

A sensual photograph of a couple in a field at night. A man is shirtless, and a woman is partially covered by a black cloth. They are embracing, and the background is a dark, grassy field under a starry sky.

A Dusting of Syn

Melinda Barron

A Dusting of Syn
by Melinda Barron

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Thanks and dedication:

Special nods to Tiff, Leigh and Jess, for their support and guidance. Thanks to Bridget for your research help and your constant friendship. And to my family, especially my brother David and his wife and children, for years of unwavering support.

This tale is dedicated to my sister-in-law, Anne, who loves historical romances as much as I do. I hope I've done you proud.

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Prologue

London, England

July, 1467

"Your majesty." Keran, seventh son of the Duke of Bristol, bowed low before his king. "You sent for me?"

King Edward IV of England looked up at the man standing next to him. It was not often he had to look up to a man. At six-foot two inches tall, most men looked up to see their king. Yet, Keran of Bristol topped him by a good three inches.

"How fare you these days?" The king grabbed an arrow from a quiver and loaded his bow. He eyed the target and let the arrow fly, hitting the bull's-eye dead center.

"Very nice shot, your majesty, and I am fine. Thank you for asking."

"Still landless?" The king smiled, and expected to see a frown on the older man's face. Instead, Keran laughed.

"Indeed. Unless someone starts killing off my brothers, I fear I might stay so, majesty. As the youngest son of a Duke, I get the leavings of the others, and by the time my father had given to the six elder sons, I am afraid there was nothing left for me."

"Hence the reason you have never married." Again, he expected the man to bristle. Instead, he just grinned. Edward let loose another arrow.

"I have looked, majesty, believe me. But so far, I have not found a suitable wife."

"It is a good thing that you have a king for a friend, then."

Edward watched Keran's shoulders stiffen for the first time, then drop back into a relaxed posture. "Indeed? Have you found a wife for me?"

"I have, and lands to go with her."

This time the interest in Keran's eyes was genuine. "I am at your service, your Majesty."

"You will leave tomorrow for a keep near the Scottish border called Mardoon. Its lord, Richard, has been dead for some seven months now."

"Seven months? Forgive me, but you are just now hearing of it? Did the man have no sons to take over his legacy?"

"No. Three daughters. One of them is the daughter of a woman who was friends with my wife's mother. The mother died in childbirth, and the girl was raised by her stepmother, who married Lord Richard soon after his wife died. It is the eldest daughter you will marry. Her name is Sidony or Sibylla, or something that begins with an .."

"If I may ask, sire, how old is she?"

"She has seen more than twenty winters," the king replied. "Some of my father's advisors tell me that the mother was a beauty, so I can only guess that the daughter will be also."

"A boon, to be sure."

"Yes, having a pretty bedmate is always a good thing," the king said with a laugh. "The keep is well off, and the people are happy, or least they were when Richard was alive. I expect it to stay that way, and for the area to stay loyal to me. I have enough problems without worrying about a keep."

"Of course, your majesty."

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"Well, before you answer so quickly you should know I may be sending you into trouble. One of your first duties will be to report to me on why it took me so long to receive this." He pulled a paper from his pocket and handed it to Keran. "I received this yesterday from a member of a traveling troupe. Written in Richard's own hand. It seems he feared what his wife would do his eldest daughter harm, and he sent this as a precaution to alert me to his death. I want to know why the wife did not write me to inform me of her lord's passing. If there is treachery there, I want it dealt with. Immediately. You have full authority on my account."

Keran bowed again, his head low. "You have my gratitude, majesty, and my loyalty. No matter what."

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Chapter One

"She's probably a cousin to your horse." Keran frowned at his friend, Patrick Dunkirk. "Your children will be little stallions."

"All the better to run over you," Keran replied. "And I will thank you to remember that I am Lord Keran now, of Mardoon."

"Yes, Lord Keran of the frozen north, sent away from the pretty ladies of court to wed and bed someone you have never laid eyes on. What if she truly is a horse, maybe not in looks, but in manners? After all, she has never been to court. Why would that be, unless her father was ashamed of her?"

"Perhaps she is just so beautiful that she would have started a riot." Keran said with a smirk. But, his smirk did not reach his heart, or his head. He'd been thinking much the same thing for the past three weeks, and the thoughts had grown more worried the closer they had come to Mardoon. They would be there within the day. It had taken him a while to settle his affairs at court, and then to hand pick a battalion of men to take with him so that he would have loyal friends to fight if the occasion presented itself.

He prayed that it would not come to that, but he was not exactly sure what he was getting into, either personally or in the ways of the castle that now belonged to him.

First, the king's offer had sent him into fits of pleasure. He would have his own keep, with his own wife, his own lands, and children. Then Patrick had started asking questions,

questions that Keran should have thought about himself before he had agreed to wed someone he had never even set eyes on just for the sake of owning lands.

Still, he was twenty-seven years old, and it was high time he settled down and had children. He had always thought he would find his future bride at court, that some father would offer his wayward daughter to him in hopes that Keran would take his disgraced daughter to wife and farm some obscure part of his land.

Was that not what was happening now, in essence? Except it had been the king to offer him the lands, and it was not a disgraced daughter, but the oldest daughter of a lord. He was not so worried about her looks. Well, maybe a little. What concerned him was Patrick's comment about her manners. What if she had none? What if he could not stand to be in the room with her for more than five minutes? Then what was he supposed to do?

And then there was the little matter of the note. Why was Richard so worried about what his wife would do to his eldest daughter? And if he were so worried, why did he not send her to court before his death to protect her? It all came down to that, did it not? Why she was kept from court?

Still, he needed sons now that he had lands to pass on, which meant that, no matter what, he would have to learn to spend time with his new bride. He just hoped she had a brain.

"Perhaps, if she is not to your liking, there will be ladies about who can warm your bed. Some of these country lasses are born for that purpose, warm and willing." Patrick wiggled his tongue and his eyebrows.

Keran laughed. "You are terrible. What sort of husband would I be, to marry, and then take a mistress right afterwards?"

"A normal one," Patrick replied. "Just do not forget your options."

They topped a hill and Keran held up his hand for the group to stop. His new home sat in the valley below.

"Not exactly a royal castle," Patrick said. "But a castle just the same. The boy you sent ahead yesterday should have already told them of your imminent arrival."

"Yes, there should be food ready and fires lit. It will be nice to sleep in a warm bed tonight."

"Take your new bride to it, unless she is a prude and must wait until the wedding. If that is the case, find yourself a willing servant. A bedding will make you that much easier to live with."

"Are you saying—"

"I am saying you have been a bear the last few weeks. I think a good tumble will improve your outlook on life."

* * * *

"Suck in your gut." Elizabeth of Mardoon slapped her daughter in the shoulder, then pulled on the laces around the girl's waist.

Leora took a deep breath and held it, letting out a loud *oomph* when her mother fastened the laces. "I cannot breathe."

"You don't need to breathe, you twit. You need to impress your future husband." Elizabeth stepped back and frowned. "I

suppose it will have to do, but you must remember to forgo the sweets this month, or you will not be able to fit into the wedding dress that is being made."

"You could always let it out," Leticia said. "Or let me wear it. Since we are putting the wool over his eyes, what does it matter which one of us weds him?"

Elizabeth wheeled on her daughter. "Leora is the oldest, and therefore will wed first."

"Is she? I thought Syndra was the oldest." Leticia turned her gaze to her stepsister, who stood nearby with her eyes lowered. "Of course she would need a bath. And some new clothes."

"And you would do well to keep your mouth shut, as would Syndra," Elizabeth admonished. "She is not a member of this family, is she?"

Leticia opened her mouth as if to object, then closed it quickly and shook her head. "No, mama."

Syndra kept her defiant gaze on the ground. When her stepmother called her name, she gave her what she hoped was a contrite look.

"Answer me."

"I am sorry; I did not hear the question."

"Pay attention, you stupid girl. I said, you know what is at stake, do you not?"

"How could I forget?" Indeed, how could anyone forget? Her stepmother had told the entire household that Syndra's friend, Alma, would die if anyone let on that Syndra, and not Leora, was really the first born daughter of Mardoon.

"You will make yourself useful by cleaning and by keeping quiet." She turned back to Leora. "You, go downstairs and greet your new lord when he comes inside the keep. Make sure to appear submissive and meek. Understand?"

"Yes, mother. I just hope he is handsome."

Elizabeth snorted. "I just hope he is stupid. Now go."

Leora and Leticia quickly quit the room, and Elizabeth turned to Syndra. "You should be happy I am saving you from a life of bowing to a man."

"Why, so I can bow to you instead?"

"Watch your tongue." Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. "As I have told you, your shape is not pleasing to a man. You hold too many pounds hostage on your body. Leora will keep our new lord happy, and with any luck, I will keep him under my thumb."

Syndra waited for her stepmother to keep talking, but she did not. She again cursed her father, though she loved him, for leaving her in this position. When he had fallen ill, he had promised her that he would see she was cared for, and would not have to stay with Elizabeth, who he knew loathed his daughter.

Syndra had hoped that meant he had arranged a marriage, or left her some monies or jewels. Elizabeth had torn the house apart looking for anything of value, and nothing had been found. Syndra knew her father would have kept his word and she had searched as well, to no avail, for the key to end her misery.

Her father had been dead for eight months now, and she had yet to unravel the situation he had left her in when he

passed. Part of her wondered if she ever would find anything, or if she were destined to live out her life under the control of a woman who hated her.

When they had received word from the king that he was sending a husband for Syndra, she had been ecstatic—until Elizabeth had slapped her and said Leora would marry the king's choice, not Syndra.

"No daughter of mine will be put behind you." The look of pure hatred on her face still made Syndra shiver. "You will end your life as someone's whore, but you will never be the mistress of this keep. Never."

Syndra had cried heartily that night, burying her head in Alma's shoulders as they slept in the rushes. The next morning, burly friends of Elizabeth's current bedmate had taken Alma away, and she had not seen her friend since. She had no doubt her stepmother would kill Alma if Syndra misbehaved in any way.

Noise drifted up from the courtyard, and Syndra looked toward the window.

"Stay up here," Elizabeth ordered. "And remember if you see the new lord to keep your eyes downcast and your mouth shut."

She swept from the room and Syndra hurried to the opening, leaving over to watch the proceedings three floors down. There were more than two-dozen men in the courtyard now, all of them milling about and studying the landscape. Two men stood toward the front, talking with Leora, and Syndra knew that one of them would be the new lord of Mardoon.

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Both of them looked to be large, handsome men. One had dark, shoulder-length hair and massive shoulders. Even from her vantage point, Syndra could tell he was taller than any man she'd ever seen. The other man's body looked as massive, but he stood a few inches shorter and had lighter, ginger-colored hair.

She fought the need to rush downstairs, to throw herself at their feet and confess all. Only the thought of Alma, locked away somewhere with the threat of death hanging over her head, kept her rooted in place. Elizabeth knew beating Syndra would not produce the results she wanted. She knew Syndra was too strong-willed for that. So, she'd attacked her from a different angle. By putting those she loved in peril.

"Alma," Syndra whispered, then closed her eyes and said a silent prayer that her friend was at least being fed and given a bit of sunshine every day. When she was done, she opened her eyes and watched as Elizabeth rushed into the scene, dropped into a deep curtsy and took the hand of the dark-haired man.

That would mean he was the new lord, and therefore had dominion over Elizabeth. Syndra smiled at the submissive position Elizabeth was in. It was good for the witch to bow down to someone, to be beholden and answerable for her actions. And while Elizabeth and her daughters were busy with the new lord, Syndra could continue her search, and hopefully find a way out from under Elizabeth's authority.

* * * *

"Not too bad," Patrick whispered to Keran as they made their way inside the keep. "You will not have to keep your eyes closed when you bed her."

Keran snorted and nodded. Indeed, the woman who had been presented as his bride was pretty enough. Her mother was a shrew, though that much was certain. Keran could almost imagine her as a snake, slithering on the ground, and causing panic wherever she went. He had to find some way to subtly let her know that he was in charge now, not her.

Her docile curtsey did not fool him in the least. He'd met women like her before, wanting to appear meek, but seeking to control their men. It wouldn't happen here. The sooner she figured that out, the better.

Inside the great hall, he stopped and examined his new holding.

"We have some rooms for your men in the main house, of course," Elizabeth said. "But perhaps some of the outlying houses would—"

"Perhaps you should let me worry about that, after we have had a chance to catch our breath. We would like some food, and a little bit of comfort away from the elements."

"Of course, my lord." Elizabeth curtsied again, but Keran did not miss the scowl on her face. He knew his arrow had hit home, and was not welcomed.

"Leora, fetch your future husband food and drink."

Leora dipped low, then scurried from the room. Keran took the time to look around. The rushes appeared to be clean, and the castle at least smelled good. He sniffed his nose and nodded at Patrick.

"It is lavender, milord," Elizabeth said. "I find it lingers, and leaves a fresh scent."

The room soon filled with servants bearing trays of ale, cheese, and bread.

Leora rushed in, a tray full of food in her hands. Behind her was a servant with a tray full of large tankards of ale. She offered it to him, and Elizabeth beamed.

Keran smiled at her as he took a healthy bite of bread. He swallowed quickly, then nodded his thanks to her. She really was not so bad, he thought. Maybe this would work.

He took another bite, then turned his gaze to Elizabeth. "I trust you have vacated the main chamber?"

"I have, milord. My daughter can move her things into the room tonight, along with yours, of course. She can take care of you tonight, milord."

Keran, who had been in the middle of a drink of ale, coughed. The room, which had been buzzing with talk as servants walked about offering food and drink to their new residents, grew quiet.

Keran finished his drink, then licked his lips. "Tonight? You have a priest handy?"

Elizabeth bristled, and he hid a smile. He knew he must marry the girl, but her mother's push for a bedding made him weary. He would rather take a little while, and allow himself to settle here before he took Leora to wife.

"No, milord. But, since she will be your wife, there is no need to stand on ceremony, do you not agree?"

Keran narrowed his eyes. "You would have me bed your daughter without the sacrament of marriage?"

Something was not right here. Mothers seldom offered their daughters' maidenheads before marriage. Or perhaps the girl was not a virgin. Maybe she had rutted with a stable hand or two. Maybe Elizabeth thought he would be too weary from travel to notice the lack of blood or the unblocked entrance to her daughter's womb.

"We are a simple people, milord. Since you will be married anyway, I thought perhaps—"

"When can the priest be here?" Keran took a longer drink, then locked gazes with Patrick, who lifted his brow in confusion.

"Not for a few weeks, I am sure," Elizabeth replied. "We had a priest here, but he died, and the king saw fit not to replace him. But, as I said—"

"Then we will wait," Keran interrupted her. "It will allow your daughter time to adjust to me, and I to her. And I will thank you not to malign the king's good name."

"My apologies, milord. I will send for the priest immediately. Now, if you will excuse me." She backed away, then stopped and a look of fury came over her face. Keran followed her gaze to a doorway where a woman was trying to stay hidden behind a male servant who stood in front of her.

Elizabeth snapped her fingers, and the woman, who could not be much older than twenty, scurried back up the stairs.

Keran frowned. The feeling of unease he had about his future mother-in-law grew. The girl had been dressed as a servant. Why would she raise such ire in Elizabeth?

He turned to Patrick, who had also noted the exchange. Patrick stepped closer and took food from Leora's tray. Then he leaned in and whispered in Keran's ear.

"Shall I find out who that is?"

Keran nodded, then took some cheese from the tray. He swallowed it, then turned to Leora. "Perhaps after I have rested you can show me the grounds?"

"I would be happy to, milord." She blinked at him seductively, dipping low enough to show him a good bit of her abundant cleavage.

Keran waited for his cock to respond. It did not, and he sighed to himself. She was pretty enough, true, but she did not stir his blood. Perhaps in the next few weeks that feeling would change. He could only hope that would be the case.

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Chapter Two

"I want to meet with the reeve, the bailiff, and the clerk," Keran told Elizabeth as Leora scurried from the room. He'd just spent the last two hours with his future bride, trying to get her to say more than two words to him without looking at her mother for approval first. Maybe he should send Elizabeth to court after the wedding. Then maybe his wife would open her mouth and let him get to know her.

"I handle everything in the keep milord, and I can continue to do so."

Keran sat down in a chair and stared at the woman. "Are you telling me your husband had no bailiff, no clerk?"

"Of course he did, but when he died, I took over things. I am perfectly capable; I can assure you." She squared her shoulders and shot him a defiant look, daring him to contradict her.

Their gazes locked, and despite himself, Keran admired her courage. Finally, he shook his head. "Out of the question. Such a thing would negate my position in the household, and I will not allow that. Find the men who had those positions before and send them to me right after we sup."

For a moment, he thought she might fight him on it. Then, she lowered her shoulders and nodded. "Will there be anything else, *milord*?"

"Have a bath sent to my chamber." *And tell me who the woman was that you banished earlier.*

Patrick came into the room and sat down opposite him, giving Elizabeth the chance to leave.

"Well?"

"She must be the castle ghost. No one knows who I am talking about. But, I have a pretty little thing enticed into my bed tonight. Perhaps her tongue will loosen after I send her soaring to the heavens."

"You are terrible."

"Am I? There are a few of the young ladies here who are very intriguing. Perhaps a good tug on your cock will make you feel more at home. I know it did for me."

"You are already tugged the wench? When? Do you even know her name?"

"Tillie. She showed me to my rooms. And she knows how to use her mouth for more than talking. She dropped to her knees the minute the door was closed. And who was I to argue when my cock was in her mouth? Shall I send her to you?"

Keran laughed. "A good sucking would be nice, but no. Something is not right here. Elizabeth rules with an iron fist and seems to frighten everyone in her path. I would like to know what is going on, and if she is hiding something—which I am sure she is. She dismissed the clerk and bailiff after her husband's death."

Patrick lifted his brow. "Interesting. Perhaps she has been hoarding money, knowing the king would eventually take things over."

"Perhaps. But, I think it is something a little deeper." Keran could not get the image of the woman on the stairs out

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of his mind. Her clothing was rough, yes, but he could tell she was pretty. Prettier even than his future wife. Maybe she was one of Richard's by-blows from a tumble with a castle maid and that is why Elizabeth despised her, for he could tell that she did, from the look she had given the girl.

Something Edward had said to him during their initial meeting about Mardoon tugged at the back of his mind, but he could not remember what it was. His brain was addled from travel, and he needed to bathe, to eat, and then to sleep. Perhaps he should forgo dinner in the main hall tonight and take food in his chamber, postpone meeting with the men in charge until tomorrow.

He dismissed the idea immediately. No, he needed to take charge of the keep soon, demoting Elizabeth publicly so that everyone knew she was no longer the mistress of Mardoon. He pushed away his unease and headed for the stairs, hoping his bath was ready, and that he might have time to close his eyes and rest for a bit before supper.

* * * *

"What are you doing here?" Tillie grabbed Syndra by the arm and pulled her into the kitchens. "You will get us all whipped."

"He is handsome, do you not think? Such large shoulders." Tillie nodded, then sighed. "He is. And his ginger-haired friend is a nice addition to the house, also."

Syndra turned a surprised look Tillie. "Already?"

"I had to. If I had not, one of the other maids would have snapped him up and I would be sleeping on the floor tonight

instead of in his nice warm bed. A man that handsome will not spend his nights alone too often."

They exchanged a smile, then Syndra peeked around the corner again, watching as the man she now knew to be Keran leaned over to talk to Leora.

"You know, if your stepmother catches you, you are in a great deal of trouble. Not to mention poor Alma."

"She will not catch me. She is too busy brooding. I hear he took away all her duties."

"Who did you hear that from? The mice? You have been banished to the upper turret, if I remember right."

"Yes, but Stacia brought me some food earlier and told me what she had overheard. Said Elizabeth told the new lord she wanted to keep the books and such, and he turned her down flat. It does my heart good to know that she has been taken down a notch or two."

When Tillie did not respond, Syndra turned to her, then followed her gaze to the doorway. The ginger-haired man stood there, his eyes searching the room, a frown on his face. Tillie stepped in front of her, pushing her toward a corner and then hurrying toward him.

She was back within minutes.

"I thought he had seen you, but he did not mention it. They were introduced to all the servants today, and he might question me about you are. You should be more careful."

"I am tired of hiding. Besides, Elizabeth would figure out some lie about me, you know that."

Tillie shook her head. "Until we find Alma, you must be careful. If Elizabeth is angry with you, or with any of us, Alma pays."

"Yes, I know. I hate her."

