



## ROWENA SUDBURY



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THE kingdom of Lysnowydh was tucked along the Cornish coast. It was a sleepy hamlet, protected from the marauding Welsh and far enough from London that few traveled its way. The king was old and kindly, and the promise of the kingdom settled on the tawny shoulders of his heir, Sir Christopher.

One warm spring afternoon the king walked across the fields with his son. "I shall not live forever," he said softly, "and the kingdom shall be yours when I am gone."

"Aye, Father, this I know," Christopher replied, a smile playing around the corners of his mouth. "Yet you shall be with us yet a while. Art too stubborn to depart ere your time."

The king laughed as they approached the stile. He rested his hip against the stone wall, and gazed at a crow winging across the clear sky. "None can say with certainty what the future will bring. There was a time when I believed that both I and your mother would live for lo these many years." He heaved a sigh, his eyes clouded for a moment. When he continued there was a catch in his voice. "And yet she has stepped off this mortal coil these three years past, leaving me with only you to keep me in check." He paused a moment, and then smiled as he gazed at his son. "I would stay with you for years and years to come, but 'tis a reality that I may not. You must provide an heir, to take the kingdom when 'tis your time to pass on."

Sir Christopher shifted irritably and startled the crow as it paused to alight. With an angry squawk, the crow flew on. There was not a day that passed when he did not think back on his own mother. He missed her still.

"Father, you speak of things that are far in the future. In order to provide an heir I must first obtain a wife, and I am far more interested in dallying with the lassies, not marrying them."

"Or laddies," his father replied softly.

Christopher blinked and was silent for a moment before he acknowledged

softly, "Perhaps more often with the lads."

"Aye," his father concurred. "But an heir will not come from such a union." He reached over and laid a hand on his son's shoulders. "Tis not my aim to judge you, Christopher. We have known, both of us, for many years what you prefer. 'Tis not that I seek to dissuade you from your passion, 'tis only that I seek to ensure the future of our lands. They are as much yours as they are mine."

"I will not settle down without love," Christopher said. "You and my mother had a lasting love, and I will entertain nothing less."

Heaving a great sigh, the king pushed away from the stile and began to walk. "Do not wait too long," he admonished.

Christopher laughed. "Again, Papa, I tell you, you are jousting with ghosts. You will survive many these years to come." He added a certain emphasis to the words, as if that would indeed make them truth.

HOT summer's sun beat down upon the practice yard. Sir Christopher worked hard with the squires assigned to his household. He toughened them, prepared them for the time when they would follow him to battle. He was a gentle yet tough master.

The portcullis creaked up slowly, admitted the only Welshman the kingdom trusted, Dafydd the woodsman, with his load of logs for the king's kitchen. He drove into the bailey and tethered his horse. The kitchen boys would unload the logs, and Sir Robert, the seneschal, led Dafydd to the well for a long drink.

"'Tis hotter than the blazes of hell," Sir Robert remarked as he handed the dipper to the woodsman.

Dafydd did not answer, merely grunted and raised the dipper to his full lips. He drank deeply while his eyes strayed to the tiltyard.

The sun dappled off Christopher's flowing golden hair, and his laughter rang out in the enclosed courtyard. "Ah, lads!" he shouted breathlessly. "You will have to do better than that if you aim to keep up with me in the heat of battle." He slid easily from his horse, tossed his practice sword to one of the squires before he headed across the yard to the well.

Dafydd melted back into the shadows of the stables. He watched curiously as Christopher swept the light linen shirt over his head and reached eagerly for the dipper Sir Robert offered. He doused his head and handed the dipper back. He was of medium height, and well muscled from the many battles he had already been enmeshed in. His eyes were brilliant blue and piercing as he cast them in Dafydd's direction. He kept his beard well trimmed.

"You there," he called toward the stable. "What business have you here?"

"He is the woodsman, your grace," Sir Robert said before Dafydd could

respond.

"He is a big one," Christopher said, talking as if Dafydd were an animal instead of a man. "Tis likely he would have the stamina to follow me into battle, unlike these boys that the nobility sends."

"He is a Welsh savage," Sir Robert replied as he reached for the dipper again. "All know the Welsh cannot be trusted."

