

“This has to be the first lie you have said that one can easily spot,” Thomas replied, still grinning. “Please say you are not losing your edge.”

“Har har. Ohhh he’s a funny man, isn’t he?” Sir Ayjay uncrossed his arms, seemed as though he wanted to add something but shook his head.

Desperate to change the subject, Marion rearranged her sleeve with great flourish. "Dear Thomas, I think you would do well to watch yourself during the next few days. I shall not answer for anything that should happen to your charming person."

Brightening, Sir Ayjay turned to Thomas and winked, which made her friend blush. "Damn right. Speaking of which, are you still up to it?"

The blond man nodded, suddenly looking extremely pleased with something. "I sure am, Sir Ayjay. I shall prove an eager pupil."

"Not too eager, right? We went over this."

"Not *too* eager."

"And would you stop calling me that? Drop the 'sir', makes me feel old."

The pair grinned in a sort of conspiratorial way that made her smile as well. "I feel left out. What shall you teach Thomas?"

Sir Ayjay's smile turned meaner, as did the sparkle in his eyes. The mountain lion was making an appearance again. "The Law, my dear, The *Law*." He lowered his already deep voice and stretched the last word for emphasis.

"I'm going to teach our sarcastic friend the finer points of The Law, in exchange for the infinite honor of pummeling me into a whining heap on the ground...he's teaching me swordfighting. Thorins and Hugo gave up yesterday. Lost my instructors, just like that."

Marion couldn't help feeling sorry for him. Certain things he could do very well with his hands – she blushed just thinking about some of them – but for others, he sadly lacked any talent at all. Swordfight among those. And riding. Only Thomas was left, still willing to teach their "Norman lord" as her people had come to call Sir Ayjay the rudiments of the sword in exchange for lessons on the "Fine Art of Arguing" as Sir Ayjay had once put his former occupation.

He pushed Thomas on the shoulder. "And if you let me nick you once in a while, I might even throw in a golf lesson or two. Free."

"How generous of you, *Ayjay*. I am quite speechless."

"If you want to learn The Law," he posed theatrically, his fist on his chest, "you're going to have to never, ever be speechless again. But that was good sarcasm. Full points."

She looked at both men and couldn't help the smile creeping up her face. Their Norman lord had been at Sargans for three weeks now, three weeks of pure carnality as he'd made love to her almost every night. She knew people whispered behind her back but did not really care as they would get married later the same day, to her utmost pleasure and that of her people. Only Thomas seemed bittersweet at the event, and she was starting to guess the reason.

"You have the look again," Sir Ayjay said, his eyes narrowing at her. "The look that makes me want to run and hide. You're not going to make me try dresses are you? Because I won't. I'm wearing my good suit today. It's *my* wedding too, I'll have you

know and it's all about one-hundred-percent wool, zipper and plastic buttons. I want to feel plastic on my chest, dammit. And real socks too. No dresses."

"They are called *gowns*."

"Yeah, it's what the judges say too. Are judges sexy and manly? Do women look at a judge and say, 'hot damn, I gotta get me some of that'? No, they don't, that's because dresses aren't for guys. Unless they're kilts, in which case, apparently those make us men plenty sexy, but otherwise, no. Dresses are for ladies." He rearranged his tunic and stood.

"I shall never get bored hearing your peculiar way of speech," Thomas said as he stood as well and bowed to her. "I look forward to the ceremony tonight."

"So do I," remarked Sir Ayjay with a curl to his lips.

Poor Thomas wasn't even out the door before her husband-to-be was wrapping his arms around her waist and nuzzling her neck. A long frisson coursed through her. Lust flared like a fever.

"I say we try the nuptial suite to see if it's up to par." He sniggered. "Oops, a pun."

She shook her head. "Not before we get married, we should not even have...*known* each other at all."

He looked past her shoulder and exclaimed in his other language. "Hey, what's that over there? The red and white one? Checkers?"

Marion looked at the games table in a corner. "Dames, you mean?"

She felt him nodding. "Yeah. Ohhh, Marion, do you know how fun checkers—dames—can be?"

She had no doubt even dames would be exhilarating when played against a man such as him. "Are you adept at this game?"

"Adept? You're looking at a champion. Strip checkers is my favorite game. We'll have to play sometime."

Marion shook her head. "Strip?"

"As in 'remove your clothes' checkers."