"We all do. But, since you are here, you should stay and listen. I know the other servants are looking forward to it since Elizabeth will be getting the sack."

"Listen to what? What are you talking about?"

"The new lord's speech, of course. If you think he took her down this afternoon, just wait."

Syndra's heart leaped for joy. She wanted to see Elizabeth get her comeuppance from someone. Of course, there was always the chance that she would take her anger out on Syndra, as she usually did. Or worse yet, on Alma. Still, it would be fun to watch.

But first, she wanted to get something to eat. The little bit of bread Stacia had brought to her had long since left her stomach, and the geese that were on the tables looked delicious.

The cooks helped her fill a plate, and she ate her fill. She'd just finished a long drink of ale when Tillie motioned her to the doorway.

She hurried over, jostling for position with the other servants that filled the doorway to hear their new lord speak on his first night at the castle. Two of the stewards stepped in front of Syndra, leaving enough room for her to see, but also so they could hide her quickly, if need be.

When Keran stood, the room quickly grew quiet. He told the crowd how happy he was to be there, and how the king

was worried that they had been alone too long, and he was here to make sure they stayed within the laws and under the king's protection.

Syndra listened with rapt attention, which quickly diminished the longer he spoke, and gave the same rhetoric that you would expect to hear at court, or so she would think. And then, he cleared his throat and looked pointedly at Elizabeth.

"In closing, I would like to again thank everyone for their welcome here today. But from this point forward we are no longer guests, but neighbors, and friends. Any problems you have, or anyone in the outlying lands has, should be brought before me and only me. I am lord of these lands now and have full jurisdiction over Mardoon and all its peoples.

"And, on behalf of his Majesty, King Edward, I wish to thank the Lady Elizabeth for her hard work at keeping these lands safe for the crown. Now she can retire to her rooms and practice her needlework, and take a well-deserved rest."

Syndra snorted, then let out a loud burst of laughter. The two men standing in front of her straightened so that she was hidden. She knew the new lord, and everyone else, was staring in her direction.

"Forgive me, milord," the largest of the men, Timothy, said, "Someone in the kitchen stepped on a chicken."

The room erupted in mirth and Syndra ran for the stairs, laughing so hard that, by the time she got to the second floor landing, she had to stop and catch her breath before she could make it to her tower room.

* * * *

Patrick grabbed Tillie's hips, holding her tightly as he thrust into her. She rode him as though he was a stallion, her breasts bouncing and her hips moving in a rapid undulation. He rolled his eyes back in pleasure.

"Welcome to the country," he whispered to himself as his orgasm built.

She put her hands on his chest and bounced harder. His bullocks tightened and he erupted, cursing himself silently for not holding back until he knew that she had been satisfied. He blamed it on too many days on the road without a soft body under him—or above him as was happening right now.

When he was empty, he flipped her off him, coming up beside her and cupping her pussy, loving the laughter that escaped her throat.

"Um, look what I found." He parted her slit and felt for her hard little button. Her soft cry of pleasure let him know when he had found it. It took just several hard strokes before she climaxed, bucking under his hand and begging for more.

"Did you like that, little one?"

"Oh yes, milord." She giggled, and he kissed her as she continued to wiggle under his hands. "Thank you."

"Oh, thank you for the welcome. And I hope that you will welcome me tomorrow night, and the night after that, too." He leaned over and licked her nipple, sucking it into his mouth and pulling away only when she started to groan in pleasure.

"Milord." The whine in her voice made pleasure crawl up his spine. "More, please."

He licked her until the tiny bud felt like a hard rock against his tongue, then he sucked her in again, waiting for just the right moment before pulling away and blowing on her.

"Tell me of the girl."

Her body stiffened under him, and she pushed against his chest. "What girl? Am I not enough for you?"

"No, you know who I mean. The dark-haired girl I saw you talking to in the kitchen. Is she a servant?"

Patrick looked down at her, careful to keep his hands gently plying her soft, swollen nether lips. He had told Keran about the woman, knowing she was the same one they had seen on the stairs earlier in the day. But, she had not been among the people they had been introduced to that afternoon. And he knew that when Tillie was sated by sex, she might talk.

Now, she moaned softly as he played with her clit, but shook her head. "I don't know..."

"Tell me." He continued to stroke her, hoping it would settle her down. Instead, her body stiffened and tears fell from her eyes.

"She will hurt me. Hurt us."

The fear in her voice made his stiffen. "Who will? The girl in the kitchen?"

"No. The Lady Elizabeth. Please, milord. I must go." She pushed against him, trying to stand, but he held her down.

"Tell me. Now." He tried to keep his voice stern, but not angry. "I will not let anyone harm you, or your friends. Tell me who she is."

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The dam burst and the tears began to flow freely. Tillie softened slightly as he pulled her into his chest, stroking her back and murmuring soft words of comfort into her hair.

"She is the Lady Syndra. Lord Richard's daughter from his first marriage." She lay back and looked Patrick in the eyes. "She is the one Lord Keran should be marrying."

* * * *

"That conniving little bitch." Keran paced in front of the fireplace in his room, running his hands through his hair. "And the worst thing is, he told me. The king did. He said there were three daughters, and I was stupid enough not to count them. Plus, he told me the daughter's name began with S. Leora contains no S. Damn her hide to hell."

He hated that the girl cowered in a chair, staring up at him as he paced. He did not want to scare her, he just wanted the truth. He stopped in front of the fire, taking a log from a pile and throwing it onto the blaze. The flames leaped into the air, sent out a burst of heat, yet Tillie still shivered when he turned to her.

"Tell me again. I want to hear it all. Leave nothing out."

Tillie looked at Patrick, who sat next to her and stroked her hands. "It is all right, little one. Tell him what you told me. He will not hurt you."

"Syndra is the daughter of Lord Richard and Lady Mildred, who died in childbed. The Lady Mildred and Lady Elizabeth were cousins, and Elizabeth was here to help with the birth, or so the older servants say."

"Chandra, who still works in the kitchens, says Lord Richard went mad with grief, and Elizabeth took advantage of it to wiggle into his bed when he was deep into his cups one night. She wanted to be mistress of the keep. Soon, she was pregnant with Leora. They married soon afterwards, and then Leticia was born."

Keran sat down in a chair, trying to still his anger. "And?"

Tillie sat up a little straighter. "Syndra says her father loved her, and you could see it when he looked at her. But, then he would get sad and make her go away. Elizabeth hated her, because she would have what her daughters would not."

"Mardoon."

"Yes, milord. She's always treated Syn very badly, forcing her to live in the tower even when Lord Richard was alive. Telling her that if she told him of her treatment, things would be the worse for her."

Keran balled his hands into fists. "She beats her?"

"She did when Syn was younger. But, when she grew older, she would just tease her for being large or for being ugly. But, Syn is not ugly, milord."

He nodded. The girl he'd seen on the stairs was not ugly, he knew that. But, a lifetime of hearing it might make her feel that way.

"Tell me of the hostage you spoke of."

"Elizabeth always made Syndra work, but when Lord Richard died, Elizabeth told Syndra she had to earn her keep, as if she had not been doing it already. She moved her to the kitchen staff. Syndra, Alma and I all work there. We are all

friends. When the witch—oh, I am sorry, when *she* heard you were coming, she took Alma away and said that if Syndra came about before you were married to Leora, she would kill Alma. She threatened us all with it. Said the girl's blood would be on our hands."

"Every servant in the keep?" This time it was Patrick who spoke.

"Yes."

"Which means she has done things to back up her words," Keran said. He lowered his voice to a more soothing level. "Does she beat you?"

"Not me, but she has had servants beaten before. Men and women. She always makes everyone watch."

"No wonder everyone was so happy to see you today," Patrick said. He leaned over and kissed Tillie's lips gently. "You did well, little one."

"What about Alma?" Her tears started to flow again. "When the beast finds out I told you, she will kill her, and it will be my fault."

Patrick pulled her against his chest, stroking her hair and holding her close.

"Do not worry," Keran said. "We will find Alma and find a way to bring Syndra out into the open without endangering her."

Patrick stood, then gently kissed Tillie. "Go back to my bed and wait for me. Speak with no one."

She nodded and fled the room quickly.

When she was gone, Patrick turned to Keran. "Well, is it not nice to know that scheming happens outside court, too?"

"I would like to kill the woman with my bare hands, but I cannot. Nor can I let her know that I know, for if I do, then she will kill the girl and then deny the girl ever existed."

"Then how do we find her?"

"She has to have the girl hidden somewhere nearby. See whom Elizabeth is closest to. Then, watch them closely and see if they go outside the keep somewhere. When they do, have them followed. In pairs."

Patrick nodded. "And what of your real intended?"

Keran turned back to the fire, studying the flames. "First, we need to make sure the message to the priest does not get there, to buy us time. See to it. After that, I need to catch Syndra out of the tower. Then, I need to let her know not to be frightened by me. That will be the first step in helping her claim her rightful place as mistress of this castle."

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Chapter Three

Syndra stood in her tower room, looking down to where Elizabeth talked with her current paramour. Elizabeth went through men so very quickly, letting one after the other fill her bed. She was sure she attracted them by promising marriage, and the promise of being the Lord of Mardoon. That never happened, though, and when she tired of one man, she sent him on his way and took another. This one was named Nathaniel.

Seconds after the woman stalked toward the castle, the man mounted his horse and headed toward the gate. She was sure his first stop would be wherever Elizabeth had hidden Alma.

She turned away from the window, tears filling her eyes. As much as she did not want Leora to take her place with the new lord, she knew it had to happen. Only with that act would Alma be freed. And he had announced last night that he wanted to wait until the priest would get her, probably another two weeks at least.

Syndra knew her first priority was to let her friend know things would be fine. Maybe tomorrow she would wait outside the gate and watch in which way Nathaniel went. Then she could try to follow, try to get an idea of where they were keeping Alma. It could not be that far away.

A noise at the door caught her attention, and she grinned as Tillie slipped inside. Syndra frowned. "You brought me no food?"

"I could not sneak any away. Leora was at the door, watching everyone. I am sure she would report me to her mother if she knew I was 'stealing' from her."

Syndra laughed. "You have a short memory, my friend. Remember our new lord took over last night. And you warmed his friend's bed, did you not?"

Tillie blushed, then giggled. "He is magnificent, but I still fear the witch, as do we all." She took a few steps closer as if to impart a secret. "Come downstairs to eat."

Syndra backed away from her. "Are you mad? She was already up here earlier berating me for being in the kitchens last night. I thought that was why you were trying to sneak me food, knowing she would ban me from eating today."

"Come down, please."

"No. If you cannot bring food up, I understand and will be fine. But, I will not risk her seeing me down there. Perhaps later tonight, when there is more chance she will be in her room, but not now."

"But she is outside now, so you need not worry about her. The new lord is kind, and he will help you."

"Have you warmed his bed, too? You have been busy." Syndra laughed, her smile turning into a frown when Tillie came closer.

"Please come with me."

"You will not bring me food because you fear the beast, yet you want me to come down and make myself vulnerable to her? No, I will stay up here and worry about Alma, and how I might help her. I will come down later this evening, after she has retired, and there is no chance of her seeing me."

"But—"

"No!" Syndra glared at her friend. "What are you playing at?"

"Nothing. I just ... hate to see you up here, alone."

"Then sit with me, but I will not go downstairs."

Tillie sighed. "Very well. I will try to bring food up later, I promise."

"Thank you. And see whether you cannot get one of Nathaniel's friends to talk about where Alma might be."

Tillie nodded and hurried out the door and down the stairs. Syndra heard the door at the bottom of the circular staircase open and close softly.

Syndra waited with baited breath for Elizabeth or her wretched daughter to rush up to see why Tillie had been up in her room. When nothing happened, she exhaled loudly. There might be a new lord in residence at Mardoon, but things had not changed, not for her, and not for the rest of the servants. They were still as frightened by Elizabeth and Leora as they had been a few days before.

If only Leora were like Leticia, who was sweet natured and loved everyone, including Syndra. But Leticia was as frightened by her mother as everyone else. She had been known to try to help Syndra when she was in trouble, but she did not think the younger girl could help her now.

A new thought occurred to her. Maybe Leticia knew where Alma was being held. Perhaps during the afternoon, when the castle was quiet and Elizabeth was be napping, Syndra could risk going downstairs to find her half-sister and see whether she knew anything.

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But then again, it would be dangerous. If Elizabeth found her, or if by some chance the new lord stopped to inquire about whom she was, then things would go badly. No, better to wait until late tonight, get food, and then sneak into Leticia's room and talk with her then. That was the best plan, although waiting would be one of the hardest things she had ever done in her life.

* * * *

"Are you sure she is coming?" Keran focused a gaze on Tillie, who stood next to Patrick, looking up at him with pure lust on her face.

"What? Oh yes, milord. I took her food around one, and she said she asked me to have Leticia meet her here in the kitchen at midnight."

"And you did not deliver the message?"

"I was going to, milord, but I saw Leticia talking with one of Nathaniel's friends. I was afraid she would report the information to her mother. It would not be like her, but then again, you can never be too cautious."

"True," Keran said, shaking his head at Patrick who was stroking the girl's backside. "You two go on and play, as I know you are dying to do. I will wait."

"But Syndra will run when she sees you. I should wait and assure her."

"You let me handle her," Keran said with a wink at Tillie, who looked horrified. "Rest assured, I will not harm her. She is to be my wife, remember?"

Tillie looked uncertainly at Patrick, who gathered her close, then walked with her toward the door. Before he left, he and Keran exchanged nods, and then the room grew quiet.

Keran wondered what time it was, and if the girl would really show, or if she had fallen asleep. That thought had no real merit, though. If she had not eaten since one she should be well to starved, and would come down seeking to fill her belly.

Anger at Elizabeth passed through him again. The woman needed to be whipped. But, he had to remember a young girl's life was still at stake. This morning, he had charged Brody, one of his best scouts, to watch the woman and see who she talked with the most, and if that person left immediately afterwards, and for him to find some way to follow that person.

Brody reported that Elizabeth had spent some time in the bailey with her lover, Nathaniel. The man had left soon afterward, but Brody could not follow him, since he had mounted and ridden off as if the devil were at his heels.

"Do not worry, milord, I will have him tomorrow," Brody had said with a grin. "I watched the direction he went and will be waiting in the trees. He was gone almost three hours, though, so he could not have gone far. He went directly to the Lady Elizabeth when he returned."

Three hours. That meant he made it to his destination quickly, checked on things, and then hurried back to make his report to the woman who obviously kept his bullocks in check.

Keran turned his attention to a mouse, who scuttled across the floor. Within seconds, a cat was after it, the sounds of their claws echoing in the otherwise silent kitchen.

Keran froze at the sound of the soft voice. "Get him, Barrett, that's a good boy."

Syndra. She giggled, amused at the cat and mouse chase. Her charming laughter was infectious, and he found himself chuckling quietly. Though she had obviously had a hard day, she was still joyful. That made her attractive to him and he had not even met her yet.

He turned his body slowly so as not to make any noise and located her standing in the doorway. She held a candle high, and her gaze followed the cat that chased the mouse.

She laughed softly again as the mouse scurried into the back room, the cat hot on its heels. Then she turned to the kitchen and set her candle on the table.

"I am as hungry as you are, Barrett. I hope I can find something to eat, just like you."

"The beef was delicious," Keran said, stepping into the light. "May I join you for some?"

She bolted for the door, but he captured her arm before she could flee and pulled her tight to his chest. "Don't be frightened of me, Syndra. I know of you, and why you are hiding."

"Let me go," she hissed, fighting against his hold.

Lowering his head, he placed lips right next to her ear. "I won't hurt you. I want to help you, I promise. The king sent me to marry you, not Leora. And I know of Alma. I can help her, and you."

Her body stiffened, and then a small cry escaped her mouth. "Please let me go."

Her words were so soft; he barely heard them. His heart broke at her plea. But her body was still tense, and he knew if he let her go, she would bolt. Then he would have to chase her down, which would increase their chances of being heard or seen.

"I have food in my chamber. Meat and vegetables, cheese and bread, and some ale. I had Tillie prepare it for us."

She inhaled sharply at the sound of her friend's name, and her postures relaxed just a little.

"Do not be frightened of me."

"She will kill her."

"I will not allow that to happen. Come upstairs with me where we can talk privately."

The silence grew as she considered his words. Finally, she nodded and he let her go, praying she would not run.

She did not. Instead, she turned to him and looked up. Tears filled her green eyes. Her full lips set perfectly between her rounded cheeks, and tumbles of dark hair fell across her shoulders.

A tear fell, and then she spoke. "Promise me you will help Alma."

"You have my word as your future husband." Another tear fell, then she turned and walked away from him. He followed her quickly, and when he thought she would take the stairs to her tower prison, she instead turned toward the hallway that led to his own rooms.

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A small part of the battle won. But the war, he knew, was still ahead of him.

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Chapter Four

Syndra reached for a piece of bread, torn off a bite, and ate it as she studied Keran. His dark hair hung around his shoulders, and his brown eyes held just a tinge of green. He was, without a doubt, the largest man she had ever seen in her life. When he had held her against his hard chest, her heart had beaten so fast she thought she would die.

Only his gentle words had soothed her. She prayed he could help Alma, as he said he could. True, he was the new lord, but Elizabeth always managed to find a way to get what she wanted.

She had been frightened as she climbed the small steps to what used to be her father's chambers. The sound of her stomach, growling its displeasure at being ignored, seemed to bounce off the walls as they entered. She had immediately approached the table and started to eat.

The feast set before them let her know he had told the truth about Tillie. There was definitely enough food here for two, and Tillie had told her earlier she would see to it she had something to eat when she came down to the kitchens. She had failed to tell her, though, the food would be in the lord's chambers.

"Sit down," he said. "Eat all you like."

She sat, thankful when he sat across the table from her, and not right next to her. Four lit candles provided a great deal of light, something else she was grateful for. Surely, he

did not mean to harm her, or take advantage of her, in so much light.

She snatched a piece of cheese, and then some carrots, waiting for him to speak. When he did not, she kept eating. After her second slice of the meat, she looked at him quizzically.

"Are you not eating?"

"I ate earlier." He cocked his head at her. "When you are done, we will talk."

She sat down the meat in her hand and pushed the plate away.

"Do not stop. I did not mean it harshly."

She shook her head, wondering why she had made such a pig of herself in front of him. It probably made him very happy he was marrying Leora and not her.

"You are Lord Richard's oldest daughter, Syndra?"

"That depends upon whom you ask. If you ask the Lady Elizabeth that question, she will tell you that I am nothing more than a scullery maid, and Leora is the oldest daughter. The oldest daughter that matters, anyway."

"I am sorry."

Her spirits lifted at his tone. He was not pitying her, just letting her know that he understood her words. She could not stand it if he offered her nothing more than pity.

"I am sure Leora will make you very happy."

"I am here to marry you, not Leora. The king sent me here after receiving a letter from your father."

"My father is dead, milord. How could he send messages?"

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For an answer, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a sheet of parchment, which he pushed across the table to her.

"You think Elizabeth allowed me to learn to read? I tried, several times. Each time I was punished, so I stopped trying."

"Then I will teach you."

His words made her gasp. When he nodded and picked up the sheet, she stared at him, dumbfounded, watching his large hands as they unfolded the sheet.

"The king received this message a little more than a month ago. He dispatched me the next day, but it took me some time to get things in order and get here. If I had known the conditions the household was in, I would have come sooner, I promise you that."

She stared at the paper. "Are you going to read it to me?"

He looked down and she clasped her shaking hands together.

When he spoke, his voice was deep. "Majesty, I have not met you, but I knew your father. He was a good man, and I think the same of you. Mardoon Keep is loyal to you and supported you during your ascension.

"I write you this missive with a heavy heart. My time is near, and as I look back, I realize the mistakes I have made, not where you are concerned, but where my life, and particularly my daughter, are concerned. I have ignored her most of her life because she reminded me of her mother, the wife I lost.

"Now, though, I know that my second wife will not treat her kindly after my death. I ask you, as the King of England, to send a new Lord to Mardoon who will take my daughter to

wife and care for her. I should have taken care of this long ago and know I will suffer greatly for my reticence in dealing with my daughter. I know what happens to my lands after my death is up to you, but knowing you will provide for her will help me leave this world in peace.

I remain, Richard, Lord of Mardoona."

The few tears Syndra had managed to hold back in the kitchen fell now, wetting her cheeks.

He refolded the paper and pushed it toward her. "You keep it."