As Christopher downed the second dipper of water, Sir Robert paid Dafydd the few coins he was owed for the logs, and watched as he swung up into the cart and departed.

Christopher watched as the cart lumbered from the yard, and then he scooped up his shirt and turned to bellow across the yard. "Lads! To me!"

DAFYDD was a simple man, and he lived a simple life in his cottage that was just inside the borders of the kingdom. As with many of the Welsh, he communed freely with the nature that surrounded him. His horse plodded away from the castle slowly, with the knowledge that when he returned to the paddock he would be rubbed down and given a measure of oats for his hard work that morning.

Dafydd was taller than most, and his massive shoulders were large with the muscles that came from hard work collecting wood. Unlike many others, his cheeks were clean-shaven once each week, and his hair was cropped short. Although he wore only homespun his very presence lent his humble garb richness.

It was cooler under the dense trees, yet Dafydd hardly noticed the shifting temperatures; his mind was centered solely on the memory of the golden beauty that still flashed across his vision. When he arrived back home, he stabled the horse by rote, and disappeared into the depths of his cottage.

Cleanliness was something he prized very much, a sharp contrast to most of the population. Usually he bathed once each week, Sunday evenings in a large tub that took many buckets to fill.

This sunny mid-week afternoon he dragged the tub to its spot in front of the fire and began the arduous process of filling it. His mind still locked on the memory of the golden beauty by the well; he stripped out of his clothes and settled on the stool in the bottom of the tub.

None graced the woodsman's bed, either man or woman. Most felt as the seneschal did, that the Welsh were not to be trusted. He was far from home, but solitude suited him.

Something had drawn him to Lysnowydh the year previous, and soon after he had settled that something had drawn him to the castle. He had watched from a distance in the beginning, and soon was certain that the golden light of the king's son

was what had guided his steps. He knew he had seen the vision of glowing beauty in his dreams.

'Twas rare to find the heir at home. It was usually his wont to be out on patrol, or off to London on the kingdom's business. On a day as today, when the vision appeared before him in the flesh, it set certain cravings roiling in the pit of his belly. Confusing cravings, yet they felt so right.

Usually the simple pleasure of the bath was enough to settle these cravings, yet there were times when the warm water's caress did not satisfy. He admired beauty, no matter the form it took, yet it did strike him as odd that he found the young man's memory pleasing enough to prompt this dreaming. He was not ashamed, yet he found that the touch of his own hand was poor substitute for what he wanted. It was not enough.

Not this time.

THE winter sky shared the sadness the kingdom felt at the passing of the king some months later. Perhaps he had known, that warm spring day, that his light would be extinguished before the year's end, yet he had not shared the knowledge beyond his urging to his heir. His passing was swift, with little time for any to prepare.

And once the sad business of the funeral had passed, young Christopher found himself on a quest to find a suitable wife.

"I will not marry without love," he declared before the councilors. He endured their arguments with a set chin, until he finally roared, "Enough."

His grief was deep yet. They allowed him the week and then renewed their efforts with fierce determination. He must begin the task of searching for a wife, and he must do it soon.

He traveled far and wide, and was unable to swallow his pride and take a mate. He knew he would face their accusatory stares when he returned yet again empty-handed. He was stubborn.

The icy rain gave way first to sleet, and then snow. His tired horse plodded down the narrow lane, and while Christopher knew he was within an hour of home, his tired beast did not. He must find shelter for the night, begin the journey again on the morrow.

The cottage was small, nestled along the edge of the little used track. Snow stung at his eyes yet Christopher managed to spot it. He slid from the horse, and stumbled toward the door. His horse blew behind him as he raised his fist to rap on the rough-hewn planks.

The door opened, spilled light into the swirling world of snow.

"Please, I beg shelter from the storm," he rasped. He looked up, not

recognizing the massive man who stood before him. "I shall pay."

Dafydd recognized the king at once and he stepped back. "Come; warm yourself by the fire. I will see to your horse."

"My thanks," Christopher shouted over the howl of the wind, and he moved gratefully toward the fire, warmed his hands.

The horse stabled, Dafydd returned and bolted the door behind him. He shed his woolen mantle, and gazed at the golden-haired young king where he crouched by the fire.