"Oh. Remove your clothes..."

"Whoever loses a piece on the board, they take a piece of clothing off. It's a lot of fun. Let's play now!"

"Sir Ayjay! We have much work to do."

"You don't want to? No? The woman who was all—"

"Sir Ayjay!"

"Mmm? No?" He lipped her lobe. "I'll make it worth your while."

She had no doubt he would, but there was still so much to prepare she didn't want to start something she knew she wouldn't want to stop. So it was with a heavy heart she pulled away and kissed the back of his hand.

While she spent the rest of the day running back and forth between the great hall and the kitchen where Cook was loudly abusing the lads and intimidating the maids, Marion realized she had to actually go change before she presented herself to her own wedding dressed with the day's soiled and sweaty clothes. Right before she left, she caught Cook looking at her with a cloaked grin on her wrinkled face. When she meant to ask the old woman what was the matter, she whirled around and began to complain someone had put too much garlic in her quails and how she was going to do the same to the culprit.

On a whim, Marion rushed back to the day room and retrieved the dames game. She knew her face must have looked flushed beet red and had someone stopped to ask her what was the matter, she would've been pressed to find something intelligent to reply.

As she made her way to her chambers, fruity smells from Cook's desserts followed her, reminded her of the last time she'd tasted honey. Her cheeks burned. Sir Ayjay's imaginative games—especially the one involving honey—was still making her blush, even days after. Such decadent bliss! She couldn't stop the giddy event from taking flight and allowed herself the utmost luxury of indulging in daydreaming. Or more precisely, reminiscing. She'd had so little reason to do so before he arrived.

* * * * *

"And you can't use your hands either," Sir Ayjay said, grinning from ear to ear as he lay on his bed, quite naked and fully aroused. He crossed his hands behind his head, adopted an expression she could only call exultant. The candle on the dresser graced his sculpted form so nicely.

If her people knew what nighttime tasks occupied their *châtelaine*, they'd be shocked indeed!

Marion put her fists on her hips. Oh the arrogant *man*. "How am I supposed to...to lick all that honey?"

"Very slowly." He looked pleased with himself.

Half of her wanted to berate the man for wasting so much of it while the other half, that wanton woman who gained more territory each passing day with the decadent Norman, couldn't wait to lick him all clean. "You're practically covered in the stuff."

"I know."

They'd just had a bath but judging by the amount of honey glistening over his body—some spots he'd kept "secret" and even had her turn her back—she knew they'd need another afterward.

Because she still wore her wet chemise, something Sir Ayjay had insisted on, Marion gathered the hem in one hand while she knelt by his side. "Where shall I start?" He was so *long*.

Baring his perfect teeth, he shrugged. "Anywhere is good, as long as you find the three bonus spots."

Heat burned her cheeks. This was all so...

Oh come off your high horse. It was thrilling, truth be told! "And what shall I win should I find these special spots?"

"One hell of a good lay!"

"Sir Ayjay!"

Eyebrows wiggling, he looked down at himself, indicating she could "start" anytime she wished.

Lips pursed with trepidation, Marion flicked her braid to her other shoulder and leaned over his muscular thigh. As good a place as any.

His skin proved fever-hot when she first touched it. Tentatively at first, she brushed the tip of her tongue along a patch of skin obviously smeared with honey. His dark hair was plastered in a perfect circle.

"I think I shall find these three spots easily," she remarked, fighting against a nervous giggle that would make her a silly girl.

"If you think so."

She noted the absolute confidence carved in his features and decided she'd rise to *that* challenge, never mind what it made of her! He was to be her husband in a matter of days. It wasn't a complete crime to enjoy his touch before the formal ceremony. And she had her pride!

His right leg proved delicious. So did his left. After the first lick over his hipbone, Sir Ayjay's eyes flared wide as he looked down at her, the expression of triumph gone, replaced with intense eagerness. His breathing was quick and shallow. Marion wanted to grin in satisfaction. So the Norman lord wasn't as nonchalant as he looked.

"What, Sir Ayjay? Am I getting close?"

He shrugged, muttered something before pretending to arrange a lock of hair that had fallen over his eyebrow. His hand shook.

Bolstered, Marion used her tongue as a brush and covered the area above his groin, right at the dawn of his belly, over the glorious network of muscles. His salty taste abruptly sweetened when she reached a spot right under his navel. Ah-ha!