She shook her head and buried her face in her hands, stiffening when she heard him stand and cross to her. He put his hand on her shoulder as she cried. The contact was just enough to offer her comfort. When she finally took several deep breaths, he stood and crossed to a chest. He was back seconds later, handing her a square of linen, which she used to wipe her tears.

"You were close?"

"No. What he said was true. He never really wanted anything to do with me. Of course, I can say the same for Leora and Leticia. I think we disappointed him by being female. But my sisters had their mother, who hates me." She sniffed, then looked away. "Two days before my father died, he promised me he had left me something to take care of me. I thought he meant money, or jewels, or some other way I could travel to court and away from Elizabeth."

"He meant this letter."

"Yes. I have no idea how he sent it on its way, for Elizabeth never left his side during the illness. The staff said it

was because she loved him, but I think it was because she had to know everything that was happening. I wonder when he wrote it."

"His Majesty said it arrived with a traveling troupe."

Syndra gasped. "They were here just two weeks before my father's death. They performed a play, and several of my father's men carried him downstairs."

Keran nodded, then cleared his throat. "We need to discuss a few things. Are you up to it, or would you rather wait until tomorrow evening?"

His hand was on hers now, warm and comforting as if enveloped her smaller one. His thumb caressed her skin and she pulled away.

"I don't want you frightened by me. I want us to discuss things so we know exactly what is going on here, to find the best way to fight it."

"Alma is—"

"I will know by tomorrow where your friend is. I have a man set up for that task already."

A real smile broke over her face for the first time in days. "What did Tillie tell you?"

"Everything about Elizabeth and her treatment of you, and the people of the keep. Now I want to discuss other things, like the men who serve her. Are they the same men your father had?"

"Some of them. A week after my father's death, she dismissed the—"

"Yes, I know about that. The men-at-arms?"

"Most of them came with her new lover, Nathaniel. I don't know from where. My father did not have many men-at-arms. He said there was no need during times of peace."

He pulled up a chair next to her and sat down. "How long have they been here?"

"A few months. She had another lover before him, a man named MacNutt. He came almost immediately after father's death."

"Scottish?"

"Yes." She narrowed her eyes at him. "Does that matter?"

"It is possible. Did she take him to her bed?"

"Yes, the night he arrived. They made a great deal of noise." She giggled at the memory, looked away, then looked back at him. "Alma will be back tomorrow?"

"I do not know, Syndra. To say yes would be a lie. We will know where she is tomorrow, and we will decide from there what to do. Elizabeth's men may have orders to kill her at the first sign of trouble, so it would be best not to rush into things."

Fear gripped Syndra's stomach. "What if Elizabeth has already ... killed her?"

Keran took her hands in his, holding them firmly. "That would serve her no purpose. If you found out, she would have nothing to hold over your head, and she knows it."

His touch was warm and comforting, and she made no move to pull away from him this time. "Surely you cannot mean to marry me."

"Why not? Not only am I following the king's order, but you are a beautiful woman who will make a wonderful wife."

She laughed and shook her head. "Elizabeth saw to it that I received no gentile training. I know nothing of being a wife, or a mother. Only of cleaning a keep."

"Then you know how to run a household, I am sure. You know how things work, and you will be able to take care of things while I labor on the outside business."

"But I know nothing of pleasing you in..." her eyes darted to the large bed, then down at the floor.

"I will teach you." His thumbs stroked her hands and she shivered. "You have already aroused me, just by being here."

Confusion passed through her, then she glanced down. She could see the outline of his manhood straining against his breeches. Her gaze fastened on him, and she wondered what it looked like, what it would feel like. She knew how things worked thanks to tales from Tillie and Alma, but she had never seen a man.

The urge to touch him sizzled through her fingers. Would he allow that, or would he want her to do nothing? Tillie told her men enjoyed being touched, with hands and with lips and tongues. Would he expect her to do that? Could she do that?

Syndra tried to pull her hands away, but he held her close, and she lifted her gaze to his. The look of desire that greeted her made her heart jump inside her chest. She imagined herself lying under him, his hardness buried in her soft center, his lips on hers.

A strange feeling crept into her stomach and she moaned softly. Tillie had often told her how pleasurable it was to couple with a man, and looking at Keran, Syndra could imagine the truth of it.

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She managed to tug her hands away from him. Elizabeth would never allow it. This man might think he was in control, but Syndra knew better. Elizabeth had Syndra under her control, and there was no way she was letting go.

"I need to go back upstairs."

"Why? No one will find you here."

"No, but she might find me gone from up there. I do not want punishments going to anyone else because I was hungry, or wanted to dream about being your wife.

"It is more than a dream, Syndra. It will be a reality."

Syndra shook her head. "It is a nice wish, but Elizabeth will find a way to keep me where I am. Or she will see me dead, I am sure."

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Chapter Five

Keran stood at the door to the main building, staring at the sun. Brody had been gone for more than half the day, and apprehension worked its way inside him. Given the speed Nathaniel had returned the day before, Keran had expected to see Brody back quickly. The longer he was gone, the more Keran worried something had gone wrong. Brody was his best scout, so he had no worries that he'd been discovered. But something was wrong.

Pile that on top of his concern for Syndra, and things were looking bleak right now. Pulling her out of her shell and teaching her not to fear Elizabeth anymore would be hard. But he would manage it.

He had wanted to kiss her last night, to reassure her things would be fine. But his unruly cock, hard and eager from the way she had stared at him, would not have allowed him to stop with one kiss. He would have wanted to kiss her again, several times, then caress her breasts before moving his hands, and his tongue, between her thighs.

His rod stiffened at the thought, and he turned away from the courtyard. He needed to take his mind off the tantalizing woman upstairs or every person in the keep would see his length pressed against his breeches.

Think of something besides Syndra. He repeated the mantra to himself, hoping his cock would listen. Instead it just throbbed, seeking attention. Maybe he should go upstairs and take care of it. He had been far too long without a

woman under him, more than a month and a half now, and his bullocks ached with need. Soon, his hand would not satisfy him; nothing more than Syndra would, lying sweetly under him, stroking his shoulders as he slide in and out of her wetness. His cock pulsed harder. He had to think of someday to get Syndra out of the tower and into his bed, and soon.

Something besides Syndra. Most of his morning had been spent overlooking the household accounts. He had noticed some interesting areas that he wanted to discuss with Elizabeth, but he wanted to wait until he had heard from Brody, to see exactly what he was up against. But then again, perhaps questioning the witch would take his mind off waiting and wondering.

He found her in the kitchens, her gaze shooting around the room as if in search of something. He wondered if she were looking for Syndra. When he had walked his future wife to her room last night, they had seen no one. But, when he had headed back to his own room, he thought he had heard a noise. He had listened, then decided it was a cat, or a dog maybe.

He needed to send Tillie up to check on her again. He had sent her with food first thing in the morning, but he wanted to make sure things were still good.

"Lady Elizabeth, a few words, please."

She turned to him and her look of displeasure quickly turned to a fake smile. "Of course, milord. What is it you'd like to discuss?"

"Not here, in the library, if you please." He indicated she should go out before him, and the frown on her face returned.

She swept out of the room, and he nodded at Tillie, who returned the acknowledgement with one of her own and began putting food on a plate.

On the way to the library, he found Patrick and signaled for him to follow. Once the three of them were inside, Keran shut the door.

"You should be spending time with your future wife, milord." Elizabeth turned to him. "My daughter is anxious to fulfill her duties to you."

He ignored her statement and crossed to the table. "I looked over the ledgers this morning. Seems three months after Lord Richard died, there was a nice influx of cash in the coffers."

He did not mention that the fact she had recorded the amount at all had surprised him. He knew she had received the money from something other than to do with the rents or the sheep. Of course, hiding cash, and then being discovered by the king, would bring about a horrible fate, so she had to record it. She just never thought to be discovered.

"The shearing, milord."

"In June?" Keran cocked his eyebrows at her as Patrick sat down and stretched out, putting his feet on the table. "Forgive me, but I was under the impression shearing season was in autumn, not summer."

"Of course, I meant, from the—the wool from the shearing. We had a good season last year."

"I would say so. Five thousand pounds is quite a fortune." He cleared his throat and pushed the book toward Patrick, who sat upright and perused the pages.

"Another two thousand pounds two months later," Patrick said. "Very impressive. Your husband should have put you in charge long before. The keep would be rolling in money."

"It seems it is," Keran replied. "All the better for the king and the treasury. I take it all the appropriate taxes have been paid?"

"Of course," she said stiffly. "Anything else?"

"No." Keran leaned against the table. "The king wishes to know why you did not inform him of your husband's death."

He could almost see her mind searching for an answer that would make sense. "I was in mourning," she said softly.

"So you, what, forgot to write and let the king know one of his most loyal subjects had died?" He fought down laughter as her cheeks reddened. He kept his gaze on her face, but out of the corner of his eye he could see her hands, clenching and unclenching.

"What exactly are you implying?"

"I am implying nothing. I am simply asking a question the king put to me. Why, he said, would a wife not inform the realm when her husband died? Do you have something to hide?"

"Absolutely not. How dare you accuse me of such?"

Keran crossed his arms over his chest and waited. Beside him, Patrick sat back, moving his legs under the table. Both of them focused on Elizabeth, and Keran imagined he could see steam coming out of her ears. When she did not reply further, he nodded.

"So, what I should tell the king is that you were in such pain from your husband's death that you forgot to tell him.

For eight months." He lifted his eyebrows in question, then hid a smile as tears coated her cheeks.

"It was painful. I loved Richard so much."

Yes, enough that you took another man to your bed weeks later, and then another man after him. "I am sure you did."

He waited for her to speak, but instead she just stood there and cried. A knock at the door drew his attention. "Come."

Brody stepped inside and bowed. "Milord, a word?"

"Of course. Lady Elizabeth, you may go." She whirled around, pushing past Brody who had tried, and failed, to step out of her way.

He grabbed the door to stay upright, then laughed. "She seems angry."

"As well she should," Patrick replied. "She is up to something."

Brody closed the door and hurried across the room. "You are very right, Patrick. I found the girl, a little more than a half-hour ride from here. She seems well, seeing as how she is the only woman in a camp of men."

"Men?" Keran frowned. "How many men?"

"Three dozen, at least. Training, my lord."

"Training? For battle?"

"Yes. Most of them looked fairly young and inexperienced."

Keran crossed to the window and looked out. Brody's report sent him reeling. It made sense, though, with the information Syndra gave him last night. A Scotsman was Lady Elizabeth's first lover after her husband's death. And Henry had fled to Scotland after his defeat at Edward's hands and

was still hiding there. If he were preparing an army, an out of the way place like Mardoon would be a good place to gather supporters. Many people in this area had Lancastrian ties.

"She has rented out Mardoon lands for Edward's enemies to use as a training ground." His words were soft, menacing. "The traitorous bitch."

"Let us attack them," Patrick said. "We will catch them off guard and destroy them."

"With two-dozen men? Our men may have more experience, but their numbers are higher. And, there is no telling whether there are other bands of men nearby."

"The surprise will work in our favor," Patrick said. "Or better yet, let us question Nathaniel, the witch's lover. He will know what is happening."

Keran considered what to do next. He needed to send an immediate message to the king, but he needed to be sure of his facts. He wanted to see the encampment for himself.

"I will take you there." He turned to Brody, who grinned. "I figured you would want to see it. That is what took me so long. I backtracked, then took another route and came out from a different area from which Nathaniel would. That way, no one would think I followed him. I can take you that way."

"Excellent," Keran said. "You are far too intelligent, Brody."

"Thank you, milord. Just allow me more time for wenching and I will be happy."

Keran returned his grin. "Let us go, then. I can come back and draft a message for the king, asking for instructions on where to go next."

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Chapter Six

Syndra's heart fell as she watched Keran and three of his friends ride out of the keep and across the glen, heading for the trees. She wondered how long he would be gone, and where he was going. It was likely he was inspecting his new lands. Those lands were plentiful, and that might keep him away for a while, a thought that hurt her insides. She had hoped he would come to see her sometime today. He had sent Tillie up twice, which meant a great deal to her. Still, she wished it had been him.

Last night had been like a dream come true. When she had heard his voice in the kitchen, she had been scared to death. Then he had captured her in his arms, and a different sort of anxiety had taken over, one that caused pleasure to soar through her veins despite the fear. She had made the decision to trust him knowing it could be the worst, or the best thing she had ever done.

She hoped it would be the latter.

A ruckus from the courtyard drew her back to the window. Nathaniel and two of his men were mounting their horses. Nathaniel was yelling at them to hurry, and people scurried about. Elizabeth stood off to the side, watching. The men took off in the opposite direction from which Keran had gone and Syndra frowned.

What was happening? Why were they all going out in groups, and so late in the afternoon, too? The evening meal was just a few hours away. There was nothing nearby to get

to in that amount of time, unless Keran was going out to examine his lands. Then he would be back. But, why had Nathaniel left in such a hurry?

She inched away from the window when Elizabeth looked up. She prayed her stepmother had not seen her. Today had been quiet, and for that Syndra was grateful. She'd had enough to think about with meeting Keran, and the possibility that he might actually figure out a way for her to escape from her stepmother's rule. The more she thought about it; the more she thought he could.

He had already proven that he was a strong man, challenging Elizabeth in front of everyone. She chuckle at the memory and went back to the window, looking down, ready to pull back if need be. But, her stepmother was gone, and the courtyard was again quiet, with nothing going on but normal activity.

Syndra stepped away from the window and sat down on her bed, her feet tapping against the paving stones. She wanted to go downstairs. Keran's words gave her courage and she wanted to join castle life again, wanted to do more than sit up here in a tower.

Maybe she could go down, just to the kitchens. Elizabeth was probably in her rooms now, resting. Leora had been strangely silent for the past day, as had Leticia. If the three of them were not around, then Syndra had the opportunity to be among people. She hated being alone.

Thinking about going downstairs made her wonder about running the castle once Elizabeth was gone, and she and Keran were married. She had seen the heavy hand Elizabeth

had used. Syndra would not do that. She would be kind to everyone, no matter what. And she would defer to her husband for the major decisions.

Tired of sitting she started to pace, thinking about wearing colorful gowns that would please her husband. They would be cut just low enough for him to enjoy the view of her bosom. The warm, tingly feeling she'd had last night when he had caressed her hands came back, starting in her stomach and moving down.

Her core quivered as she thought about him touching her, his strong fingers buried in her soft flesh. Wetness seeped through her folds, and she remembered Tillie telling her how it made it easier for a man's cock to slide inside.

Syndra stepped up to the window and looked to see whether Keran had returned. He had not. By the set of the sun, she could tell he would be gone for at least two hours.

Where was he?

A heavy sigh escaped her, and she ran her hands under her breasts and down her ribcage. She had to get out of here, or she might go mad. She wanted to see him, to talk to him. Barring that, she wanted to talk to anyone. Sitting here was no longer an option.

She pulled open the door and crept down the narrow, uneven steps. At the bottom, she pushed the door open. If Elizabeth or Leora were nearby, they would order her back upstairs. When no sound came, Syndra stepped into the hallway and closed the door. She took the back steps to the kitchen, stopping at the top to look around.

"Come in." Susan, one of the cooks, motioned to her. "She is upstairs, resting."

"And Leora?"

"Well, that one has been absent most of the day."

Tillie bustled over, laughing. "Tell her why. No wait, let me."

"Tell me what?"

"She is with a man, one of Nathaniel's men," Tillie said. "Last night, Patrick asked me to meet him near the brook outside the gate. So I took the entrance on the south, and there she was, rutting with him."

Syndra's eyes widened. "Her mother will whip her if she finds out."

"Let us hope so," Tillie said before putting her hand over her mouth and asking the heavens for forgiveness. "I should not say that, but it is very funny, is it not?"

Susan held out some cheese and Syndra took it, eating heartily while fighting back laughter. "It is funny," she said, swallowing hard. "Which one?"

"The dark-haired one, the younger one who sits at the back. When Nathaniel rode off, the young man went searching for Leora, and finally found her in the great hall. When her mother went upstairs, they hurried outside. I am sure they are, um, making good use of their time."

Laughter filled the kitchen and Syndra wondered about her stepsister's actions. Never mind if her mother saw her, if Keran saw her, it would all be over for her, surely she should know that. Of course, it was over anyway, but she did not know it yet.

"What is going on in here?"

They froze at the sound of Elizabeth's voice. Syndra wanted to melt into the floor. Then she remembered Keran's words from last night . The king had sent him to marry her, not Leora. He would make that come true, she just knew it. She no longer had to fear her stepmother.

"You." She stepped in front of Syndra and narrowed her eyes. "What are you doing down here?"

"I saw the men leave and came down to work."

"A likely story. Perhaps a few lashes will remind you to of my order to stay upstairs."

"I am tired of listening to you. From what I heard last night, you are no longer in charge here."

A collective gasp filled the room, which then drew silent. Two of Nathaniel's men stood in the doorway, watching.

"Justin," Elizabeth said. "Bind Tillie to the whipping post. She will take Syndra's lashes."

"No!" Syndra launched herself at Elizabeth, but Justin knocked her down as he grabbed Tillie, who tried to flee. "You have no authority! We all heard."

"He is not here, is he? And if he finds out, if someone tells him, I will whip her again. I will find a way." She turned to Justin, who held a struggling Tillie close. "What are you waiting for? Do it!"

"Milady, do you think it wise? She has been in one of their beds."

He let out a loud yell when Tillie's foot connected with his shin.

"Obey me, or take the lashes yourself."

A Dusting of Syn
by Melinda Barron

Syndra tried to seize his feet, but he pushed her away and drug Tillie from the room. She scrambled up and made to follow them, but the other man at the door grabbed her.

"Bring her. Let her see what her mouth brings about."

The room had grown silent, everyone staring after them in horror. Their destination was clear, a room set up after Richard's death with a post in the middle, and plenty of room for people to crowd in and watch someone whipped. Elizabeth made use of it at least once a week.

The man carried Syndra down the hall, and they entered the room in time to see Justin rip Tillie's bodice and bear her back. Her arms were tied above her head, and she was screaming at the top of her lungs.

"Go ahead. Do it. You'll get yours for it, and it will be worth it."

Syndra struggled against her captor as Tillie turned to look at her. Her friend blinked, then nodded, and Syndra shook her head. "No!"

"She will get hers. You will see."

"Believe it if you want," Elizabeth said. She flicked a heavy piece of leather against the floor. The cracking sound made everyone jump. "Once he is married to Leora, I can control him. If he refuses to cooperate with me, it will be easy enough to poison him and be done with it."

The leather cracked again and Syndra cried out. Elizabeth's laugh sent chills up her spine. When the woman pulled her arm back to let the leather fly again, Syndra screamed.

* * * *

Keran jumped from his horse and slapped at the dirt that clung to his breeches. He handed his reins to the stable boy, then stepped toward Patrick and Brody. What he had just seen made him sick to his stomach. Traitors, making themselves stronger so they could try to overthrow their king. It also made him want to follow Patrick's advice to attack, immediately, although he knew it would be futile.

"We will send two men toward London tonight. It should not take them more than four or five days on horseback. From there we will await instructions. And Brody, take care of that other matter tonight."

"Consider it done, milord."

"Shall I send Timmons and Markham?"

"Good idea, Patrick. I'll go and compose—" The sound of a woman's scream stopped them all in their tracks. Seconds later they ran for the castle, stopping just inside the doorway. The next sound they heard was a whip cracking and Keran balled his hands into fists. If Elizabeth touched Syndra he would kill her with his bare hands.

A boy ran up to them, a terrified look on his face. His trembling finger pointed down the hallway. "There!"

The three took off with Keran in the lead. He pushed open a door in time to have leather fly backwards and hit his arm. He grabbed it and pulled it hard, jerking Elizabeth backward onto her bottom.

"What in God's name do you think you are doing?" His angry voice echoed in the mostly empty room. Patrick rushed past him toward Tillie, who fought like a mad woman against her bonds.

"Exacting punishment." Elizabeth stood and faced him.
"This is not your concern."

"You forget, madam, this is my keep now. Everything is my concern. You will not whip people like cattle." He kept his tone even and menacing, and when she glared at him, he wanted to bind her to the post, show her what it felt like.

"I am lady of this keep until you marry my daughter. And as such, it is my duty—"

"You are no longer mistress here." He stepped closer. "I thought I made myself clear. If not, let me make it clearer. You are nothing here, and if I hear of you touching another person, or issuing another order without my consent, I will have you shipped to court to stand before the king in judgment for disobeying your new lord. Do you understand me?"

Keran thought she would try to take the whip back and turn it on him. He had never seen such venom in someone before. He cut his eyes to the doorway where Nathaniel pushed inside.