"I will pay you for your trouble," Christopher murmured. "I have gold."

"You will not," Dafydd responded as he moved into the room toward the large table that dominated the center of the cottage. "I do not require payment in gold for sheltering a traveler from the storm."

As the fire warmed him, Christopher shed his fur-lined cloak, rose, and sprawled in the one chair at the table. He watched as Dafydd stirred the fragrant stew in the pot hung above the fire.

"Then I shall pay you with what you desire," he said. "Everyone desires something."

Dafydd set the long-handled spoon aside and turned to pour two mugs of ale from a pitcher that sat on the windowsill. He handed one mug to Christopher and took the other for himself.

"I have all I require," he said. "A warm cottage, a horse, work I enjoy."

"Then I fear you misunderstood me," Christopher said softly. "I did not promise to give you what you require, but what you desire. There is a difference between the two."

With a grunt Dafydd set his mug on the hearth and swung the cast iron pot out from its spit over the fire. He ladled two bowls of the savory stew, and broke a round loaf in half. He handed the simple meal to the king.

"Then I will ask you for a story," he said. He sat on the floor, his back against the hearthstone.

Christopher took the bowl and realized this simple man had shared full half of his meager meal, and had allowed him to take the only chair. Were he not so bone tired and hungry he would have returned the bowl and pressed on, stronger now for having sat a quarter of an hour in the warmth. Yet something held him, and he scooped some of the rich stew up with the bread, burned his tongue, and spoke with a full mouth.

"What kind of a story do you wish?"

Dafydd ate with his spoon and saved the crust of bread to soak up the rich gravy that pooled in the bottom of the crude bowl. "A story of beauty, of the finer

things in life," he said simply.

The meal consumed, Christopher picked up his mug and accepted another measure of nut-brown ale. "I am not sure I can oblige," he said softly. "There was a time when I knew beauty, and softness in my life, but I fear now 'tis not so. Now I must needs accept that the world is a cold and hard place."

"I am a simple man," Dafydd said. "I know nothing of the world. I would accept any story you told, real or imagined. You did promise."

Christopher smiled ruefully. "That I did. Yet I fear you would know the difference between a made-up story and the truth."

"I would not know the difference," Dafydd replied softly.

"Aye, you would."

They sat in companionable silence until Dafydd refilled the mugs for the third time. Christopher took a long draught of ale, and ran his soft pink tongue over his lips to clear the foam. "My manners are sorely lacking. You have fed me a delicious meal, and yet I know not even your name."

"My name is Dafydd, and I deliver the wood for your castle's kitchens, your majesty."

"Ah, so you have had the advantage of me all this while, knowing who I am whilst I am kept in the dark." Warm, full of good food and ale, Christopher sprawled back in his chair; his eyes twinkled in the firelight.

"I am not a stranger to your bailey," Dafydd said. "But you are dallying from your task. My story."

"A promise is a promise." Christopher rested the mug on the arm of the chair. "Once there was a young lord who was the apple of his mother's eye. In fact, the only one she favored more was the lord's father, the king of a small hamlet on the Cornish coast."

Dafydd sipped his ale, comfortable on the furs that were scattered before the fire. He listened as Christopher told his story, realized it was his own history he recounted.

"The lord admired many things, yet what he admired most above all things was hard work, and thus he held those who toiled diligently above all others." He paused to look down at the woodsman. "When the lord became king, he was expected to take a wife, provide the kingdom with an heir. The new king found this prospect distasteful."

"Why was that?" Dafydd asked as he set his empty mug on the hearth.

Christopher's voice dropped, and became sultry and warm. "Because, the king preferred to have a man to warm his bed."

There was a silence between them, and yet it was not uncomfortable. Dafydd

shifted his position on the floor, moved closer to the king. Christopher dropped a hand from the arm of the chair, stroked it across the top of Dafydd's closely cropped hair.

"Does this story trouble you?" he asked softly.

"Nay," Dafydd whispered.