She couldn't help herself. "I found one!"

"Yeah, well..." he began, ground his teeth audibly when she gave him an enthusiastic lick on the belly. "Beginner's luck."

"It certainly was *not* luck," she countered.

"Pfft."

Oh I shall show you!

Marion straddled his thighs and proceeded to lick his fine belly all over, looking for those sweet little honey spots. She realized what she'd done after his shaft brushed against her cleft, which suddenly ached with need. Her gaze met his.

"What are you doing, exactly?" he asked, his mouth a thin, tight line. Raw energy exuded from his every pore.

Marion wanted to move away but he wrapped her waist in both hands and kept her put. "You're supposed to lick the honey off, not torture me with yours."

"Sir Ayjay, I..." Marion cleared her throat. "You are just annoyed because I found one."

"I'm many things, but not annoyed."

Before she could counter, he'd slipped a hand under her chemise and readily found her sex. She'd trapped herself astride this gorgeous man, her fists on either side of his flanks, her thighs wide while he had both hands with which to work. Panting, she bit the inside of her cheek when he teased her pearl then slipped a finger inside, left her waist so he could seize a breast. Her nipple burned when he pinched it.

"You think you can start something like that and expect me to just lie down?"

Marion gasped when he thrust his finger deeper. The urge to grind herself against his hand proved too strong to resist and she did just that, rolled her pelvis so she could crush her flesh to his finger, spear herself and take it as deep as she could. Sir Ayjay nearly ripped her chemise in his hurry to yank it up to her waist. The sound of stitches tearing the most exciting prospect.

Incredibly hot, his shaft pressed against her nether lips, parted her then sank in.

"Ahhh."

Like a horse, she rode him unabashed, rolled with his powerful bucks, spread her thighs to the burning point so he'd have room to part his and add muscles to his thrusts. Such an unusual position! Marion bit her bottom lip when a small ripple presaged one fine peak. When it came, she let it out in one long moan that spurred Sir Ayjay into a frenzy. His hands unyielding around her waist, he pumped fast and profoundly. The wet sounds of their coupling made Marion smile.

Sir Ayjay left her waist so he could jerk her chemise open and gorge on her breasts. Near brutal, his mouth and teeth rendered her nipples into tight, feverish pebbles that he rolled and rolled between his fingers. Marion raised herself, arched back. He followed her.

As she sat astride his lap, his member still stretching her to the limit, Marion began to move in ways she'd never done before. Up and down, she ground her cleft against him, swayed back and forth, her breasts bouncing, which seemed to entrance him as he braced himself and stared at her chest. Feeling powerful and feminine, Marion enhanced the arch in her spine so her breasts would be that much closer to him. Growling, he trapped them both and nipped each in turn.

Her cries of pleasure must have been too much for the man for he encircled her waist, brought her down with him and thrust so deep she swore she saw stars.

"Marion, Marion, Marion," he kept repeating.

Her name had never sounded so decadent, so great and celebrated. So *loved*.

* * * * *

Marion practically walked into the doorjamb so engrossed she was in the vivid memory. She had to brace herself with a hand against the wall to keep from stumbling back.

Ah, woman, get a hold of yourself.

Yet the memory of the fevered coupling that had followed still made her want to seek him out and repeat the experience. Such intensity, such raw carnal energy.

Once in her bedchambers, their future chambers as a married couple, a still panting Marion arranged the game of dames for later, if she had enough courage—or mead—to actually remove her clothes one piece at a time. She'd always been dismally bad at dames. Yet the prospect of losing raised the fine hairs on her arms.

"What has he made of me?"

She took a hurried bath, had Hannah do her hair in thick braids she pinned around her head before slipping strands of harebell and a thin ribbon of matching color through the "crown" formed by her plaits. Her maid wore a pretty wool dress dyed that newest shade of lilac they had produced the spring before and a brand new white bonnet. Her own gown fitted well, or so Marion hoped. Slipping her feet in her thin leather sandals, she smoothened the front of her pale blue dress, adjusted the belt lower on her hips then looked back up and caught the expression of pure joy on Hannah's face.

"I hope to do the same for you very soon, Hannah," Marion remarked with a crooked grin. That she'd already tasted her future husband's touch several times she left unsaid. Hannah was undoubtedly still a maiden. Although she sometimes wondered...