"Milady." He crossed to her and tried to pull her close, but she pushed him off and focused a penetrating gaze on Keran.

"You *will* whip her for her insolence."

"What is her offense?"

"Nothing." Syndra pushed forward. "She is whipping her to get to me, nothing more."

Keran stared at her, barely concealing his surprise. What was she doing here? Had he not told her last night they needed to play things quietly until he decided what to do?

He prayed she would follow his lead. "And who are you?"

"No one, milord." Her words tumbled out, and he almost sighed in relief. "Just a kitchen worker. The Lady Elizabeth is angry with me for—spilling food."

"Then why did she not whip you?"

"I will whip them both," Elizabeth said, reaching for the leather. "One is clumsy, and the other laughed at me."

"You will do no such thing." Keran wrapped the length in his hand, then glanced at his future wife. "What is your name?"

"Syn..." She glanced at Elizabeth, then clamped her mouth shut.

"Syn, hum? A perfect name for such a beauty. It would be a shame to waste you in the kitchen. Curves such as yours are indeed made for sinning." He turned to Elizabeth and glared at her. "You will go to your chamber and stay there until I call for you. I will have your meals delivered. If I see you outside your rooms even once, I will tie you to the post."

He looked to where Patrick held Tillie close. "Is she injured?"

"No, milord. The whip missed her flesh and hit her skirts." He shot an evil look at Elizabeth, and Keran could tell he wanted to strike out at the woman, but held back.

Satisfied Tillie was well, Keran turned to Syndra. "You will come with me. I am dirty after my ride, and you can help me wash the dust from my body. And then, we will see whether you can live up to your name, sweet Syn."

Elizabeth stepped between them, an angry glare in her eyes. "You would disgrace my daughter by taking a whore to your bed?"

"Disgrace her? You offered your daughter's body to me just two nights ago, without the benefit of marriage. Do not dare to question my morals." He glanced at Nathaniel. "Take her from my sight. Now."

Elizabeth violently brushed off Nathaniel's hands and stormed out.

When the room emptied, Syndra rushed to Tillie. "I am so sorry."

"It is not your fault," Tillie said. "Besides, she did not touch me. I think she was trying to draw it out, to frighten us both." She laid her head on Patrick's shoulder. He promptly gathered her in his arms and carried her from the room.

"I will go back upstairs," Syndra said, keeping her voice low.

"You will do no such thing. You are mine now. If I let you leave without coming to my rooms, she would know something is amiss. You are my bedmate, Syn. And I could not be happier about it."

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Chapter Seven

Syndra stood in the middle of Keran's chamber, not sure what to do. Last night, she knew exactly what to do. Eat and talk. But today was an entirely different situation. Men and women carried in large buckets of steaming water, and they all glanced at her, large smiles plastered on their faces. She shrugged at them and tried not to look at Keran.

When they had first entered the room, he had gone directly to his desk, sat, and began writing something, making several goes of it, before he folding up the parchment and sealing it. The earlier drafts he threw in the fire.

He watched as they filled the tub, then walked to the door and handed his missive to someone she could not see.

When the servants had delivered the last of the water and left, the room suddenly seemed very small. He sat down and took off his boots. Other parts of his clothing followed, his belt, his jerkin, his doublet. When he reached for his breeches, she gasped.

He turned and grinned at her. "I am sorry, would you like the honors?"

The look on his face made her nipples harden, and the tingly feeling she'd had last night returned. She felt heat coat her cheeks. "Milord, I am a ... not accustomed to..."

"You are a virgin." It was not a question, or an accusation, just a statement of fact. She nodded, grateful when he nodded in return. "Do not worry, Syn. I will not ravish you.

Not yet. And remember you shall be my wife. When I do take your maidenhead, I will be very gentle."

His hands, still at the fastenings of his breeches, started loosening the leather. Her gaze froze there, watching.

"Come to me, Syn."

Their gazes locked as his hands worked the ties of his breeches. She shook her head even as she walked toward him.

When she was inches just away, she stopped, keeping her hands clasped in front of her.

"Touch me."

His voice cascaded over her skin, making it ripple with excitement. She did not move, just let her gaze travel down his half-naked body. He was magnificent. His muscular shoulders, his broad chest lightly coated with soft hair, his hips still encased in leather. And at the center of his legs ... she swallowed hard. The outline of his cock pressed against his breeches. He was hard and ready for her.

"It is all right. Touch me."

"I..." She swallowed hard again, then tentatively moved her fingers toward him, lightly touching the hard ridge of his manhood. When he sucked in a deep breath of air, she pulled away.

"No, do not stop. It feels wonderful. Do it again."

She stepped away, then bit her lip. "You should not tempt me so. Elizabeth is right. It is sinful for us to lie together."

"Is it? Well, I do not see it as such. Do you think your friend Tillie a sinner?"

A smile spread across her face. "No, just an adventurer."

"Then follow in her adventurous footsteps, not with Patrick, but with me. Touch me, Syn."

Oh she wanted to, very badly. She'd dreamed about him last night, and had thought of him all day long. Why should she let fear of the unknown stop her now? Besides, he was right. They would be married soon.

She snaked her finger out again, tracing the outline of his rod. This time, his sharp intake of breath did not scare her. He took several more, then groaned. His sounds emboldened her, and she increased the pressure, pushing into his hard flesh.

In response, her nipples throbbed and the center of her quim began to ache. Was this desire? Tillie and Alma had both told her of the feeling, of how it swept through your body making you want to do nothing more than lie under a man, let him touch you and to touch him in return.

She had been excited last night thinking about him, but this was so much more than just excitement. Touching him felt wicked, and deliciously wonderful, and Syn wanted more, so much more. She ran her finger back down, then put a finger on either side of his width and gently squeezed.

"You do live up to your name," he said, throwing back his head. She stared at the curve of his throat as she caressed him.

"I like it," she said in a feathery smooth voice. "But will it fit inside me?"

"Perfectly."

He inhaled sharply again, then his fingers went to his stays, working them furiously. She stepped back and watched

as he worked, and when his hands went to his waistband and pulled down, she licked her lips.

His cock sprang forth from its prison, and she gasped. "I ... I..."

"Touch me now, sweet Syn."

Her gaze feasted on him. When she did not move, he quickly pulled her to him and kissed her, his lips demanding yet gentle. He cupped the back of her head and held her close, his tongue caressing the slit between her lips. She opened, welcoming the feel of him inside her, moaning as he moved around, softly licking at her teeth and tongue.

His length pressed into her stomach and one of his hands moved down her back to cup her buttock, pulling her into his hardness. When both hands grasped her and held her close, she ground into him, the friction increasing the feeling of desire in her quim as they writhed together.

"Keran."

"Syndra."

She tilted her head back, and he rained kisses on her cheeks, her chin and her neck. He pulled her closer still. Each thrust of his hardness brought a new feeling, a stronger sensation, an almost overwhelming need to scream at him for something, but she did not know what.

When he pulled away, she sobbed at the loss of him. He stepped closer, putting his hands on her hips and caressing her, but not giving her the intimate embrace he had done earlier.

"Why? What is wrong?"

"Shush, I forget myself. You told me you are a virgin, and I told you I would not ravish you. Yet, it is the first thing I do."

His hand was on his cock, gently moving up and down. She clasped her own hand around his, loving the look of pure pleasure that came over his face.

She ran her free hand down his bare chest, toying with the curly hairs. "Then take my maidenhead. Now."

"It would be over too quickly. I want to play, to get to know you, and to let you become accustomed to me. I want to feel you wiggle in my arms as ecstasy flows through your veins. I want to watch the desire light your eyes and flow through your body."

Small gasps of breath escaped her as he talked, his hand stroking her hips and up to just under her breasts and back down again. The feel of him was like nothing she had ever experienced, and she could see now why Tillie and Alma told extolled the virtues of taking a man to their beds.

She continued to stroke him, loving the feel of his thickness in her hand. When he stilled her movement, she looked at him questioningly. "Did I do something wrong?"

"You did everything right," he said. "I cannot decide whether I want to bathe, or feast on you."

"Do I get to help you make your choice?"

"You are a little vixen." He kissed the side of her mouth.

"I feel like it, yes. I loved watching you take down Elizabeth. It made me feel free, as if she could never harm me again."

"And she never will. That is my promise to you."

Syndra lightly traced his cock with her fingertip, a little surprised by her own boldness. "Let me wash you."

"Only if you undress for me first." His cocky grin made her insides curl. "And we had best hurry before the water gets cold." He stepped around her and walked to the large tub.

"I did not think we had a tub that large."

"I brought it with me." He stepped over the edges, then settled himself into the warm water, laying back with a sigh. "I am a large man and I like to stretch out in a bath. Plus, it is big enough to share with my wife."

She walked toward him, swaying her hips as her friends had taught her. Then she kneeled down and took the bar of soap in her hands.

"You are not playing fair. I am the only one who's naked."

Her shoulders stiffened, and she was grateful that he did not push the issue.

"Tell me why you have never had a lover. Most women your age have had at least one."

Warmth crept up her chest and into her cheeks, and she said the first thing that popped into her mind. "I am not pleasing to men."

"Who told you that?"

"Elizabeth."

She lathered the soap between her hands, then reached into the water and massaged his calves, keeping her gaze trained on what she was doing, though she could feel him watching her. She moved up his thigh, taking more of the soap into her hands. When she moved even further up, she felt his hard manhood press against her hand.

The feel of him made lick her lips as she remembered caressing him earlier.

"Do you like that?"

"Yes."

"Let me tell you something, sweet Syn. My cock would not be hard if I did not think you were beautiful." She glanced up at him, and he nodded very slowly. "Now, undress for me. Slowly. I want to enjoy every minute of seeing my future wife naked for the first time."

She shook her head and looked away.

"Syndra, do it now. My cock aches to see you, and I will not be responsible for my actions if you continue to tease me by remaining clothed."

The rich timbre of his voice made her shiver. She pushed away from the tub, then stared down at him. Touching him had seemed so easy, but baring herself to him would not be easy at all. The only people she had ever been naked in front of were Tillie and Alma when they shared baths.

Her hands went to the tie at her bosom, then dropped to her waist. "I am not sure where to start." She could hear her own nervousness, and all it did was increase the pressure she felt.

"Top first," Keran said, sinking down into the tub. The tips of his hair hit the water level, and then his chin did. He licked his lips as he went in up to his nose, then came back up. She could see his hand between his thighs, stroking himself.

She took her kerchief from her hair first, letting her braid fall down her back. His nod of encouragement stilled her shaking hands as she gathered her kirtle in her hands, slowly

tugging it up her body. Her breasts jiggled as she lifted it over her head and let it drop to the ground. His gaze stayed on her breasts, just as she had focused on his cock earlier. Her shift was low and well used, being a hand-me-down from Leticia, who was a great deal smaller than Syndra. She'd had to cut pieces from the skirt to add to the bodice so it would fit, and now she felt a little embarrassed about him seeing the sad state of her underclothes.

When he ran his tongue over his upper lip, she smiled. Maybe he would not notice or say anything.

"Good?"

"Perfect." The water moved gently as he continued to touch his cock. "Show me more."

Her fingers moved to inch her shift up her body, but when she got to her hips she stopped and let it drop, moving her hands to her braid instead.

"Tease." His eyes narrowed in mischief, and she grinned back, her fingers working to undo her hair.

She took her time, watching him all along. Part of her reticence was nerves, she knew. The other was just a desire for this not to end. Taking her clothing off for him made her feel wonderfully wicked, and if she hurried, it would be over, and then what would happen? Would he take her? Or would he just want to see her? The wonderful things he had said to her earlier still made her blood race. She knew what it took to make him spill his seed and that it could be done with just hands, or with a mouth.

What she knew though came from talking. She hoped he would not be disappointed with her lack of knowledge when it came down to pleasing him.

When her hair was down she ran her fingers through it, watching him as he followed the progress of her fingers.

"You really are a tease."

He stood quickly, rivulets of water cascading down his body. He moved from the tub quickly, splashing water over the sides and grabbed for her. She laughed, partly from surprise and partly from fear, as he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed, depositing her in the middle of the soft mattress before getting on his hands and knees above her.

"Vixen, you will get yours now." He took her shift and tore it. She gasped as the material spit in two, all the way to her breasts.

"Milord, I have no other."

"I will have a thousand made for you." He lay on top of her, claiming her lips in a demanding kiss. His hardness pressed into her belly, and she moaned into his mouth at the first skin to skin contact.

"So beautiful," he whispered as he feathered kisses over her face. "I must remember to thank the king the next time I see him."

Syndra caressed his back as his head moved lower. His tongue found a nipple, lapping at it over and over until she arched up into him. When he captured it and suckled her, she thought she would die of pleasure. Never had anything felt so good, so right.

His teeth nipped at her, the pain turning into sharp tendrils of pleasure that shot straight down to her quim.

"Keran, more please."

"You will be begging for more than just this," he blew hot breath on her wet nipple and she shivered from the intense bliss.

When he moved to the next one she ran her fingers through his hair, again trying to push as much of herself into his mouth as she could. His fingers toyed with the still-wet nipple, gently twisting and pulling it until she again groaned, wiggling under his touch.

"Keran." His tongue moved down her body, licking at her ribcage. He stopped to kiss her bellybutton, and she laughed. "Where are you going?"

"Where do you think?" He lifted his gaze to her briefly, need flashing in his eyes. "Spread your legs wide for me."

She shook her head violently, nerves jingling inside her despite the pleasurable pull from her throbbing nipples.

"Syndra." He drew her name out as his fingers played over her naked thighs. "Obey your husband."

"You are not my husband, yet." Heavens above, she wanted to do as he asked, but her nerves felt as if they might singe her body if she did.

"As far as I am concerned, I am, with the authority given by the king." He kissed her thigh and she shivered. "Now open your legs and let me bring us both exquisite pleasures."

"I am not ready for this." Her words were low, and she tried to scoot away from him.

He captured her hips and pulled her back toward him.
"Obey me. Spread your legs."

Heat rolled through her as he lowered his head more, his breath blowing on the soft curls between her legs. "You cannot. It is not ... it is not..."

"Open." He applied pressure to her thighs, just enough to make her moan and lift into him, spreading her legs slightly when she moved. He took advantage of the opening and dipped first one, then two fingers into her curls, sliding into her soft folds, moving around the wetness there.

Syndra gasped and spread her legs more. His fingers pressed into her and she bucked up into him, a feeling unlike anything she had ever felt before spreading through her.

His fingers found the hard nub at her center, rubbing it back and forth. Pleasure shot through her body as she continued to wiggle. Something built inside her, she was not sure what. It felt like a dam about to burst.

"What is happening?"

"Shush." He separated her outer lips, then lowered his face, his tongue moving into the place his fingers had been. He licked the nub as his hand trailed down, his digits pushing inside her. He moved in and out, then sucked her into his mouth and nibbled.

The dam burst. She grasped his hair as she thrashed about, bliss spreading through her like wildfire, it seemed to ebb and then gained in speed, roaring through her again.

She was not sure when he had transferred his lips to her own, his tongue diving inside her as she greedily clutched him to her, wanting to take all of him into her body.

"Take me."

"Not yet." He growled the words. "Later, but not yet."

His hands were on his cock furiously pumping up and down. She clasped her own around him, and he cried out as hot jets of liquid hit her stomach.

"Oh Syn, sweet Syn." He kissed her again as they continued to caress him, their tongues flicking against each other before he collapsed beside her, his chest heaving.

Syndra moaned softly, then snuggled down next to him. She trailed a finger through the seed staining her stomach. "Next time I want you inside me, promise me."

"Then you shall have it." He kissed her deeply, pressing her head back into the soft mattress. Then he stood, wet a piece of cloth in the bathwater before cleaning her stomach, and then himself.

He pulled the ruined shift from her body and tossed it into the fire. He climbed on top of her, kissing her again before rolling them onto her sides and pulling a blanket over them.

"What was that? The feeling?"

"The French call it la petite mort. The little death. It is a sexual climax. It is what a man feels when he spills his seed, and what a woman feels when you play with the sweet little button at the top of her quim."

She laughed softly. "It is fantastic. I have never felt anything like it."

"I am very glad you liked it, because you shall have quite a few petite morts, and I will love giving them to you."

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Chapter Eight

Keran stroked Syndra's shoulder, looking down at where she lay nestled into his chest. She had her hand on his thigh, just inches from his cock, which grew very interested in her nearness. As he hardened, he thought about how he could take her maidenhead and not give her pain.

Having her on top was probably best. He was afraid he would get too excited and enter her too quickly. With her above him, she would be able to control the amount she took, and the time. It would probably kill him to wait, but he wanted what was best for her, not for him.

He stroked her shoulder and she moved again, her fingers brushing against him. His cock leaped to life, growing to its full length. He kissed the top of her head and was about to wake her when there was a soft tap at the door.

"Keran." Patrick's muffled voice sounded through the wood. "Wake up."

He moved away from her gently, stroking himself as he crossed to the door. Patrick's eyes widened, and he grinned at the sight of his erection. "Am I interrupting?"

"Yes, I was about to wake her. So hurry and deliver your news." He grabbed his shirt and wrapped it around his middle, holding it closed at the waist.

"Our messengers have left without being detected. I had three men ride out with them to the borders of Mardoon. They returned to say no one followed them."

"Good. And?"

"Brody has returned with your package."

Keran laughed. "Did he have troubles?"

"No, not a one. The men down there are inept to say the least."

"Even inept men can swing a sword and hit someone."

Patrick nodded. "True. But, it will make things easier."

Keran sat down, his desire dwindling as he thought about how to best handle the situation at hand. "We have to make sure they do not find out that we know what is happening. If they find out, they are likely to attack."

"I agree," Patrick said. "Should we send men out to spy on them from time to time?"

"Yes, but tell them to be cautious. Send two at a time, so it looks as though they are out for a ride. And make sure you do not send the same two in the same few days."

"Too suspicious," Patrick said, sitting down across from him.

"How is Tillie?"

"She is a spitfire. She wanted me to bind Elizabeth so she could take the whip to her. She swore she did not want to hit her, just scare her."

"A tempting idea. One I am sure my sweet wife would love, too."

"Yes, she would." Syndra sat up. "But I could never do it, despite the temptation."

He looked at her as she clutched the sheet to her chest. In the glow of the waning firelight, he was sure he had never seen a woman so beautiful. His cock, which had deflated slightly, hardened again, pulsing under his shirt.

"Well, I am off." Patrick stood and moved toward the door.
"See you both in the morning."

"Patrick." He stopped and turned to Keran. "Tomorrow, send a message to the nearest priest. I want him here as quickly as possible."

"First I do not send for him, now I do?"

"Yes. I want to marry Syndra promptly."

"Very well." Patrick's muttered words as he walked toward the door made Keran laugh. "Send for him, do not send for him. Changes his mind as much as a woman."

When he was on the other side, Keran turned to Syndra. He let the shirt fall to the floor and walked toward her, his stride slow, his gaze fixed on her beautiful lips.

"Are you ready to take me inside you?"

"Oh yes, milord. More than ready."

* * * *

Syndra scrambled to her knees, letting the covering drop from her body. She did not care that she was naked. All she wanted was Keran. She wanted to feel his hands and lips on her again, wanted to know what it felt like to have him buried inside her quim.

She held out her arms, clasping him tightly to her and kissing him with a passion that burned straight down to her toes.

"Now, please." Her nails clawed at his back and his hiss of pain made her pull back.

"Slow down, pet. You will thank me for it later, trust me." He cupped her face and ran his thumbs down her cheeks. "I

love that you are so excited, but since this is your first time, we need to take it slow and make sure you are ready for me."

"I am. So ready." She stroked the scratches she had left, then kissed his shoulder when he seemed to melt into her body.

"Mentally, yes, but physically, no. We want to lessen the pain you will feel."

Her heart slowed just a bit. Vague memories of Tillie and Alma telling her about the pain of their first couplings floating through her mind. And the blood. There would be blood. He was gazing down at her, his look gentle and full of concern. It made her senses sizzle.

"I will be fine," she whispered. "You being here, and having this happen, is more than I could ever have hoped for in my life."

When his lips touched hers, his tongue tracing her lips, she moaned softly. She lay back as he trailed kisses down her neck, licking each spot he visited. Her nipples hardened in response, and he captured one, sucking it in deeply. She arched into him, her fingers kneading his back.

Her quim was slick with need, and she pressed herself into his thigh, undulating against him to increase the friction.

"Keran, please."

He kissed her again before standing, his tongue probing her mouth until she mewled in response. She sat on her knees as he grabbed her shift and his shirt from the floor and pushed aside the pillows, putting the material in their place and sitting down on it.

"Come here, little one." She shook her head in confusion, but took his hand and moved toward him. "Straddle me."

She laughed at the idea, then put a leg on either side of his body.

"Now, hold on the frame, and slowly lower yourself down onto me. Stop when you feel pain, or feel as though it is too much. That will give you time to relax and take all of me."

Syndra grasped the wood, then looked down to where Keran held his cock. It stood firm in his grasp, seeming anxious to be inside her. His hand was gentle on hip as she positioned herself above him, her heart racing, her body quivering with the idea of giving herself to him so fully.

Her chest, rising and falling with excitement, was in front of his face and he licked each breast as she lowered herself, giving her soft words of encouragement.

"Easy, little one. That is it. So soft, so warm. Oh, right there."

She clasped his cock tightly as she lowered herself, sinking onto him, loving the way he stretched her. She pushed harder, then felt the first stirrings of an uncomfortable feeling spread through her body. She knew Keran felt it too because he grasped her tightly, his hands on her hips, his fingers trailing up and down in a gentle rhythm.

"Easy, my little one. Slow and sweet. That is it."

His words soaked into her, empowering her in a way she had never felt before. He wanted this as much as she did, and the pain would be fleeting, surely. Nothing about it could compare with the pleasure he had given her earlier.

Syndra lifted herself slightly, then bore down, pushing hard when the tingling feeling came again. He slid further in and a sharp pain spread through her belly. She moved her hands to his shoulders, lowered her forehead to his, then dropped her hips, crying out as his cock slipped fully inside her.

"Yes, shush, it is all right." He stroked her as she gasped, her quim throbbing around his hardness. The pain was sharp, but not overwhelming. Still, tears burned at the edges of her eyes. He kissed her, his lips gentle against hers.

Keran stroked her back as he held her. "Better?"

As warmth spread through her she started to rock, the dull pain turning into an aching need to take him as deeply as possible. He encouraged her by gripping her tighter, moving her gently back and forth.

One hand held her close while the other snaked down her belly, ticking her and finally settling in her quim. His fingers found her hard nub within seconds. When he rubbed her there, sparks of pleasure shot through her body and the pain quickly disappeared.

The fantastic feelings she'd had earlier returned. She moved faster, tightening herself around him, loving his groans and grunts, and the sharp intakes of breath that made it sound as if he had just run the length of the castle and back.

When her orgasm rocked her body, it was even harder than before, tendrils of pleasure moving through her and making her body tighten with need. She started to yell out his name, but he pulled her close, capturing her lips so that her

screams went into his mouth. Before it was over, he flipped them and was on top, thrusting into her, feeling as if he would reach her heart.

She wrapped her legs around him, claspng him as tightly as possible. She wanted to take all of him inside her, their bodies fusing to become one. His guttural moan was the sweetest sound she had ever heard. She could feel his warm fluid sliding into her, filling her as nothing ever had before.

When his body stilled, he kissed her shoulder then stood quickly, pulling her with him. He picked up the shirt, then led them to the tub where he wet it and rubbed it between her thighs.

In the faint glow of the firelight, she could see a smear of blood on the white fabric. He repeated his actions, one hand stroking the shirt over her mons and across her thighs, the other stroking her cheek.

"I hope I did not hurt you too much."

"No. It was fantastic." She laughed at the look he gave her. "Fine, it hurt a little, but nothing I could not handle."

He washed her one more time, then used the shirt to clean himself. "Climb back in bed."

She obeyed him without question, watching as he added a few logs to the fire, stoked it, then threw the shirt and shift onto the flames.

"You do not want to prove to people I was a virgin?"

He climbed into bed, and they snuggled down into the sheets. "It would not have mattered to me whether you were virginal or not. I could not have asked for a better bride."

"Thank you."

"No, thank you. But, it is best they do not find out I know you are Richard's daughter, not quite yet. If they find out, they might try to harm you. As it is, I am sure she will try to use you as a spy. Now, go to sleep. Tomorrow promises to be a busy day."

She nestled next to him, loving the feel of his arms around her. As she drifted off to sleep, she silently thanked her father for thinking of her in his last days, and more than making up for his neglect.

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Chapter Nine

Syndra burrowed down into the covers. There was an ache between her thighs that she had never felt before, and it was fantastic. If she concentrated hard enough, she could feel Keran inside her, his cock sliding into her quim. She put a hand onto the cold part of the mattress where he had been not long ago.

He had kissed her gently before he left, telling her to meet him for the noon meal in the dining hall. At first, her eyes had widened in shock and she shook her head. The stern look he had given her made her giggle, and she nodded. Her future husband wanted her to take a meal with him, and she would do it.

She wished Alma were here so she could talk to her about last night. Of course, she could talk to Tillie. But, then again Tillie was probably working, or still in bed. Syndra knew she should get up, do her share of the work. Just because she was the new lord's future wife did not mean she should just lie around all day.

The minute she did that she became just like Elizabeth, and that thought sickened her. She would never be like her stepmother. Never.

The door opened softly, and she burrowed further down. She knew she should get up, but all she wanted was to sleep. A rough yank on the blanket made her sit up and pull the cover closer. Leora stood there, eyeing her with interest. Letica stood behind her, trying to hide her amusement.

"Mother sent me to check for blood. I see there is none. She will be happy to hear she was right, and you have been spreading your favors around."

"Me? I was not the one rutting with a man two nights back outside the main gate."

Leora's cheeks flushed with anger, and she leaned over as if to scramble across the bed and attack Syndra.

"Stop it." Leticia grabbed her arm and yanked her sister back. "Do not be mad because she tells the truth. Everyone knows about your lover, well everyone except mother, and if you are not careful she will learn soon, and you know what that means."

Leora's cheeks went from red to white and Syndra felt like laughing and asking her how it felt to be afraid of a potential beating. It took her a few minutes, but she recovered.

"She wants to see you. Now."

Syndra leaned back against the bed frame. "Then let her come here."

"You know she cannot. My future husband has banished her to her rooms."

Syndra wanted to sneer at Leora, tell her she would never marry Keran. Remembering his words though, about not letting them know he knew Syndra's true identity, she just smirked. "He's banished me to his bed. So, we have a bit of a dilemma."

Leticia's laughter earned her a stern look from her sister. "Mother will not appreciate your cavalier attitude."

"You are right. And she would not appreciate your spreading your thighs for—"

"Shut up." Leora sneered at her sister, then turned back to Syndra. "Don't get used to playing lady of the manor. Your lover will not last for long since he will not allow mother to rule the way your father did. And if I were you, I would go and visit her soon. Very soon."

Leora pushed past Leticia and quit the room. Leticia winked at her stepsister. "Was it wonderful?"

"Yes, it was." Syndra felt as if rays of sunshine streamed from her face. She'd never been so content in all her life.

"I am happy for you. Just do not tell mother I said that." She followed her sister out of the room, closing it behind her. Syndra snuggled down further, then let out a burst of laughter. Leora's words about Keran not being around long would come back to haunt her. The idea of the two women getting their just desserts thrilled her to no end. They could both spend the rest of their lives in the Tower for all Syndra cared.

Then a horrible feeling grasped hold of her. What if Elizabeth had some horrible plan for Keran? Would she try to poison his food? Or send her lover to try to kill him? She wouldn't put it past her to bring her treachery into play somehow.

The thought propelled her out of bed. Keran had not said what his plans were for the day, but she was sure he was still in the grounds somewhere, surely. She hastily washed herself then turning quickly and kicking her kirtle into the soot-filled fireplace, covering it with ash.

"Oh bollocks." She had no clothing to wear now. The shift was filthy, and Keran had ripped her shift last night in his

desire to see her naked, and then he had burnt it after it had caught her virgin blood.

Her kirtle would not provide enough protection for her to go about the castle, not even to dash to her tower room. Plus, she had only the one shift. What was she supposed to do now? She looked around the room, her gaze coming to rest on a large trunk.

Would she be able to lace herself into Keran's clothing? She was shorter than he, and had larger hips. And of course there was the problem with her chest area. Still, she could not wait around her for him to show back up. She needed to let him know of Elizabeth's potential for intrigue.

She threw open the chest, finding several pairs of clothing. Two leather jerkins sat on top of several white shirts like the one he had used to tend her last night. Under the shirts, she found breeches. She pulled them out and held them up.

Trying not to think about the way she would shock everyone she put one leg into one side, and then did the same for the other, pulling them up her body and over her hips. They were tight, but they fit. She'd never had anything this snug around her body, and it felt wicked. She laced the top part, not getting it as close together as Keran's had been on him.

A tentative few steps made her giggle. The leather rubbed against her thighs and the wicked feeling increased. Oh, that it was Keran between her legs and not his pants. She pulled on a shirt, the material floating down her body. It was thin, though, and when she looked down she could see her breasts, her hard nipples, poking out for everyone to see.

The jerkin proved to be a problem, as it wouldn't pull closed around her bosom. She threw it back into the chest, then lifted it back out. At least it would cover her nipples. She pulled it back on, then nodded in approval. She quickly braided her hair, then pushed her feet into her worn shoes and hurrying down the hallway.

Servants stopped to stare and laugh softly as she passed, but not one of them she asked knew where Keran was. The great hall was mostly empty, and she hurried to the kitchen. As usual, the room was abuzz with work, people hurrying to and fro. Syndra glanced around, then wheeled toward a burst of laughter.

Tillie held her hands over her mouth, her laughter escaping through her fingers. "What are you doing?"

"I, well, need a shift. Will you loan me one?"

Tillie wiggled her hips as she walked toward her. She had a huge smile on her face that lit up her eyes. "Did he rip it from your body?"

"Yes." Syndra tried, and failed, not to giggle.

"I am so happy for you." Tillie hugged her close, then pushed back and looked her up and down. "I will run upstairs and get you a shift and kirtle before he sees you in this."

"Why? He might like it."

Syndra swerved her head toward the doorway where Keran stood, a predatory look on his face. His gaze ran down her body, then slowly inched back up as he licked his lips.

He crossed the room quickly, pulling the two unlaced halves of the jerkin apart, his gaze fastening on her breasts.

"Delicious." She knew he meant his soft words for her ears only. "Perhaps we should retire for the day."

"Milord." She tried to pull the jerkin from his hands, but he held it closed. "It is not yet noon."

"True, but I find my appetite is whetted for something other than food."

Her blush warmed her body, and when he kissed her gently, the kitchen staff *ooed* and *aahed* and clapped.

"Stop that." She tried to pull away again. "We need to talk."

"About what? I only came in here because a young boy told me a woman masquerading as a man was terrorizing the keep."

Shock ran through her body. "Truly?"

"No, but when I asked where you were, he said you had come in here, and were wearing breeches. I just had to see it for myself."

He dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose. "I rather like you this way. I am sure watching you walk will be quite provocative."

She leaned closer to him. "Elizabeth is asking for me. What do I do?"

"Go to her, after you are properly dressed, of course. And make sure you break your fast. I would not want you to face her on an empty stomach."

"But what do I say?"

He put his hand on the small of her back and led her toward the great hall. "The truth, most of it. Don't tell her I know who you are, but tell her that I bedded you several

times, and am quite enamored with your charms. That is the truth."

Her blush spread. "And then?"

"Be submissive. When she orders you to keep tabs on me and report back to her, agree to it, but do not agree too quickly. Let her think she has the upper hand."

"Why would she ask me to do that? She will order me from your bed, or she will hurt Alma."

He ignored her fears, caressing her forearm with gentle strokes. "When you are done, come and see me in the salon next to my quarters."

"But Keran, why—"

"Shush, just do as I ask, please." His kiss was gentle. "Promise me."

A shiver coursed through her body. "She will be so angry."

"She will not touch you for fear of reprisals from me. I can assure you of that." He kissed her again, then slapped her leather-clad behind. "Now, go with Tillie and dress. And thank you for wearing my clothes. It gives me some very naughty ideas."

* * * *

Syndra fought not to run when Elizabeth slowly turned from her window, her eyes narrowed. "No blood, I hear. You little whore."

"What do you want?"

Elizabeth's eyebrows shoot up. "Do not be snippy with me. If it were the right time, I would have already dispatched your new lover. I have to wait, but it will be worth it."

Syndra frowned but did not say anything.

"You will listen to his conversations with his men and report back to me."

"You have never done anything for me in my whole life. Why should I help you get out of your prison?"

The urge to run came again when Elizabeth stepped closer. "Do as I say or I will kill you with my bare hands and put you next to your lover in the crypt I am having prepared just for him."

Her stepmother's eyes narrowed. Syndra had thought her anger would have cooled overnight, but she felt the venom shooting from Elizabeth's eyes could have knocked her down.

"And if that is not enough incentive, then I will put your friend Alma in there to wait for you. Do you understand me?"

Her hands shook with the need to reach out and slap the woman before her. She remembered Keran's words to agree to her plan. "You are evil."

"You will report to me every evening after the meal, and then again the next morning after you have left his bed."

The thought of Alma, and of doing as Keran asked, made her nod in agreement. "May I go now?"

"Be back tonight and bring me news." She took another step forward. "Now, get out of my sight."

Syndra refused to rush. She stared at her stepmother, then turned and walked calmly from the room, her chest aching against Tillie's too-tight clothing.

Outside the door, she put her hand on the wall and paused to catch her breath. Elizabeth's sharp words worried her, but she knew she had to have faith in Keran, he would make

things right. He had proven himself trustworthy to her, and she would do the same for him. She straightened, and the snug clothing pulled across her breasts. She needed to have one of the women bring cloth to Keran's room so she could make a new shift, and while she was at it, she would make a new kirtle, too. A green one to match the flecks of color in Keran's eyes.

She stopped in front of the door to the salon that adjoined his room. She could hear voices drifting through the wood. She identified Keran and Patrick, and then Tillie's laugh and then. No, it could not be. Surely, Elizabeth would have told her if...

Her heart stilled, and she pushed open the door, rushing inside and then stopping dead in her tracks as everyone turned to stare at her.

"Alma!"

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Chapter Ten

Syndra rushed across the room and threw her arms around her friend. "How? What?"

"It is a good thing you did not tell her before she went in to see the hag, or else our secret would be out of the bag." Patrick shook his head as if in disgust, but the smile on his face showed his amusement.

"How did you escape?"

"I did not. I had a rescuer." She grinned at Brody, who winked at her.

"But how? How did you find her so quickly?"

"It was not hard, love." Keran sat down and put his forearms on his thighs. "We simply followed Nathaniel. Then, last night while everyone slept, Brody snuck into her tent and stole her away."

"He held out his hand and whispered your name," Alma said. "I did not have to think too hard about leaving with him."

The room filled with laughter, then Keran cleared his throat. "Did the witch say anything to you, about Alma?"

"She said I was to report back to her after the meal every evening, and again the next morning. She threatened to kill Alma if I refused."

Alma gasped, then put her hands to her throat.

"You are safe," Keran said. "Her words only show me she thinks you have escaped. She does not know you are here in

the castle. We will keep you in Brody's room. I hope that is acceptable to both of you."

"It is to me," Brody said, his voice deep with obvious desire, drawing another bought of laughter.

"And me," Alma said, smiling at him shyly.

"Good." Keran winked at her, then turned back to Syndra. "What else did she say?"

"She said she is preparing a crypt for you."

"That does not surprise me." He leaned back in his chair. "We need to watch for signs of poison, or other nasty little things like poisoned darts or serpents."

"I cannot believe she would go to these lengths," Syndra said, crossing the room to put her hand on Keran's shoulder. "What are you not telling me?"

"Intelligent," Patrick nodded in approval.

Keran sniffed, then sat perfectly still. Syndra could tell he was considering what to say, choosing his words carefully. The idea filled her with anger, but she wouldn't say anything in front of everyone else. She would save it for later, when they were alone in his rooms. When he finally spoke her annoyance lessened somewhat.

"You are so expressive, Syn, that I hesitate to tell you too much. If you let something slip, then the game will be up and we will be in serious peril."

Her heart beat quicker, then she kneeled down next to him. "Tell me."

Each word he spoke made her breakfast turn sour in her stomach. Her hands went clammy, and her already

accelerated heart rate shot up even more. When he was done, she looked down at her feet.

"My father was always loyal to the House of York. He would never go against the king."

"I have no doubt of that," Keran said. "But she is renting out the land for supporters of the Lancasterians, who would still love the throne. We need to take care of it before it gets out of hand, but we have to wait for reinforcements from the king."

Syndra nodded. "What do we do?"

"We act as if nothing is wrong," Keran replied. "We go about our work of settling into life at the castle, we eat, we work, we make love. But, we watch our foes, very carefully. For eight months now they've been training men. I am sure the forces there now are just the latest batch. We cannot let her know we're on to her. That would prove disastrous."

"They would kill us all," Patrick said.

Syndra nodded, knowing her reports to Elizabeth would have to be monitored very carefully. She also knew she would be feeding her false information, and that made her grin.

"What is so funny?" Keran pulled her to her feet and set her on his knee.

"I am a spy."

"That you are, little one, and a very beautiful one." He kissed her softly, and Alma sighed, making Syndra laugh.

A knock at the door, however, silenced them all.

Brody clasped Alma's hand and pulled her toward the door that led to Keran's room. He pushed it open, glanced inside to make sure no one was there, then closed the door after them.

"Come." At Keran's command, several household staff members entered, carrying large pieces of fabric. "Set it on the table."

"What is this?" Syndra crossed and ran her finger over the beautiful material. This was material bought for Elizabeth, Leora and Leticia. She had never had material so fine and soft.

"For you, to make new shifts and kirtles. Tillie can help you." His unspoken '*and Alma*' widened the smile that was already on her face.

"Thank you."

"You are very welcome. Use the green material. It will look very fetching on you."

* * * *

Syndra ran her fingers over the soft material of her new kirtle. Under the emerald green overskirt, the shift, cut lower than any of her clothing had ever been, hugged her body. The three of them had worked tirelessly through the afternoon to make sure the garments would be completed in time for the evening meal. Tomorrow, they planned on placing gold decoration around the neck and arms, and possibly on the bottom of the skirt. She had never had decoration on clothing before, and she could hardly wait to get it done.

Sitting and laughing with her friends had produced more fun than Syndra had seen in years. The two of them had begged for details of her first bedding, but she had given them few, preferring to keep the particulars close to her

heart, a memory that would forever make her feel warm inside.

When they had finished putting the shift together, she had held it up and chortled with glee. "This is so much fun."

"We cannot have you going to eat in breeches and a jerkin that does not cover your body," Alma had said with a laugh as she picked up shears to cut the green material.

She still could not believe she had new clothing, something not worn by anyone but herself. This was the first time in her life that had happened. It made her feel warm and special.

"You look so beautiful." She turned and looked over shoulder to where Keran stood in the doorway, leaning against the doorjamb. "I knew the green would be perfect for you."

"Thank you, milord."

He closed the door and crossed the room quickly. Coming up behind her and stroking her arms. "You are welcome, *milady*."

The warm feeling in her belly spread and she put her hands on her abdomen and pushed down, trying to calm her nerves. *Milady*. She'd never thought to hear that word associated with her. She'd never thought she'd be anything but Elizabeth's slave for the rest of her natural born life.

"Is it time for the evening meal?"

"Not quite yet." He lightly ran his fingers over her shoulders. "But I am hungry."

"We can find you food in the kitchen to tide you over." She turned to him, her eyes widening at the look on his face.

"I am not hungry for food." He took her hand and placed it at the apex of his thighs. His cock sat hard and ready for her.

"Before dinner?" She could not keep the shock from her voice. "It is still light outside."

"Yes, it is." His gaze roamed her body again. "Such a beautiful new kirtle and shift. It would be a shame to ruin all your hard work so quickly. Take them off."

He practically growled out the last words, and Syndra nibbled on her lower lip, her heart racing. "'Tis unseemly, milord, to engage in carnal acts in the middle of the day."

"I will give you ten seconds, and then I lay rent to all you have done today. I want you naked. Right now." He took one step back and gave her a stern look. "I am waiting."

This was a side he hadn't shown her last night, and it thrilled her, making her nerves jump with pleasure.

"One."

Her hands trembled as she lifted the kirtle, setting it aside carefully.

"Two ... Three..."

"You are counting too fast."

He licked his lips as she lifted the shift, and the wonderful place between her thighs tightened in anticipation. She could feel wetness forming in her folds, preparing the way for her to take him inside her. Again.