Her maid blushed and nodded. "If Thorins ever makes the plunge, I shall be happy to catch him, my lady."

"Tell him to speak with Thomas, he helped Sir Ayjay with the tricky notion of taking a plunge. That is what I have been told."

"Oh no, my lady, I would not go near Thomas today as I was told he is very busy indeed...with Sir Ayjay."

"How so?"

Hannah shook her head emphatically. "I was threatened with dire consequences by both should I open my mouth, Lady Marion. But all I can say is that they were spotted at the smith's several times in the last days."

Marion tried a faint scowl but her maid wouldn't budge. "Fine, let the men scheme and plot to their hearts' content. I have a wedding to attend. My own."

They shared a quick grin before Marion realized her hands shook and so did her legs. Remnants from her stirring memory added to the agitation of what lay ahead. "Well," she said, taking a peek through the window. "It is almost nightfall. We should be going."

As soon as she emerged into the great hall, she spotted her future husband proudly standing near the table onto which Cook had a maid arrange an assortment of multi-colored flowers and other decorative foliage that spilled over from all four sides. His hair slicked back as the first day she'd met him, his "suit" as he'd called it, looking freshly brushed and impeccable on his tall and slim figure, Sir Ayjay's ardent gaze on her drew that of everyone else in the large room. Soon noise faded to a few whispered comments then even this died.

Sargans' family notary Sir Emery emerged from the crowd around Sir Ayjay and offered his hand to her. "My dear, what a vision you are."

She returned his smile.

By Sir Ayjay she spotted a grinning Hugo, flanked by his wife and teenage son, then by Thorins, who kept peeking at Hannah as she walked beside Marion and finally Thomas, looking resplendent in forest green hose and tunic. She returned his wink.

She stood by Sir Ayjay, blushed when she felt the weight of his hungry gaze on her—hadn't her unruly mind just replayed for her a most voluptuous scene—then crossed her hands over her front. He did the same.

As was customary, Sir Emery listed the chattels that would transfer to Sir Ayjay with the ceremony. The man could not have looked less interested in her dowry and merely nodded when the notary asked if all was in order. Then it was Sir Ayjay's turn to clear his throat and turn to her. Perhaps the groom addressing the assemblage was a custom from his homeland? She waited with her heart hammering arrhythmically.

"I'm not from this region obviously," Sir Ayjay began, using his booming voice so particular to him. "And I've been told there are certain things done differently from what I'm used to." He turned to Thomas, who produced a small item he passed to Sir Ayjay. "Thanks, my friend."

Try as she might, she could not see whatever he held as it was completely hidden in his large fist. But everyone wore knowing grins.

"Where I'm from, when a man loves a woman the way I love Lady Marion, he's expected to offer her a token of his commitment."

While Marion watched, Sir Ayjay knelt on one knee—actually *knelt* in front of her—brought his fist in front of her waist and opened his hand. In the middle of his palm sat a tiny wooden box with detailed engravings set on its top.

"The lady has to open it before the gentleman develops cramps," Sir Ayjay whispered to her. His wink made her and the closest people to them chuckle.

She reached out and tentatively brushed a shaking hand over the box. The sparkle in his eyes bolstered her. She took the small box and raised the lid. A thin, highly polished ring of the palest metal she'd ever seen gleamed around a peg covered with midnight blue wool.

"What is it?" she murmured, awed at the lustrous, silvery-white band. It looked so pure and smooth, with not a single mark on its surface.

"It's called titanium. It's one of the strongest metals known." Sir Ayjay picked up the ring and stood.

Marion smiled as tears welled her eyes. "It is beautiful."

"It's going to look less beautiful when compared to the rest of you, but it should do." He angled the ring to put it on her hand. She offered her index finger but strangely, he aimed instead at her second to last finger and gently slid the ring past her knuckle. It fit perfectly. The man had a good eye.

He elevated her hand and tenderly kissed the knuckles. She distinctly heard women giggling somewhere behind her. The entire time Sir Emery grinned and nodded when Sir Ayjay turned back to him. "Okay, I've done my bit. Now I want to kiss my wife."

It was the men's turn to laugh. After Marion repeated the simple vows of fidelity and commitment, Sir Ayjay did the same, his voice sounding near the breaking point at one time. When both had spoken in turn, Sir Emery chuckled as he held both her husband's and her hand.

"I think it is high time for a kiss?"

Sir Ayjay—Lord Sargans now—didn't need telling twice. He unceremoniously dropped the old man's hand and encircled her waist, dipping her slightly back to various gasps and chuckles. His burning lips on hers spread a wild fire right down to her belly, which quivered with need. After her husband had straightened and hugged her fiercely, Sir Emery paraded her to the men in assistance so they too could kiss the bride's hand as a sign of "farewell". She wasn't leaving Sargans per se, but leaving the ranks of available women, even if she'd been a widow and approaching her late twenties, therefore, barely available at all. The symbolic gesture touched her nonetheless.

While Cook rounded the servants and ordered them about like a knight going to war, Marion managed to get back to her husband's side and clasp his hand. He looked down at her and wiggled his eyebrows.

"However did you find this?" she asked, showing the ring on her hand. A faint memory tingled the back of her head. She'd seen such pale metal before but couldn't remember where. It was lovely.

"I didn't find it. I had it made especially for you." He looked quite proud of his accomplishment.

"I have never seen such metal before. Where is it from?"

He leaned into her and whispered, "The *future*."

Marion *shooshed* him with emphatic motions of her hand. "Truly, where is it from?"

"I was telling the truth. Why won't anyone believe a lawyer when he's telling the truth? It's very insulting. We try not to make a habit of it, you know, so we don't break our vows, but still, once in a while, we do tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth." He raised his right hand and showed her his palm. "So help me God."

Her eyebrow arched high, she stared at him.

"Okay, it's from one of my golf clubs. I had its head cut off and the titanium on it stripped. Your guy at the forge thought I was nuts. But when I showed him what I wanted, he stopped running his mouth—Thomas never did tell me what the old man was saying."

"You destroyed one of your golf sticks to make me a ring? Why? I did not require a gift. It is not customary for us to exchange gifts." Although she *was* planning one for him later on that night.

"Look, I'm bringing nothing to this union, except these hands—which I've noticed are in urgent need of a manicure. And my brain. That's all. I have nothing to give you. A guy has his pride, you know."

"You bring much more than your hands, my lord." She loved the sound of those words. But obviously, her husband didn't for he looked quite shocked, even appalled.

"Damn, Marion, don't call me that. It reminds me of the *other* Lord, you know the one... I'm your husband, the man who'll make love to you within the hour too, your *friend* and so I want you to call me A.J. No sir, no lord."

Something in the way his name sounded didn't make sense. "How do you spell your name?"

He showed her his big hand, which he used to write his name on with the index finger of his other hand. But she only saw two letters.

"Your name is Alexandre-Jean, is it not?"

He nodded.

"Then why do you call yourself Ayjay? Why only two letters?"

"Not Ayjay, *Ayy-Jayy*." He wrote it again. A large A then a J.

Marion's sudden laughter seemed to catch him by surprise. He cocked his head. "What?"

"I always thought it was Sir Ayjay. A-y-j-a-y."

He was still shaking his head when she finally quieted down.

* * * * *

"*A-y-j-a-y*, come on," he muttered as he emptied his third mug of mead. Or was it his fourth?

Damn this stuff was good. He swore he wouldn't have more than two, but everyone kept harassing him about how he needed sustenance for the night to come. He

felt like telling them he'd needed it a lot sooner but kept his mouth shut. *Let them think what they want.* Plus, he knew Marion wouldn't like him running his mouth about their private affairs.

So even if he was getting increasingly tipsy, A.J. reminded himself if he was too drunk, he wouldn't be able to make love to the gorgeous woman sitting beside him. The sobering thought had the effect of a cold shower – not that he'd see one anytime soon. Ha.

His situation, despite the seriousness and finality of it, didn't quite raise his blood pressure. Sure, he hated being stuck in a place where indoor plumbing was still four hundred years away – although he was *so* going to change that and starting with the master bedroom's lack of an en suite facility – and that he wouldn't get to see anyone he knew ever again, A.J. still thought he'd been dealt a good hand. And it all came down to one person. Marion. No matter the time or place, with this woman by his side, there wasn't a thing in the world that could bother him. And Thomas too, come to think of it. That guy sure made things fun around Sargans. He'd never had the kind of easy familiarity he shared with Thomas. He'd found a friend for sure. A kindred soul even, with the man's caustic sense of humor! Even Hugo and Thorins were pretty decent for Conan types. Maybe he was suffering from denial and a good case of psychosis but he couldn't for the life of him feel sorry for himself. Yeah, he'd crash-landed in Middle Ages Switzerland. So what?