"Four ... Five ... Six. You had better hurry. I am not a patient man, and my cock grows weary of waiting for you."

She let go of the shift, letting it drop back down into place, then gave him a coy grin. "And if I do not hurry?"

"Cheeky little chit, are you not? Do not make my deadline and find out what happens. Seven, eight, nine, and ten."

Fear of her new clothing going the way of her old, she lifted the shift again and pulled it over her head, dropping to the floor.

"You disobeyed me. Wives should always obey their husbands."

She ran her hands down her sides, caressing her thighs. "But I am naked, as you asked me to be."

"Not quickly enough, though. Come with me, wench." He walked toward the bed, and she fell into step behind him, excitement coursing through her. He stopped at the corner, putting his hand on the bedpost. "Come here."

The deep timbre of his voice should have made her nervous. Instead, it ran through her like wildfire, exciting her senses and making her want to obey his every command. She stepped right next to him, and he took her hands, placing them on them on the bedpost high above her head.

"Keep them here until I say otherwise." His breath tickled her ear.

"Yes, Keran."

"How should I punish you for making me wait?" He ground his hips into her, the leather soft against her naked flesh, the outline of his hardness pressing against her buttocks.

"Oh, I..."

"Perhaps I should make you wait, as you made me wait." His lips were on her ear now. "I could excite you, then make you get dressed without bringing you to climax. You would sit through dinner, wanting me. Needing me."

Her mind reeled at the thought. "But you would be unsatisfied, too. Punishment for you also."

"Who said? I can satisfy myself and make you watch, make you see what you will have to wait to enjoy."

"No," she moaned. "Please, Keran, I will move faster next time."

"Do I have your word on that?"

"Oh yes." She leaned back into him, putting her head under his chin. She almost let go of the post in process, remembering at the last minute to keep her hands in place. She loved this game of his. Her nipples were hard as little pebbles, and her juices coated the insides of her thighs.

His hands caressed her hips, sliding back to her buttocks and down to her thighs. The heat of his touch against her bare skin made her shiver with delight. He slid his hands up her torso and cupped her breasts, and she moaned softly. His fingers tweaked her nipples until the little pebbles grew even harder.

"Keran."

"Tell me how you feel."

"Wicked, wonderful, and in need of you. Please."

He moved his hands to her hips and pulled her back just a little. "And your quim, is it sore my pet?"

"A little, but it does not hurt badly, if that is what you are worried about."

He nibbled at the spot where her neck met her shoulder, the tiny bites sending sensations of sweet pleasure down her back. "I will admit I was a little worried, but I am happy to hear you are not in much pain still."

"I will be if you make me wait much longer." She looked over her shoulder to grin at him, laughing at the look of surprise on his face.

"Someone is very cheeky."

He took a step back, standing up to his full height. She looked up at him, her heart racing, wondering if she should have teased him. He looked stern, and a little angry. And then, she saw a twinkle in his eyes, the corner of his mouth twitching upwards before he caught it and frowned. He was laughing at her.

"Do I need to count to ten?"

He took another step back, and this time there was no hiding the smile on his face. "I have unleashed a monster."

"You have indeed, milord. That means you need to soothe the beast, before she loses her temper."

"No, it means I will have to tame the beast." He smacked her bottom and she jumped.

"Ouch!" She started to turn, but he pressed against her, putting his hands over hers.

"The only counting that might be done is by you, as you list the number of smacks to your bottom." He slapped her bottom again.

The sting spread through her and she gasped as another one landed. She expected a fourth, but his hand was soft again, caressing the spot he had spanked. He trailed his fingers over her hips and down to her quim.

"Give me your hand."

She dropped her hand to his. When he moved her fingers toward her quim, she shook her head. "No, I could not."

"You can, and you will. I want to hold you while you pleasure yourself."

"Keran." She tried to move, but he pulled her close, keeping her body pinned between him and the thick bedpost.

"Allow me to teach you, sweet one. Do not worry, it will be fine."

"But I cannot touch myself."

"Shush." He guided her hand down her belly, pressing her fingertips into her soft curls. "You do not know how much it will please me to see you do this. And it will please you, also. Just follow my lead."

Syndra nodded as their joined fingers dipped into her wetness. The mixture of his large hand and her smaller one, brought a great deal of pressure to her nub, and she gasped loudly, arching herself back into him.

"That is it, allow yourself to feel the pleasure." He put her finger directly on the spot and pressed down, moving it in a slow circle. Her quim tightened under the sensations. He removed his hand from hers and whispered, "Keep moving it, my pet."

She nodded, varying the pressure and the speed of her fingers, closing her eyes to let the vibrations float through her body. She had no idea how long she stood there, one hand on the post, the other exploring herself before he whispered, "You have no idea how beautiful you look right now, head tilted back, eyes fluttering, your hand working hard toward your goal."

"Keran." She opened her eyes to find him standing next to her naked; she had not even heard him take off his clothes,

so entranced was she in the feelings spreading through her body.

He stepped up behind her, his hands on her hips. "Open wide for me, and keep playing, my pet. It excites me so."

"Excites you?" She leaned her head against the post as he slowly slid into her, her quim tingling as it stretched around his girth. Her senses stirred inside her as he slid in and out of her warmth, and she could feel the buildup to the peak that he had brought her to yesterday.

"Keran, I am ... going to..."

"Yes, do it." He thrust harder, the sound of their bodies hitting together echoing in the chamber. "And when you have climaxed, keep moving your fingers. You can do it again, and again. I want to feel it while I am inside you."

His hands left her hips and circled her body, finding her breasts, his fingers expertly working her nipples. The combination of his hands, her hands, and his cock sliding in and out of her drove her higher until she hit the top, her body feeling as if it would burst open. She screamed out his name, and before the feelings faded, a second climax took hold of her, this one racing through her at the speed of a shooting star.

Keran's arms were around her waist now, holding her close to him. She felt his pulse inside her and she knew he had spent also, giving her everything he had.

He held her close, their breaths coming in short, shallow gasps. Syndra's legs felt wobbly, and she was thankful for Keran's firm grip. He was still buried deep inside her, his head

A Dusting of Syn
by Melinda Barron

resting on her back. They stayed this way for a few moments, joined, neither of them speaking nor moving.

She had never felt so close to one person in her whole life. She wanted to ask him what he was feeling as they stood there together, both of their bodies still flushed with the aftereffects of their lovemaking.

When he kissed her neck, then licked her lips, she knew he felt exactly the same way. "I will have food sent up. Get into bed and wait for me, and whatever you do, do not put any clothes on."

"What if someone comes in the room besides you?"

"Shoo them out and tell them not to come back until tomorrow morning. We shall be very, very busy."

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Chapter Eleven

Syndra put aside her sewing and looked around the great hall. She would rather be in her own salon, with Alma at her side, but Keran worried that her spending too much time cloistered up there would raise suspicions, so he had her come downstairs as often as possible. He and his men had been here almost two weeks now, and things were going beautifully, as far as Syndra was concerned. She knew he kept a careful watch of Elizabeth's warriors as they trained in the glen, and her stepmother was blissfully ignorant of the fact Keran knew of their existence.

Syndra reported to her twice a day. She loved it that Elizabeth's nerves were on edge. Still, confined to her room, she paced like a wild animal when Syndra came in. And she still used Alma as a threat, though the young woman was no longer under her control. Syndra fought hard to keep her emotions in check when her stepmother brought up her friend. It would not do to let her know Syndra knew she was lying.

Twice a day she fed her the information Keran provided. Things were fine. He was visiting the sheep herds, getting an idea of his new holdings and making sure things ran correctly. And, she had to say, just yesterday that yes, he was still planning on marrying Leora, just as the king ordered.

The words almost stuck in her throat, but she knew there was nothing for it. If Elizabeth did not believe that Keran still thought Syndra was nothing more than a servant girl he had

chosen to bed, things would come to a head rather quickly, probably with disastrous results. Still, thinking of him marrying Leora hurt, especially after everything they had shared. Their lovemaking now took place twice a day, before the evening meal, and after they had retired for the night.

She loved the way he made her feel, both physically and mentally. He always made sure that she climaxed, something Alma told her did not always happen. When she had asked her friend if Brody made her climax, she had just blushed and nodded.

Aside from the physical part, though, was the emotions that came with Keran's touch. When they were done loving, he would close his eyes for a few moments. The first night she had thought him asleep, but then he had opened them and turned to her, and they had talked until the small hours of the morning.

He told her about being the youngest of seven boys, how his brothers would tease him and beat up on him, until he started to grow.

"I am taller than all of them now," he said proudly. "It happened when I was about fifteen. The teasing and beatings stopped around that time."

Then he had told her how he and Patrick had met at court, when Patrick had been caught trying to bed another man's intended. Keran had come to his aid and they had been friends ever since.

"He was the first person I went to when the king gifted me with Mardoona," Keran had said last night, putting his arms behind his head. Her head had been on his chest, listening to

his heartbeat. "First he told me I was crazy, but he came around. I hope he enjoys it enough to stay."

"I am sure Tillie does, too." They'd both laughed until tears streamed from their eyes.

When he had asked about her childhood, she did not have as many nice things to say as he did. "Elizabeth was hateful, as was Leora. My father tried to ignore me as much as possible. Leticia was nice, when her mother was not around. I cannot blame her for that, though. If her mother had caught her being polite to me, she would have punished her."

"Elizabeth will be sent to court when this is all over," Keran said. "The king will decide what to do with her."

"What's she has done is treason. Will he condemn her?"

"Would that bother you?" He stroked her hair, and she lifted her gaze to his. "She has never given you a nice thought in her life."

"Yes, but I do not want her dead, just gone."

He had studied her until she grew nervous, then he kissed her forehead. "You are too good, my wife."

After that, they had made love again, slowly and gently until she was wiggling in ecstasy.

Now, she was mending one of his shirts. They had ripped it the night before in their hurry to couple after dinner. She smiled to herself as she traced the stitching she had done to repair the rent. It looked almost as good as new.

"Well, are you not the dutiful wife." Leora sat down across from her, setting a book on the table. "Except you are not, are you? You are just the whore. You know, I have given this some thought, and I think it is better this way. You get a

taste of what you will never have again. Of course, he will not be my husband for long, but before I am widowed, I plan on lording it over you."

"Tell me, Leora, how will you explain the lack of blood to Keran on your wedding night? When he finds out you have been rutting with another man, he may well ask the king for a divorce. And I think it would be granted, since you are the whore."

Leora stood quickly, pulling her hand back as if to strike Syndra.

"Go ahead," Syndra said, her calm voice belying the nerves rampaging through her body. "I am sure your future husband will be thrilled to know you have a violent temper, just like your rotten mother, who is nothing more than a witch."

Syndra could see the differing ideas passing through Leora's mind. On one hand was the desire to strike her half sister; on the other was the knowledge that if she did, it would get back to her future husband, and her mother. And while Elizabeth would probably laugh and pat her daughter on the back for a job well done, she would not want to deviate from the course they had laid out. Leora was to marry Keran and gain a stronger foothold on the keep, and then he would die sometime after the wedding, very soon after.

Elizabeth probably planned to marry Leora off to Nathaniel soon after Keran's planned death. That way her stepmother's lover would have control of the keep, until the king took it away from him.

"What are you waiting for? Do it." Syndra stood and leaned over the table. "You don't have the strength. You are a big chicken, admit it."

They were attracting attention now, people stopping to watch the sisters argue, something they had never seen before. Syndra never talked back. She always nodded and did as she was told. Years of being yelled at, or slapped, taught her to keep her mouth shut. But not anymore. Her time with Keran had done exactly what Leora had said, it had given her a taste of the good life, and she would not allow her half sister to threaten it, even if Syndra knew it was just words that would come to nothing.

"Go on, hit me." She held her hands away from her body. "I know you want to. You will never marry him. Never. He is in love with me and will not give me up. I can promise you that."

The room was deathly silent, people rushing in from other areas of the castle to watch. Syndra did not care who saw. She was tired of being bullied by her "family," and intended to let them know it. Leora balled up her fist, and for a moment, Syndra braced for a blow. But it never came. The younger woman stood up straighter, gave her a smirk that made Syndra want to smack her, then turned and left the room at an even pace.

A smile broke out on Syndra's face. She felt as if she'd just won a huge battle, actually standing up for herself instead of backing down. She wished Alma were here, or Tillie, so she could share the victory with them.

But Tillie was working, and Alma was hidden in Brody's room, coming out very little to lessen her chances of being seen. She needed to find Keran, to talk to him and share how she'd stood up for herself.

She went first to his rooms. Not finding him there she checked the great hall, where she had just left. The people there were still buzzing about the confrontation she had just had with Leora. Nerves gripped her, and she hurried toward the training grounds where men sparred with each other.

The sounds of sword hitting sword hit her ears, the smell of sweat permeated the air. She searched the men's faces, more than a dozen of them labored at honing their battle skills. She saw Patrick, wielding a sword with expertise. Toward the side stood Brody, watching them with interest.

When he saw Syndra he nodded almost imperceptibly, a look of concern on his face. She could not ask him where Keran was, because she was not supposed to be close to the men, just Keran. She turned without acknowledging him and headed toward the stables. Her feeling of euphoria was waning, and bragging to Keran seemed to be a childish idea now. She should not have allowed Leora to goad her into a fight in front of everyone.

What if he heard about it and was angry with her? He'd told her several times they needed to keep up the appearance she was nothing more than a bedmate. And now she had blurted out that he loved her, that he wanted her.

Dread gripped her stomach as she wondered about his reaction. What would he say? Would he banish her back to her tower room until their reinforcements came and they took

care of Elizabeth's warriors? Worse yet how would he react when he found out she'd called Elizabeth a witch in front of everyone?

She went inside, ignoring the looks from the stable hands. The smell of hay and horses assaulted her nose, and she wrinkled it in distaste. She was not allowed to ride, so she never came down here.

"Where is Lord Keran?"

"Who knows," an older man announced. "He left moments ago with his intended."

The fear she'd felt earlier intensified. No one knew it, but she was his to be his bride. If they thought he left with his future wife, it would have to be ... "What?"

"Lord Keran and Lady Leora left just moments before, on horseback."

"Going where?"

The man shrugged and Syndra hurried from the building. Once outside, she surveyed her surroundings. People milled about, but there was no sign of anyone on horseback. Which could only mean they had left the keep.

Her heart joined her stomach, both organs feeling as if they'd dropped to the ground. He'd gone riding with Leora. Why would he do that? There was no reason for it. He'd flat out told her he would not spend time with her until "after they married," and Leora did not know that would never happen.

Why would he do so now? Unless ... the idea was too horrible to contemplate. Perhaps he had been using her all along. Maybe he really did want his wife to be a virgin on their wedding night, but he needed female companionship

before then and had chosen her. Could it be she was the one being played, and not Elizabeth and Leora?

Her palms started to sweat and her tongue felt as if it had swelled to the size of an apple. Surely not. In the time they had spent together he had been loving, and caring. He had shared information about his childhood and asked her about her own. He had taken her to dinner in the main hall with him, letting everyone see them together. He had not kept her hidden away to use her only as a bed warmer, had he?

Syndra hurried inside the castle, ignoring a call from Tillie to stop and talk to her. She almost tripped on the uneven steps as she hurried to Keran's room, throwing open the door, and slamming it shut behind her. Her heart felt as if it would beat out of her chest.

She went to the bed, the one they'd made love on just hours ago, and put her hands on the coverlet. She closed her eyes and felt him inside her, his cock pulsing as he thrust back and forth; his mouth was on her lips, her shoulders, her breasts. He loved her, did not he? A man could not do those things unless he loved someone, right? Or was that just her naivety talking? He wanted her, not her sister. Surely, his ride with Leora did not mean anything, did it?

"What is wrong with you?" Tillie crossed to her, stroking her back. The look of worry on her friend's face made Syndra snifle.

"He is out riding with Leora."

"So?"

"What do you mean so? Why is he out with her?"

"He is keeping up appearances, as you do when you report to Elizabeth." Tillie stroked her back. "Why do you worry? Did you quarrel with him?"

"No, with Leora." Syndra quickly related the details of her run-in with her sister. "She was smirking at me, and now I know why. He had probably told her they would ride together. He probably knew it when he left me in his bed this morning."

The door opened and Alma, wrapped in a cloak, hurried inside. Brody pulled the door closed behind her and she discarded her wrap and joined her friends.

"You are risking much," Tillie said to her.

"Brody said Syndra was upset. What has happened?" Tillie gave her a brief version of events, and Alma hugged Syndra close. "It is a fine line we are walking. You know that."

"Yes, but why does he have to spend time with her?"

"Keran told her mother he wanted to know Leora before they wed," Tillie replied. "If he did not spend time with her, it would look suspicious."

"How much time has he been spending with her?" Realization swam through her. Keran spent hours away from her. Was he with Leora during all that time? She covered her face with her hands and sobbed. "Maybe she just offers more to him than I do. After all, Elizabeth does not recognize me as part of Mardoon. Maybe Keran has come about to her way of thinking."

"But the king knows you are Lord Richard's firstborn," Tillie said. "He sent Keran here for you, specifically."

"Yes, but what if he has decided I am not good enough. What if he is bored with me?"

"Use your mouth on him," Alma said, breaking into laughter. "He will not be bored with that."

Syndra pushed away from them and crossed to the window, looking down on the activity in the courtyard. It seemed so different here than it did from her third-story room. Everything seemed alive, real. Upstairs, people looked like little dolls as they moved about their business.

"Are you on your courses?" Tillie came up next to her. "You seem to be very agitated. Perhaps it is your woman's time."

"No."

"Maybe he has gotten a child on you," Alma said.

"I would know, would I not? There has been no sickness, nothing to show I might be with child." Movement at the gate caught her attention. Keran rode in with Leora trailing behind him. They stopped near the building and he dismounted, handing his reins to a boy and then crossing to help Leora down. When he did so, he kissed her hand and she laughed, the dainty sound drifting up to the window.

Syndra's heart broke in two. Tears filled her eyes then ran down her cheeks as they continued to laugh together, as if one of them had just told a joke. Maybe they were talking about her. Was Leora's visit this morning had been more than goading? Had Keran told her he would marry her, that the priest was even now on his way?

"Did he lie to me about the priest, too? Why is he not here?"

"Perhaps he could not leave then," Alma said. "Do not do this, Syndra. You know he cares about you and will do the right thing."

Did she know it? Downstairs, Keran had not dropped Leora's hand but held it close, kissing it yet again. She pushed past Tillie and ran from the room, ignoring the calls from her friends to come back. She headed straight to her former prison. Better to be a slave to something she knew than to be used by a man who kept her in the dark, and had probably been lying to her since he arrived.

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Chapter Twelve

Keran slapped the dirt from his breeches, then headed toward his salon. If he had to spend another minute with the insipid Leora, he would lose his breakfast. He hated that he had to act as if he were courting her, but there was nothing else for it. If he did not, her mother would know and things would probably advance more quickly than he wanted them to.

"Milord." He turned toward the voice.

"Timmons." Keran ushered the younger man up the stairs and into his salon. "Well?"

"I rode ahead to bring you this. Timmons handed Keran a piece of parchment. "Reinforcements are two days away. Six-dozen men, sent by the king himself."

Keran read the missive quickly. "Two days, then it will be done. You made it quicker than I thought you would."

"Markham and I rode like the wind, and the king insisted the soldiers leave the next day. He wants this taken care of immediately."

"Good." Keran reread the note, pausing at the part where the king thanked him again for his loyalties and offered to find him a bigger keep nearer to London, if he desired.

The thought made Keran laugh. He had no desire for another keep. What he wanted was here. The peace and quiet of the country, and Syndra. Sweet, beautiful Syndra who welcomed him into her heart and body with such wonderful

abandon and trust. His cock throbbed with need at the thought of her.

It was early in the afternoon, but not that early. He needed to find her, bring her back to the bedroom and bury himself deep inside her. The swelling in his breeches increased and he held the paper near his groin, hoping to hide it.

"Good work. Go and bathe, fill your belly and rest. I am sure you can find a willing wench. Do not say anything to anyone else. I will do that."

"Milord." Timmons made a mock bow and Keran laughed. All the men serving under him now had been his friends for years. Getting used to Keran being "milord," was tough for them, he knew.

He crossed to his chamber and opened the door. "Syndra?" Not finding her there he headed downstairs. The people seemed cautious today, smiling and nodding but not talking. Was something wrong?