How much of a riot is that!

A.J. raised his mug to his good luck and emptied the rest as he surveyed the table. They had – according to Cook, because he sure couldn't recognize a single thing – roasted quail and goose, venison or whatever it was, roasted peacock and something that sounded a lot like calves' heads. But he stayed well away from *that* platter. Man, he'd kill for a simple sandwich and a Greek salad. By his side, Marion talked and laughed in a way he'd never seen her do before. She looked so much younger and relaxed. A.J. caught himself gazing at her like a lovesick teenager would, all watery eyes and gaping mouth. Not pretty on a man in his thirties.

To his right, Thomas was telling a joke, he thought, but because he spoke in German, A.J. couldn't be sure. When Thomas delivered what sounded like a punch line, his neighbor, a bearded fellow who resembled a large garden gnome, roared laughing.

Well, he knew jokes too.

"Hey," he said to Thomas as he pulled on his sleeve. "I got a good one for you."

Thomas leaned his elbow on the table and gazed expectantly – or amorously – at him while he cleared his throat and rummaged in his brain for a quick good one. Oh. Perfect.

"Do you know how to save a drowning lawyer?"

Thomas, good man that he was, shook his head. "I am afraid not, my friend. But is it something one should try to do?"

“Argh, come on, man, you’re messing my joke. So okay, you don’t know how to save a drowning lawyer?” A.J. waited for maximum impact. “You take your foot off his head.”

To his immense gratification, Thomas burst out laughing as though he’d actually gotten it then slapped his hand on the table. A.J. told him another good lawyer joke. He had them by the bag full. Soon, the closest guests were all leaning forward over the table to hear him. With another sip of mead, A.J. told them the one about the well-hung lawyer.

“How can you tell if a lawyer is well-hung?” he asked, waiting as Thomas translated to those who couldn’t understand his particular sort of French. “You can’t get a finger between the rope and his neck!”

General laughter ensued. Damn, he was good at this.

“Okay, okay, another. Here it goes... Where can you find a good lawyer...? In the cemetery!”

A.J. laughed with the rest of them. Marion was leaning on his arm so she could hear too. Even Hugo looked as though he thought the notion of a noose around a lawyer’s neck was funny stuff.

‘Kay...

“Hey, this one’s good. What’s the difference between a porcupine and a Mercedes Benz full of lawyers?”

He should’ve noticed the slightly blank look in Thomas’ usually sharp gaze. For his defense, A.J. blamed the mead. *It was all the mead, Your Honor.*

“The difference is...the porcupine has pricks on the *outside.*”

They laughed. God love them they did, but A.J. could tell they did so out of courtesy. He’d totally tanked that one.

With a surreptitious wink, Thomas leaned into A.J. and put his mouth very, very close to his ear. The warmth of the man’s cinnamon-scented breath stirred his hair. *Whoa.*

“You know, Tom,” A.J. remarked in all honesty—what was this place doing to him?! “Where I come from, it’s commonplace for men to live together as couples, some of them marry and adopt children. I wish you could see this much from my home, if nothing else.”

A blond eyebrow arched high. “I shall remember those words tomorrow when you are sober again, and shall derive much pleasure in watching you squirm.” He grinned while he said this and A.J. could tell he was being mocked by someone even more devious than he was.

“You’d make a fine lawyer,” A.J. remarked, himself leaning so Thomas would be the only one to hear his next words. “And if I were, er, so inclined, I’d—”

“I think, my friend, you should retire with what little grace you still possess. A lesser man than I might be tempted to take advantage of the situation.”

A.J. swore he squeaked. Actually *squeaked*.

With Marion helping, he stood, bowed to the cheering crowd.

"A dance, my lord?" someone shouted down the table.

"The only dance I'm dancing tonight is with my wife and you're not invited," A.J. replied to a roar of laughter that lasted well after they'd made their hasty departure.

Marion, his *wife*, was practically pulling him by the jacket so he'd walk faster.

"Hey, what's the hurry?" he asked, stumbling to keep up. *Okay, no more mead for you, mister. It's boiled water from now on.* He still couldn't get over the look on Cook's face when he'd asked for pre-boiled-then-allowed-to-cool water to drink. He could've grown a dick on his forehead and she wouldn't have looked more surprised!

"I have something to show you," Marion replied, all grin and playful eyes.

He liked the sound of that "something".

But when he recognized the corridor leading to one of the towers, the one he'd climbed with Thomas and her, A.J. pulled back on her hand and pointed with his chin.

"I want to go see the stars."

Her eyes sparkled like the brightest stars of all but he still wanted to see the night sky. And he needed air. Lots of it. That mead thing was getting to his head. Big time.

After she retrieved a candle and dish from the box at the entrance to the tower, she lit it—he should've brought the lighter, just to spook her again—and led him up those damn steps. He'd forgotten about those. He'd also forgotten, apparently, to duck and knocked his head at least two times. Curses reverberated in a very satisfying way along the stone interior. Marion chuckled.

When they emerged onto the cren—

Crena...

Shit, what was the word again? Oh yeah, *crenellated*. So, when they got to the *top*, Christ, A.J. was ready to tear all his clothes off and make love to his wife right then and there. But the look on her face cut through the fuzzy layers of after-party.

"What's wrong?" he murmured, cupping her chin.

"I was wondering why you wanted to come look at the stars. Even if it is very selfish of me, I was afraid perhaps you missed your home."

"Home?" A.J. grinned in relief. "My home is here now, with you. Why did you think something like that? Doesn't this mean something to you?" he asked, pointing to her ring, which glowed faintly in the candlelight.

She nodded vigorously. "It does. But I would understand if—"

"No, no, no. Look," he pinched the bridge of his nose out of habit. He was going to bare his soul to someone—tell the *truth*, whoa—and it always made him fear a migraine would come stabbing in just to punish him. "There's a reason I keep brushing you off every time you offer to go back to the crash site, Marion. I can't seem to find the words but it doesn't lessen the reason for it. I don't *want* to go back. Call me crazy—hell, I'm

calling myself that a lot these days—but I no longer view myself as anything else but that Norman dude. I *love* being your Norman! A storm brought me here, and short of pulling a Benjamin Franklin and using myself as a lightning rod, I'm not going back to where I'm from. And that's fine."

Marion still looked as though someone had announced her favorite puppy was dead. "Shall you not miss the people you knew? Shall they not look for you? I cannot believe no one shall notice." Her chin trembled. "I would miss you terribly should something happen."

"Oh, please don't cry."

A.J. gathered her face in his hands and angled it upward so she wouldn't miss a single word, nuance or body language message he sent. "I'm not leaving. You're my wife and I'm your husband, and yes, there'll be times when you'll want to commit a crime of passion and kick my sarcastic, arrogant ass over the ramparts, but you have to remember this. As flawed and dumb as I am—I'm a man, don't forget, and a cynical lawyer on top of things—you have to believe me that I love you with everything I have. All of it. And that I'll treasure you to my last acerbic breath. There, I rest my case."

Marion nodded. "We shall be happy you and I."

"Damn right. And you know what?" He kissed her on each cheek, the chin, the forehead. "I haven't had a migraine in at least two weeks. I'm going to like it here, my lady."

"You shall like what I have waiting for us even more, A.J.," she replied, the sound of his name in her mouth the most delicious thing in the world.

"Oh? Am I?"

Marion nodded, that impish grin widening. "As you say, 'damn right'."

His laughter must have been infectious for they both leaned over the other for support. After a while, when A.J. was afraid they'd have to come pick him off the floor, he stood straight and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "Okay, no more fun and games. We have a nuptial suite to test. Let's go."

Marion leading the way, they reached her room—the master's bedchamber, they called it—where she unlocked the door and stood aside so he'd be the first one in.

"We have another tradition where I'm from. Come over here."

A.J. scooped Marion off the floor and carefully navigated the doorway. "Would you stop smiling? You're blinding me," he said in his Papa Bear voice. She only grinned wider.

Oh she's sitting on something fun, that woman. He wondered what it was.

When he had deposited her feet on the floor, she rushed to a table by the hearth—which roared like a small forest fire—and came back with something under her arm.

"The bed, my lord."

"Hey, watch what you call me."

He sat on the bed, smoothed his pant leg and watched her put a narrow box on the bed then sit by it.

“At which game are you a champion again? Strip dames?”

“Oh...oh...you wicked little thing you! Ha!”