In the great hall he surveyed the room, not finding her. It was not time for her to report to Elizabeth yet, so she should not be up there. She stayed away from the beast as much as possible. Maybe she was outside. He had never known her to ride a horse, but perhaps that was where she was, out for an early-afternoon ride.

He poked his head into the kitchens. Not finding Tillie, he moved to the outer rooms and stood, pondering his next move. Worry snaked up his spine. It was not like Syndra to not be there when he came back from one of his outings. She

was always waiting, smiling, her arms opened. That one idea always made him want to return home as quickly as possible.

An idea occurred to him, and a smile lit his face. She was with Alma, visiting with her friend despite the fact he had told her to stay away from the Brody's room, in case someone got the wrong idea. He took the steps quickly, turning toward the wing where the men were houses. He knocked and entered, closing the door behind him quickly in case someone happened by and saw Alma.

He frowned when he saw Tillie and Alma sitting on the bed, their heads bent together as if imparting secrets that would bring down an empire. "Where is Syndra?"

The look Tillie gave him made his blood freeze, and his eyes widened. "What has happened? Where is she?"

* * * *

Syndra lay on her bed, tears leaking from her eyes. She had hoped to never have to sleep here again. The only bed she wanted had Keran in it, but she would be damned if she would let him use her.

How could she have been so wrong? He had seemed so sincere in his lovemaking, in the way he looked at her and talked to her. And yet she had seen him give that same look to Leora just minutes ago.

The doors to her room burst open, and she could feel his presence behind her. "Syndra, get up. Come back downstairs."

"Go away."

"Now." She knew without even looking at him that his shoulders were thrown back, his hands on his hips. She'd seen him in that stance before when he had talked to her about her reports to Elizabeth. Her visiting the woman made him mad, but she still had to do it. "I will not ask again."

"Good. Then leave. Take Leora to your bed. You seem happy enough to take her riding today."

"You know why I have to do that. Just a few more days, I promise. The king's men are almost here, and we will be able to put all this behind us and live our lives as we want."

"What I want is for you to leave. Now."

There was a shuffle of feet, and then he was behind her, the heat from his body radiating down into her own. Her quim reacted with its usual desire for him. Wetness formed and her bud hardened. Her nipples peaked against the soft material of her shift.

"Just remember, I asked you nicely." She gasped as his arms went around her waist. He picked her up as if she were a feather, throwing her over his shoulder and heading for the stairs.

"Put me down!"

She tried to push away from him, but he held her firm. He started down the stairs, taking them slowly and her breath caught. These stairs were precarious at best, the steps uneven. If he lost his footing, they would both suffer.

"Keran, please."

"Save your begging, because you will need it. I cannot believe you distrust me so." He put a hand on the wall to steady their progress.

"Put me down please, before we fall."

He navigated the first curve, his steps slowing even more. They made it around, and then he stopped, keeping his hand against the wall.

"Are you going to behave? I want to talk to you, and I do not want you behaving like a child."

"Have you gone mad? Put me down."

"You are at my mercy here, Syndra. One false move and we both tumble. Now, will you listen?"

"The fall will injure you, too."

"Will. You. Listen."

"Why, so you can lie to me?" She cried out through her tears. "You are a bastard."

"I've never lied to you, Syndra. I just did not tell you I was spending time with Leora because I knew it would upset you, and I did not want that to happen."

"It is the same as lying."

"No, it is not." His hand was on her backside now, caressing her through her clothing. "You know I have to put on these airs, as if I am getting to know her."

"Did you have to kiss her hand?" He turned, making her reach out for the walls. The space was narrow, and the drop to the bottom seemed far away.

"I am setting you down now." His voice was like a caress. "Do not run, or push, just stay where you are at."

She turned toward him when her feet were on the stones. With her on the steps above him they were the same height. It felt strange to look him in the eye when they were not lying in bed together.

"Do you doubt me so much?"

"All my life, no one has given a wit about me except for Tillie and Alma. And then you were here, and you made me feel so special. And when I saw you kiss her hand, twice, I..." Her tears fell faster. "...I felt as if I were nothing."

"I am so sorry. You are everything to me. If the priest were here, I would marry you this instant, out in the open and be damned what Elizabeth or Leora thought."

"You are just saying that because you are afraid I will push you down the stairs." She laughed softly.

"I am saying it because I care for you, because I am starting to love you. I can feel it deep inside me when I see you, a wonderful feeling that spreads through my belly, up to my heart and down to my cock." He took her hand from the wall and pressed it against his groin. "See how much I want you, even now when you call me a bastard?"

He moved his lips toward hers, but she turned her head. When he put his fingers on her chin and turned it back, though, she did not fight him. His kiss was gentle, his lips smooth against her own.

"Take a few steps back, then turn around and get down on your knees. You can brace your hands against the wall."

"You do not mean to take me here."

"I do."

"But the stairs, what if we fall? And what if someone hears?"

"The stairs above you are wider, and will help me keep my balance. If I do not get inside you now, I will die from need." He moved her back gently, then guided her into a turn. "And I

do not care if anyone hears. Let them all hear you scream and beg for me. Let them know you are mine."

Excitement coursed through Syndra's veins. She kneeled down slowly, putting her hands on a stair above her to try to keep her balance. Light from the open door to her room trickled out, giving the area a soft glow. She could hear Keran undoing his breeches, freeing himself.

When he lifted her skirts above her waist, she gasped. He slapped her behind. "Wider." She spread her legs as far as she could, her knees hitting either wall.

"Do you want me, Syndra?"

"Yes."

"Then beg for me. Tell me what you want."

"I want your cock, Keran."

"Where?"

"In my quim."

"Louder."

His voice was deep and commanding, and she imagined that was how he sounded when he gave orders to the men who served him. It made her quiver in pleasure.

"Give me your cock."

"Louder." He slapped her behind, the sound echoing in the tight stairwell. "Let them hear you. Let everyone know I am taking you now."

"Give me your cock, take me, make me yours." She knew anyone standing on the other side of the downstairs door would hear her, hear them. It made her feel wanton, knowing someone might be listening.

"Scream." His legs were around her now, his cock rubbing against her wet folds, probing for entrance. "Beg for my cock."

"Keran! Please."

"Say, *fuck me*."

Her body stiffened, her head shaking of its own accord. "No, no I could never." Her breath came in short shallow gasps. His length still slid up and down her folds, and she pushed back. "Please. I need you inside me."

"Say it just for me, whisper it. Be naughty for your husband."

A thrill coursed through her. How could she have been so stupid to think he'd lied to her? He cared for her as much as she cared for him.

"Say it, my love, say it."

"Fuck me." The tip of his cock slid inside her opening and she arched back into him. When he pulled away, she groaned in need.

"Again."

"Fuck me." He fed her more this time, stretching her quim into that wonderful way that made her feel as though she belonged to him. She thrust back, crying out in need as he pulled out yet again, then licked her ear, his hot breath making her shiver.

"Again, and then scream for me."

She moved her lips to him as he bent down, putting his ear right next to her mouth. "Fuck me, my love."

He slammed inside her and Syndra dropped her head and screamed out his name. The sound of his flesh hitting hers

filled the small space as he banged his cock in and out of her quim, sending her flying into an orgasm that topped anything she had ever felt. She clawed at the stairs, grasped at the walls, and begged for more.

Keran grasped her hips tightly and she would swear he was deeper inside her than she had ever felt. His sweat dripped into her hair, his moans of exertion creating chills in her body. When he filled her quim, she could feel his seed erupt from him, finding a new home in her body.

"Keran. I love you."

"And I you, Syndra. My beautiful taste of Syn. Please do not ever forget it."

"I never will again. I promise." He dropped a kiss on her neck, then helped her to stand before turning her around and claiming her lips in what Syndra could only think of as a claiming. *No, I will never forget. No matter what happens.*

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Chapter Thirteen

Patrick stood just outside the door, leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. The look of amusement on his face made heat rise in Syndra's chest.

"Enjoy yourselves?"

"Yes," Keran replied. "We had a wonderful time. What are you doing here?"

"Keeping people from opening the door. The whole castle thought you were killing her, or beating her, from the way she screamed. But I knew better. Screams of pleasure are much different from screams of pain. Well, most of the time."

Her blush spread to her cheeks.

"Elizabeth came out to listen for a while. She called you a name I shan't repeat, Syndra, and then she stalked back to her room. I swear I could see steam rising from her skin."

"Good." Keran took her hand and they started down the hallway, Patrick falling into step behind them.

"Do you think it wise to antagonize her so much?"

"When I think about what is sitting in the field not far away, yes."

"Ah yes, but they still outnumber us. Do not forget that."

"Not for long." They were in Keran's rooms now, the door shut behind them. "Tell the men we fight in three days time. The king's soldiers will be here in two days. Have them camp far enough away from the castle that Elizabeth and her pitiful band do not see them. We will wipe them out, and Mardoon will be loyal to its king again."

"The keep is already loyal," Syndra said. "You are Mardoon."

He kissed her hand, his tongue sliding over her knuckles. "We are Mardoon."

Warmth suffused her body. This man, whom she'd known for such a little amount of time, made her feel as no one ever had before. It was not just the lovemaking, it was a closeness she would never think to have with a man.

Sometimes she could imagine he held her heart in his hand, clasping it tightly and then kissing it before putting it into his own chest, as if their hearts would beat together, making them one person instead of two.

There was a knock at the door, and Tillie entered at Keran's command. She nodded nervously, then sent a lusty smile Patrick's way. He winked at her, and then she took a deep breath.

"The priest is here; and Lady Elizabeth knows and is with him right now."

"Hell and damnation," Keran said, releasing Syndra and running his fingers through his dark hair. "Did I not order his presence to be kept a secret?"

"You did, but it seems Leora and her lover were outside the gates when the priest came up. She ran to tell her mother."

The room grew silent, and a look of astonishment came over Keran's face that made Syndra laugh. "Her what?"

"Her lover, milord." Tillie's saucy smile grew wider. "She has been spreading her legs for one of Nathaniel's men for some time now."

"Good. Then he can marry her." Keran sat down and stared at the wall.

Syndra wished she could see inside his mind, see what he was planning. He sat for some time while they all stood, waiting.

Then he stood and crossed to Patrick. "Go and see where the men are. Push them to arrive here tomorrow if possible. If not, then the next morning." He turned to Tillie. "Tell the Lady Elizabeth I will marry her daughter tomorrow at sunset."

"What?" Syndra felt as if her heart had been pulled from her chest and thrown to the ground.

"Shush. You must trust me."

Tears filled her eyes "But..."

"Syndra, hush. By tomorrow evening you and I will be wed. I promise. But, we must play the charade out to the very end to give us more time. If we let on now that I know about you, it could be disastrous. Please understand that."

She wanted to believe him, she truly did. After all, he had professed his love for her. But, he had done it while in the throes of passion. Tillie said men said anything while they were inserted into a woman and close to climaxing. She had to believe in him, though. But in her heart it hurt to hear him say he would marry Leora.

Still, this man had not led her down a wrong path yet. She would trust in his lead. The king trusted him, and that was good enough for her.

"I understand. And I trust you."

The look on his face made her heart swell with joy. "Good. You and Alma, and Tillie, make a kirtle for your wedding tomorrow. Make it blue, a beautiful dark blue."

"Yes, milord."

"And whatever you do, stay away from Elizabeth and her daughters."

* * * *

"I really must insist you kick the whore from your bed."

Keran turned to Elizabeth, who stood in the doorway of the great hall. It was almost time for the evening meal, and the place was full of people. Everyone had been talking and laughing, getting ready for tomorrow's wedding.

He narrowed his eyes at her. "May I ask who gave you permission to leave your rooms?"

She ignored his question and ran her hands down her skirt. "Now that the priest is here, I simply cannot allow you to embarrass my daughter any longer. You should marry her tonight, not tomorrow."

"And you do not embarrass her by talking about private matters in front of everyone?"

"You mean everyone who did not hear Syndra cry out like the slut she is? You have caused shame to be heaped upon my daughter's head with your actions. If I thought it would be allowed, I would petition the king to have you removed from Mardoen."

Keran grabbed hold of his anger, and then he laughed, loving the red flush of anger that rose in Elizabeth's face. "I will not be dictated to by you, or anyone but the king. When

you show me a royal seal, you may tell me who I can and cannot take to my bed. Now, scamper back to your rooms before I decide to postpone the wedding another week, or a month."

"My daughter will not accept her bastard."

Keran's blood froze in his veins as gasps filled the hall. Did Elizabeth know something he did not? Had he planted a child in Syndra and she had not told him about it? Surely not. She would have said something. Besides, it had only been a few weeks. What were the chances that she was already breeding?

Could that be the reason for her behavior earlier today? He knew women sometimes were emotional when they were with child. Of course, it could just be seeing him with Leora really did upset her. Whatever the cause, he needed to ask her, tonight.

He turned back to Elizabeth and squared his shoulders. "Your daughter will do as I say, no matter what. You will not run this keep, and neither shall she."

"I insist you send the whore away. Tonight. At least give my daughter that amount of respect."

He wanted to tell her that her daughter's lover, who he found out was called Thomas, would give her all the respect she deserved when he married her tomorrow. Instead, he just smiled. "Go back to your rooms, milady, before I have you escorted back."

For a minute, he thought she would argue. And then, she turned and walked calmly away, her hands down at her side.

Patrick came up behind him and chuckled. "I would like to see her in the tower before this is all over. Or should we just dispatch her here and save the king the trouble?"

"No, she will be sent to London. The king will decide her fate." People had started to talk again, and Keran wanted nothing more than to have Syndra at his side. She had been working on her kirtle for tomorrow for a few hours, though, and he missed her more than he thought possible.

The vile words spewing from Elizabeth's mouth sickened him and made him want to take Patrick's advice, just try her, convict her, and have her executed here, in Mardoona. But, the king would not take kindly to that, so he would do his duty and deliver her traitorous behind to the king.

The urge to see Syndra grew. Patrick was now talking with Brody, who looked, like Patrick, to be enjoying country life despite the fuss both of them had put up about leaving London.

Of course, he was too, and the reason was sitting upstairs in his chamber, sewing a garment for her to wear for their wedding tomorrow. His cock stiffened at the thought, and he stepped closer to his friends.

"I shall take my meal in my chambers. Please watch things here carefully."

"Enjoy yourself," Patrick said with a grin. "Should I post a guard to keep away the curious, or will she not be screaming this time?"

"She will indeed," Keran said. "And much louder than before."

* * * *

Syndra set aside her sewing, picked it back up, then put it down again. Tillie and Alma had not allowed her to work on her kirtle for tomorrow, saying they wanted it to be a surprise. They had taken it with them and left several hours ago. She had done some mending on Keran's clothing, then paced the chamber for a while, knowing it was in her best interests to stay inside and not stir things up downstairs.

She was bored, though, with both her friends gone and most of the mending done. There was not much else she could do. She crossed to the desk and looked at the sheets of parchment lying there. She picked one up, frowning at the letters. She forgot much from when she had tried to learn her letters. She recognized the ., because Leticia had showed it to her once, saying it was the first letter in Syndra's name.

The rest looked like a big jumble of lines, things she could not make any sense of. Should not the lady of a castle know how to read? Keran had said he would teach her, but then things had heated up with the discovery of Elizabeth's use of the land, and he had not mentioned it again. Maybe she should mention it to him. After tomorrow. After the wedding.

The idea of him taking her to wife sent a thrill through her, just as it had earlier. She put her hands on her stomach, wondering if a child were growing inside her or if it were just wishful thinking on her part.

"Is there something you want to tell me?" She turned to Keran, who stood in the doorway.

"No. I was just looking at the things on your desk."

"Snooping?" She could hear the laughter in his voice.

"How can it be snooping when I cannot understand the missives?"

"True." He stepped aside as two men entered carrying trays of food. "I thought we would eat upstairs tonight, just the two of us."

"Thank you, milord." She blushed, and when the men were gone he turned to her.

"Are you hungry?"

"Not for food." She ran her fingers over her breasts, loving the intake of breath that made his chest tighten.

"Naughty wench. Perhaps I will make you wait." He crossed to the desk and picked up a piece of parchment. "But then again, perhaps I will work on keeping my promise to teach you to read. To do so, you will need to undress."

Her eyebrows shot up. "I have to be undressed to learn to read?"

"Yes, you do. Take off your kirtle and shift."

Desire ragged through her as she followed his command. He watched her carefully, making her nipples tighten and wetness flood from her quim.

When he spoke, his voice was tight with need. "Now, I shall teach you a few basic words first." He sat down the parchment, took a quill, and dipped it in the ink. Then he started to write. She watched the letters appear, her gaze following his hand, amazed by it.

When he was done, he sat down in the chair and patted his lap. "Sit here."

"Should you not be naked, too?"

"Later. Right now, I want you naked in my arms and ready to learn."

She sat on his thigh, bringing her legs up to shield herself in case someone should walk in unannounced.

"Now, this letter here is an .."

"Leticia taught me that one."

"Good. This is an ., and this an .."

Syndra tried to keep all the letters straight in her mind as he showed them to her, wondering how she would ever learn which went where, and which ones formed which words.

"I fear it may be too much for me, milord."

"Nonsense. This word is your name, *Syndra*." He went through each letter, pointing it out to her. She snuggled down into her chest as he showed her the words *England, king, Edward, Keran, Mardoon, London, court, Tillie, Patrick, Alma, Brody* and *castle*.

"There are so many."

"There are a few, yes, but these are the important ones in your life. Now, which one is England?"

She pointed to a word starting with the letter ., and he nodded his approval. They did it several times, going over the words until she thought she knew each one. When he took a knife from the desk, she inhaled sharply, watching as he cut the words apart.

"Now, I will hold up words for you to see, and you will tell me what they are. This will mix them up a little, so it will show if you really know what they are, or if you have just memorized their place on the parchment."

"Trying to trick me."

His grin made her nipples grow tighter. "If you are right, you will get a reward. If you are wrong, you will get a punishment." He patted the edge of the desk. "Sit here please, just on the edge."

She moved into the spot he indicated, gazing down at him. "Punishment? I am not sure I like the sound of that."

"You will like it. Spread your legs very wide."

Desire ripped through her as she opened for his view. His hand went between his legs, stroking his cock and she licked her lips.

"Very nice." He held up a card. "What is this word?"

"Syndra."

He turned the sheet and looked at it. "Very good." He leaned forward, then placed his head between her legs, his tongue parting her curls and finding her hard nub. He licked gently, her flesh quivering under his touch.

"I like that."

His reply was muffled, then he looked up at her. "Your reward." A few more licks made her wiggle, and then he stopped and sat back.

"More."

"Shush." He held up a card. "What is this word?"

"King." This time she arched into his tongue, pushing herself against him without abandon. The pleasure spread to her stomach, running up to her nipples, which tingled and drew together without being touched.

"Keran." Her fingers were in his hair now, pulling him closer as his tongue flicked around the bud, keeping her just

on the edge of release. "Please, push in the center, make me spend."

"Not yet." He sat back and licked his lips. "Your pleasure is at my discretion tonight and will depend on how well you remember your words."

She got two more right, *Keran* and *Alma*. Her reward kept her dancing on the edge of orgasm, her body tingling as if she were standing in the middle of a fire. And all the while, when he would sit back and lick his lips, she thought he looked more pleased with himself than he ever had before.

"You are torturing me," she muttered.

"You will thank me afterwards, my love, I promise."

When he held up the next card, her mouth went dry. "Um, I ... castle?" Syndra bit her lower lip when he looked at the card, and then shot her a stern gaze.

"No. Try again."

She shook her head. "Alma?"

"You just did that one. This is *court*." He stood and kissed her forehead. "Stand and turn."

He took her hands placed them on the desk, then stepped behind her. "How many letters in the word? Count them."

She studied it, her hands shaking. "Five."

"Very well, five." And he struck her buttock. It was not a hard strike, just enough to burn. She gasped as a second one, and then a third one fell. The last two made her wiggle.

"Five swats for five missed letters. Now, what is the word?"

"Court."

He kissed her shoulder. "Very good."

Within seconds, another card appeared before her eyes. Without being asked, she said London. He kneeled down behind her and licked. This time his tongue pressed into her opening, sliding into her until she cried out. He slid it back and forth, stretching her just a bit, wiggling his tongue until she stomped her feet and struggled to stay in position.

"Keran, please!"

He stood, placing his lips next to her ears. The smell of her quim drifted over her as he licked her cheek. "Just a few more words."

"No, please!" She thrust back, her bare behind coming into contact with his cock, still encased in his breeches.

"Syndra." There was dangerous desire buried in his words. "Behave yourself and do as I ask."