A.J. helped her set the board game between them then put the pieces on their respective squares. Marion explained the rules to him and except for a few differences – like no stackers, which usually meant, in his version of the game, that the players would do it too – dames were pretty much the same thing. He was glad for it. How would he lose wretchedly if he didn’t know how the game was played? Huh?

“You shall start,” she announced.

“Hell yeah.”

He picked up one of the red pieces and made his move. She followed with one of the whites. Before long, he had one of his ready to be gobbled up. Marion pounced on it.

She glowed. “Ha.”

“Ha yourself,” he muttered, forcing himself not to pump his fist in the air. “Which piece should go first?”

“The overtunic.”

“The...excuse me?”

“The black garment, this one,” she replied, pinching the lapel of his jacket.

Making a big show of it, rolling his hips and doing his best stripper impersonator, A.J. gleefully removed his jacket and sent it twirling behind him. As long as it didn’t land in the fireplace, he didn’t care one bit about his suit tonight. A game of strip checkers with a twelfth century – blushing – lady! His *wife* too! Life didn’t get any better than this.

After she swooped on another piece of his, Marion threw him a slanted look. “You are losing on purpose.”

“Absolutely.”

“Sir Ayjay!”

He leaned into her, clamped his mouth for one hell of a passionate kiss then withdrew. She was panting. He liked it when she was panting. “You call me that again, I’m gonna have to punish you.” After he wiggled his eyebrows, she put her hand in front of her mouth and smiled.

Standing, A.J. undid the button on his pants, let them hang there while he moved his hips like a pendulum, slowly then in circles, each rotation bringing him closer to her knees. When he was standing right next to Marion, he pulled the zipper down by slow and measured increments, let her hear each tiny hook, before he slipped one side down then the other. And damn it if she wasn’t all eyes for him! Feeling like a Greek god, A.J. lowered his pants, went “*oh look at that*” when only his boxer briefs restrained his dick

from twanging. A foot away, Marion watched it all like a hawk. A.J. had never felt so good.

"All for you," he said, knowing he sounded less than humble but not giving a shit. It *was* all for her, dammit! Forever.

When he stood in his underwear only—with socks and shoes, but hey—A.J. caressed her cheek then sat back on the bed. "No more Mister Nice Norman."

Within two moves, he had three of her white pieces lined up. Giving her a Shark look, he skipped and took all three. Marion huffed and puffed but stood nonetheless.

"Dress."

"What do you mean, dress? What about one shoe then the next?"

"You got to choose the first piece, right?" he replied, trying to subdue the triumphant jackass in him. He could be so shallow.

"Oh you flea-bitten coxcomb! You let me choose on purpose so you could do the same later!"

"I *am* a lawyer, jeez! Off with the dress."

Well if the little tigress didn't look as though she'd been practicing behind his back as she removed her dress with a subtle twist of the hip and a provocative lift of her chin. She stood in her...her linen underthing, fists on hips.

"That linen shirt too and the shoes."

"No, it is my turn to play."

"Nope. I took *three* pieces, so you take off *three* pieces."

"With the dress, it makes four, not three."

"Fine, keep one of the shoes."

She narrowed her pale eyes at him but removed the linen shirt, denuding her curvy body to his hungry gaze, then kicked off one of the shoes. Stubborn.

"Had I known you would have played such lowly tricks—"

"Oh? What? Huh? What would you have done?" A.J. asked, giving her a playful wink. He was salivating just looking at her. And they still had plenty of pieces left. Dammit.

Marion lifted her chin. "I would have worn more layers."

A.J. could resist no more. He leaned over, trapped her wrist and pulled her to him. Kissing her mouth, her face and neck, he filled his hands with her plentiful form and rocked back so she'd straddle him. "Like I said, I'm going to like it here."

Marion nodded as she ran her hand in his hair. "I shall make sure of it."

About the Author

I am a mother, spouse, older sister, writer, ex-soldier, high school drop-out, dog owner (or dog owned), half couch potato/half intermittent jogger, wannabe renovator and avid reader who watches too much television, sinks too much money in clothes, likes animals more than humans, recycles, wore braces, never downloads copyrighted stuff, was a nerd without the grades, has a belly laugh that turns heads in theaters, can't stand bullying, is mother hawk more than mother hen, votes even if candidates aren't that great and thinks formal education is highly overrated (probably because she has none).

Nathalie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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