She nodded, fighting the need to tear him from his breeches and push herself down on him.

He continued the game. She got his name and Tillie right, and then missed England and Mardoon. By the time she had been licked and spanked several more times, she knew she could not stand it anymore. The spanking did nothing more than fuel her need for him, fan the flames of the fire that now burned brightly in her quim. She turned to him, pushing him into the chair.

"Please, please, Keran, do not torture me anymore, I am begging you."

He arched his eyebrows at her, then gave her a look as if she were a piece of meat on his dinner plate.

She dropped to her knees and put her mouth on his cock, which throbbed under his clothing. Her hands fumbled with his stays, and his deep laughter created chills inside her.

"Eager, are you not?"

"You are evil." She freed him, then licked her lips, lifting her gaze to him.

"Go ahead, my love. Taste me."

The most wonderful of temptations was before her eyes. Her mouth watered, and her hands shook as she traced his length with her fingers.

"Yes, my love. Show me how much you desire me. It cannot be half as much as I desire you."

She lowered her head, her tongue out and ready, licking at the slit. The juices that hit her tongue were salty, and tasted exactly as she thought they should. Musky, with a taste of masculinity that made her shiver.

She repeated the action, her tongue sliding over his slick skin, the hardness pulsing under her. Keran's moan let her know she was doing the right thing as she flicked her tongue down his length and back, tracing a vein that ran along the backside. He shivered, his hands weaving into her hair as hers had done with his.

When she opened wide and took the tiniest part of him into her mouth, she knew this felt as wonderful for him as his tongue had felt for her. She tightened her lips around him, sucking as hard as she could.

"Oh Syndra, you will be the death of me, and what a sweet death it will be." He pulled her head up and kissed her, his tongue licking her teeth.

"Come to the bed my wicked one."

He undressed as he walked, leaving bits and pieces of clothing lying around. When he climbed onto the bed and lay on his back she frowned, not certain if he wanted her to mount him as she had done the first night she had taken him inside her.

Instead, he crooked his finger and patted the space next to his face. When she was near him, he kissed her gently.

"Lower your quim onto my face, then lean down and take my cock in your mouth."

"That is.... well it is ... sinful."

"*Synfully* marvelous, just like your name. Do it." Keran caressed her thighs as she straddled him. She felt as if the breath would leave her lungs, and she wouldn't be able to take any more in. But if she died, like he said, it would be a sweet death.

She edged down until she felt his tongue probing for entrance in her wet folds. She bucked into him, fearing she had hit him too hard. When he wrapped his arms around her thighs and pulled her closer, she let him guide her until his mouth was firmly placed on her quim. He went to work, licking her folds, his teeth nibbled at her soft, vulnerable flesh and she quivered with each pass of his tongue.

Not wanting to be the only one feeling pleasure, she lowered her mouth to him, taking him inside her mouth in a bold move that shocked her to the core. Her fingers wrapped around the part of him she could not get into her mouth, tightening when his groans turned deeper.

Keran clasped her buttocks, pulling her down even more. Syn ground herself into him, her body spinning out of control. She lifted her head and screamed as her climax claimed her, writhing against him, her hands clasping his cock and tugging as she spent again.

"Keran! Oh, I.... cannot ... oh."

Warm liquid coated her hands, and when she looked down it was to see Keran's creamy seed coating his cock and her hand. She stood on wobbly legs and went to the chest, pouring water into the ewer and wetting a cloth. She cleaned him gently, rubbing him as he'd rubbed her the first night, making sure he was gently cared for.

"Would you like food?"

"All I want is you," he said. "I do not have need of anything else."

He held out his arms and she went to him, snuggling into his chest, loving his warmth, the strong beat of his heart.

"Tomorrow, Syndra, I make you my wife in the eyes of the law. But, you already belong to me, in my heart."

"I love you, too." She snuggled closer.

Within seconds, his even breathing signaled his sleep and she followed, never wanting to leave the comfort of his arms.

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Chapter Fourteen

Syndra woke to bright sunshine streaming in through the window. She blinked and sat up, trying to judge the time of day. It must be at least noon the way the sunlight sat on the floor. She stretched, then glanced around the room.

"Keran?" As she said his name, images of the naughty things they had done last night filled her mind. And she loved it, loved every memory, every touch, every feel of him. And then it dawned on her, as clear as the sun streaming onto the stone floor.

Today was her wedding today. No matter what Elizabeth thought, or Leora was preparing for, Syndra knew that by the end of the evening she would be Keran's wife, mistress of Mardoon Keep. Her father had seen to her happiness after his death as he had never done while he was alive. That thought made her feel more love for her father than she ever had before. In the end, he had thought of her.

She wished there was some way she could thank him for it, let him know that she was fine, that his letter had brought her more than she'd ever dreamed of. She closed her eyes, repeated the words to him, hoping his spirit could somehow hear her.

A knock made her sit upright. The door opened, and Alma stuck her head in the room. "Are you awake? You have wasted half the day with your eyes closed."

Syndra laughed as Alma and Tillie came into the room. "Sorry."

"He wore you out, did he?" Tillie nodded, a knowing look on her face.

"I suppose you could say that. He is wonderful. He makes me feel so perfect."

Her two friends climbed onto the bed with her and Syndra settled herself back against the pillows.

"We are done with your kirtle," Tillie said. "Would you like to see it?"

"Yes." She sat back up and hugged her legs to herself. "You finished it very fast."

"Well, you cannot," Tillie said with a giggle. "Not until moments before you o downstairs."

We wanted it to be perfect," Alma said with a smile. "We—
"

A loud noise outside the door made the three of them sit up straighter. Alma's eyes widened in fear, and Syndra stood quickly, indicating her friend should take her place in the bed. She threw covers over her, then hurried toward the dresser to pull out clothing.

Elizabeth burst into the room seconds later, her eyes taking in every aspect, including Syndra's naked form.

"What are you doing in here?" Syndra clutched her shift in front of her.

"I just came to make sure you were enjoying your last day in the Master's bed. Soon, you will be back up in the tower where you belong."

Syndra laughed, and when a look of absolute surprise came over Elizabeth's face, she laughed harder. "You have no

authority here, I know that. Leave now, and I will not tell Keran you were here, trying to cause trouble."

Elizabeth took a step closer, and Syndra prayed she would not look at the bed. Would Alma be able to stay still enough not to be discovered? In the last two weeks her stepmother had continued to lord Alma over Syndra's head, telling her the girl was being abused by her captors, and that each day Syndra spent in Keran's bed meant more men between Alma's legs.

It was not hard to feign horror at the idea, though she knew it was not true. She had cried and called Elizabeth horrible names. That, Keran said, helped Elizabeth to believe Alma had escaped and was not in the castle.

Elizabeth studied her carefully, then turned to Tillie. "Get out."

"No."

An evil glint came into Elizabeth's eyes, and she jerked her head at Nathaniel, who grabbed Tillie and dragged her from the room.

"Leave her alone!" Syndra made to follow but Elizabeth stepped in front of her.

"The fact that she spreads her legs for Patrick will save her, but it will not save Alma. If I were you, I would listen to the proposal I have."

Syndra glared at Elizabeth, and when her stepmother laughed her heart seized. Had she done something to Keran? No that could not be, or else she wouldn't have a scheme to put before Syndra.

"You have proven you are a whore. You don't have to flaunt it by running around naked." Syndra looked down, then hurried to where she'd dropped her shift. She put it on quickly, then wheeled on Elizabeth.

"Why are you doing this? You have what you want."

"Not totally. I want him dead." She held up a small handkerchief. "If you value your friends' lives, you have a parting drink with his lordship before he goes down for his wedding. Mix this into his wine and make sure he drinks all of it."

"Poison?"

"We do not want it to go into effect until after he has wed Leora. That way I can tell the king the marriage was consummated. There is just enough here for that to happen, after he has bedded her tonight. Or before, it matters not. All that really matters is that the priest pronounces them husband and wife."

"Yes, it does not really matter, does it? It is not as if she is a virgin, if someone checks for proof."

Anger flared in Elizabeth's eyes and she drew back her hand. She seemed to think better of it, though, and before she struck she took a step back and clasped her hand over Syndra's forearm and squeezed. Syndra refused to react, though, and after a few seconds, Elizabeth dropped her hand to her side.

"Are we clear on what you are supposed to do?"

Oh yes, perfectly clear. "I hear you."

"You will do it, or Alma will die, and I will find a way to make sure Tillie suffers every day for the rest of her life."

"With you around, that would not be hard."

"Enjoy your freedom, while you have it." Elizabeth stalked from the room, slamming the door behind her.

"Alma?"

There was a rustle as Alma came out from under the bedcovers. She came up next to Syndra, and they stared down at the item in her hand.

"I have to make sure I talk to him before the wedding."

"Do not worry," Alma said. "I am sure everything will be just fine."

* * * *

Syndra sat at the back of the chapel, her hands clasping and unclasping the beautiful blue kirtle she wore. Keran had come back just moments ago, looking as if he had washed himself in the lake.

He had seemed weary, but happy, and he had kissed her gently and told her to dress and go to the chapel.

"But why? And what has happened? Tell me."

"Shush, not yet. Just do as I say, and do not put up a fuss, of any kind. Stay in your seat until I call for you." Then he'd kissed her gently and patted her bottom as he urged her toward the doorway.

His words had made her just a little nervous. What if something went wrong, and he was forced to marry Leora. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. He had not even seemed surprised by the poison she had shown him, only saying he was shocked it had taken

Elizabeth so long to try to kill him. When Syndra had told him what she had said about the wedding, he had nodded.

"Of course. It would give her a greater hold on the castle if her daughter were married to the lord."

Syndra smoothed down her kirtle. It really was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Deep blue with stunning silver decorations along the sleeve. Where her friends had found the materials, she did not know. She was just happy they did. She had gone to Tillie's room after leaving Keran's. When she had seen it, she had cried, and then hugged both of her friends.

She looked around, trying to find them. Tillie stood in the back with the other servants. Standing behind her, her face half-shielded by a cloak, stood Alma.

The room grew quiet as Elizabeth walked in. She walked to the front, laughing and joking as if she were happier than she had ever been. She sat down, and moments later Keran and Patrick came in.

When Leora came in by herself, Syndra wondered where Leticia was. She should be with her, standing next to her sister in support. Leora stepped to the front, and her mother stood up next to her.

Syndra worried for her half-sister, who had been strangely absent the last two weeks. If she had stood up to her mother, there was no telling how she was being punished.

The priest gave the standard welcome, his voice loud, announcing that he was to officiate at the marriage of Lord Keran of Mardoon and the eldest daughter of Lord Richard, the late Lord of Mardoon.

"If there is anyone who knows of an impediment to this marriage, let them speak now." The priest's words were greeted with silence, and Syndra wanted to rise and scream. He was not saying anything. He would marry her. What was happening?

Before the priest could speak again, though, Keran cleared his throat. "I have an objection."

A loud gasp greeted his words, and the priest called for silence.

"What is that objection, milord?"

"I was sent by the king to marry Lord Richard's eldest daughter. The woman standing next to me has been introduced as such, but it is a lie perpetrated by herself and her mother. The Lady Syndra is Lord Richard's eldest daughter, and therefore my rightful bride."

When Elizabeth screamed, Syndra laughed.

"You will control yourself," the priest said to her, turning back to Keran. "Where is this Lady Syndra?"

Keran turned his head to her and held out his hand. She rose and walked up the aisle, her movements greeted by silence. She placed her hand in his and he pulled her close.

The priest turned to Elizabeth. "Is this true? Have you been lying to your new lord, trying to get him to marry a woman of your choosing, and not of the king's?"

"No! He lies to try to marry his whore; I swear it." Elizabeth's lips seemed to turn white as she clamped them together.

"It is true." All heads whirled to the back where Leticia stood, Brody on one side of her and Markham on the other.

"Come here." The priest gestured to her and she hurried down the aisle.

"You are?"

"Leticia, your grace, daughter to Elizabeth. For the past three days I have been held prisoner at a camp because I dared to tell my mother I would tell Lord Keran everything."

"Leticia." Syndra reached for her, but Leticia pulled away.

"Syndra is my father's first born."

The priest turned to Elizabeth. "You lie madam, and in the house of the Lord, too."

Elizabeth backed up, then shot a hateful look at Keran. She turned to run, but Patrick grabbed her before she made the entrance.

"Do not think to run and hide with your men, Elizabeth." Patrick dragged her to Keran, who spoke loud enough for everyone to hear. "They are either dead, or in the custody of the king's soldiers ready for transport to the Tower on charges of treason, including your lover."

Elizabeth stood ramrod straight, her eyes filled with hate.

"I believe you should join them." Keran snapped his hands and two guards, dressed in bright outfits Elizabeth had never seen before, came forward and took Elizabeth by the arms.

She glared at Syndra, who shook her head. "I am sorry for you."

"Do not be sorry for me. I want nothing from you, including pity." She walked down the aisle as they guests sat, quietly watching the proceedings.

"But what of me," Leora's voice shook. "I only did what she said."

Syndra rolled her eyes, but stayed silent.

"That is up to the king," Keran replied. "You will go to London where he will decide your fate. But, I believe you knew nothing about the men gathering to rise against the king, so that will go heavily in your favor."

Keran snapped his fingers again and Markham came forward to escort Leora from the room.

When they were gone, the priest turned to Keran. "Do you wish to wed the Lady Syndra tonight?"

"Yes, your grace, with the up most haste if you please." Keran glanced down at Syndra, then pulled her to him, kissing her deeply. She melted into his chest, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Very well," the priest said. "Are there any impediments to this marriage?" There was resounding silence and the priest leaned in toward the couple. "If you will wait and kiss her later, milord, after you are wed."

"Then hurry, your grace. For I don't want to wait a moment longer."

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Epilogue

Sixteen months later...

"What is this word?"

Syndra yawned and batted her weary eyes. "Keran, please. I am too tired for games."

"Syndra." His mock sternness made her laugh.

"Oh, very well. *London*."

"No." He stood and walked to the desk. "That is seven marks in the punishment column, because this word has seven letters. Would you like to try again?"

Syndra eyed the parchment, then sighed. "I do not know. Tell me what it is."

She rubbed her belly, then looked at her husband as he sat down next to her on the bed. A year and a half had passed, and she still had goose bumps appear on her skin when he was near her.

"It is Richard. It is what I believe we should name our son."

As if he approved, the child lying in the bed next to his mother let out a loud wail.

"After my father?"

"Yes." Keran took her hand and brought it to his mouth, kissing her gently."

After all, it was your father's foresight that brought us together. If he hadn't known what Elizabeth would do, there's no telling where we would be right now."

"You are right." She looked into his eyes, feeling as if she could lose herself in their depths. The mention of her stepmother, dead at her own hand by arsenic, still made her shiver. Sometimes she felt as if she were in the castle, haunting Syndra's every move, taunting her. And then, Keran would appear and chase her fears away.

He made her laugh, and the memory of the look on his face when their son was born two days ago still warmed her as nothing ever had before.

"I take your silence as agreement." He lifted the baby into his arms. "Very well. I dub thee Richard of Mardoon, son of Lord Keran, and his Lady wife, Syndra."

Richard shook his fists, and Keran laid him down where the baby immediately sought his mother's breast. Keran lay on the other side, looking down on Richard as he suckled.

"I love you, Syndra. Thank you for my son."

"He is a sign of our love for each other. The first of many signs, milord."

"Yes, my father had seven, if you remember."

Syndra gasped, then laughed. "I hope we have a daughter or two, also."

"Seven sons and two daughters would make nine. A large number, but I am willing to put out the effort to make your wish come true."

"You have already made all my wishes come true. You did that the first day you set foot in Mardoon."

"Then we are even." He stroked his hand over her cheek. "I wished for a wife who was beautiful and intelligent, and I have her, and so much more."

He put his lips on hers, the kiss gentle and lasting. "We will name our next son Edward, after the king."

"And our daughters?"

"Syn, I believe, after her mother. Who a sinfully wicked woman."

"Well, I have my husband to thank for that. After all, he taught me everything I know."

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Author's Notes

King Edward IV of England is a fascinating person to me, both as a man and as a king. He was extremely tall for his time. Reports put him between 6' and 6'4, depending on which book you've read. I split the difference and made him at 6'2. And he was also reported as being quite handsome, a fact backed up by portraits. He ruled England from 1461 to 1470, and again from 1471 until his death in 1483. Edward's father claimed the English crown during the War of the Roses, and Edward claimed it when his father died at the Battle of Wakefield.

Edward's cousin, Richard Neville, the 16th Duke of Warwick, supported his claim to the throne. He was also the man, however, who sought to have him deposed several times and finally succeeded in 1470. In 1471, Edward and his brothers marched from France to London to finally defeat Warwick at the battle of Battle of Barnet. Edward reclaimed his throne and ruled until his death.

He was succeeded by his son Edward V, who ruled from April 1483 to June 1483. Edward V, of course, is one of the famous princes of the Tower. He and his brother, Richard, 1st Duke of York, were taken to the Tower of London for "their own safety," and never seen again. Edward V's uncle, Richard III, took the throne in his nephew's stead, and is, without a doubt, one of the most infamous kings of England.

I've set my story in the years before Edward IV was deposed, and after he secretly married Elizabeth Woodville, a

A Dusting of Syn
by Melinda Barron

commoner who was the love of his life. Their marriage was the event, some say, which started him on his path of woe.

Keran is a loyal servant to King Edward, and will do anything in his power to help his king, and win the love of his life, at the same time.

—MB

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About the Author

Melinda Barron loves to explore Egyptian tombs and temples, discover Mayan ruins, play in castles towers, and explore new cities and countries. She generally does it all from the comfort of her home by opening a book.

Melinda is the fourth of five children born to an Army officer and his wife. A longtime newspaper journalist, Melinda has loved to read and write from an early age. Now she lives in the Texas Panhandle with two cats, Amelia and Pippin, and enough books to, according to her brother, open her own library. In addition to reading and writing Melinda enjoys travel, cross-stitching, watching movies and spending time with her friends and family.

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Taken with the Enemy by Tia Fanning

Name: *Mathews, Brenna Marie*

Rank: *Sergeant*

Date of Birth: *September 21st, 1976*

Occupation: *Combat Medic, United States National Guard*

My captor tells me that I'm not a prisoner of war, but how else can I see myself? I was abducted and brought to an unknown location in the middle of the desert. I'm sequestered behind a locked door and bars cover my windows. I even have an armed guard who takes me for walks.

But he, the nameless captor responsible for my care, claims otherwise. He tells me that he's not my enemy, that if he was, I'd already be dead. He promises to release me when the time is right. He says I'm safer now—with him—than I was before.

Despite his reassurances, I do not feel safe. Though he has treated me kindly, given me every comfort a prisoner could ever want or need, I have to find a way to leave—and soon. I don't understand how it's possible, but my captor knows me. He knows my past, he knows my secrets, knows just what to say to move me ... and what to say to break me.

I have been taken by the enemy ... and I must find a way to escape before I'm *taken with* him.

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Wish Me Up, Rub Me Down by Melinda Barron

Book One of the Desires of the Lamp Tales

With no love life to speak of, BBW Anya Bartholomew lives only for her job. This dedication has paid off. As a successful advertising agent, she has risen in the ranks of her firm to be the top moneymaker.

But at the insistence of her two best friends, who claim she needs a break from work, Anya takes a weekend vacation to the small town of Pleasant, Maine. While shopping at an antique shop, she rubs a lamp that looks as if it could belong to Aladdin himself.

Things will never be the same.

Back at work on Monday morning, Anya finds that her boss has given her a new account ... for a lamp factory. However, her clients—two very handsome, very sexy men—are more than what they seem.

They're pleasure Djinn. And they have come to fulfill five of Anya's most secret sexual wishes.

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Fiery Ember by Celia Kyle

Ember Ellason is a darned good secretary. True, she'd like to be more, but since her father's passing, her step-mother has taken over as CEO of Ellason Advertising, and Clementine Ellason feels Ember is only good enough to fetch coffee ... barely. But when Clementine and her horrid daughters fail to show up for the meeting with the biggest client they could ever land, Ember saves the day by impersonating her step-mother.

Paul Ashe needs a new ad campaign and he's found the perfect company with the perfect proposal in Ellason Advertising. Too bad his body is a little too interested in the voluptuous CEO with her fiery red hair and blazing green eyes. Then he can't seem to find the elusive woman after their first intimate tryst, and is left with only a pair of panties to remember her by.

Will this Cinderella tale end in happily ever after? Or will Ember be separated from her panties—and her prince—for ever more?

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