"The king," Christopher continued, "was sent on many a journey to find a suitable wife, yet each time he came up empty-handed, because he vowed he would not marry without love." He tipped back his mug and finished his ale. "As such, he gained the disdain of his council, and was set upon by all within his kingdom. He was not allowed proper time to mourn. He soon discovered there was little softness in the world, and all became bitter and ugly in his life."

"Mayhaps not all," was Dafydd's quiet response.

"Most," Christopher said softly. "There was not even time for the king to seek for aught beside a mate."

A log shifted in the fire and settled in a small shower of sparks. Dafydd moved closer to the hearth and shifted the embers with a long stick. He added another log, and turned to look back at the king.

"I would stay this night," Christopher said softly, "if you would allow me to sleep on the floor before your warm fire."

The wind howled outside the small cottage; icy drafts found their way inside around the windows and the door. Dafydd reached for another log and added it to the blaze.

"You must stay, your majesty. 'Tis far too cold to return to the warmth of your keep. Yet you must sleep in my bed."

Christopher cocked his head to the side, and he leaned forward in the chair, his forearms rested upon his knees. "Tis an offer you give me?"

Even in the wan light of the fire 'twas obvious that the woodsman blushed. He dipped his head to hide the confusion in his eyes. "An offer for the warmth of the bed. 'Tis I shall sleep on the hard floor."

With no more than a rustle, Christopher slipped from the chair and knelt on the floor in front of Dafydd. "'Twas not my intent to make you uncomfortable, Dafydd."

Dafydd raised his head, his eyes free of the confusion. "You do not, your majesty."

"I have told you," Christopher continued, "that I would prefer a man in my bed, not a woman. 'Tis not something most men talk about, and yet you have put me at ease, Dafydd. If it troubles you, you must needs let me know."

"I have told you that it does not," Dafydd said.

"Then you must tell me of yourself," Christopher said gently. "And what you prefer."

Dafydd dipped his head again. "I know not," he whispered.

"Ah," Christopher said. "Tis well. Your honesty speaks volumes."

"Please, your majesty," Dafydd said as he raised his eyes and met the king's steady gaze again. "You must sleep in my bed this night and allow me to take the floor."

"Aye," Christopher said, and he rose from his knees. "I am accustomed to sleeping on the hard ground, yet I will honor your request with a condition attached."

"A condition?" Dafydd said as he stood.

Christopher turned and took up his cloak from where he had tossed it earlier on the bed. "You must needs wrap up in this cloak. 'Twill keep you warm."

Dafydd hesitated and then reached out and took the cloak. "Aye," he said simply.

They settled then; the king in the bed burrowed deep amongst the furs, and Dafydd on the hearth, snug in the king's rich mantle.

When morning came Dafydd stirred first. He made a hearty oat stirabout in the cast-iron pot and drew another pitcher of ale from the barrel in the corner. The two ate in companionable silence before the rekindled fire.

At last Dafydd took the bowls and set them aside. He took up the king's cloak and brushed it deftly before handing it back.

Christopher reached for the cloak, but did not release Dafydd's hand. He pulled him closer. "My thanks, humble woodsman," he said softly, "for the sharing of your meal, your abode."

"Twas my pleasure, your majesty," Dafydd said with a slight tremor in his voice. "All that I have is yours."

"'Tis well," Christopher said. He bent forward and pressed his lips against Dafydd's. When he pulled back, he held the cloak. The woodsman had trembled against him as he bestowed what was supposed to be a kiss of peace, yet they both knew 'twas something more. "Might I come again?"

"You need not ask, your majesty. My home is yours when e're you desire."

"Then I shall return," Christopher said. He donned the cloak and turned to leave. "Mayhaps sooner than later."

"I shall look for you then."

The snowdrifts were piled deeply around the cottage. Dafydd stood before the door and watched as Christopher rode off down the track.



IN the week that followed, the snow melted and was replaced throughout the kingdom with soggy mud. Dafydd foraged through the surrounding woodlands for wood to replenish his own stock, and that of the king. Although he did not expect the king to return right away, he felt certain that one day he would.

When the roads were passable, he loaded his cart and set out for the castle. He was welcomed, and Sir Robert bade him come in to the kitchen to warm himself by the fire. There he was offered a meal, something he had not been given in the past. He gleaned, from the conversation around him, that the king was not within the castle, and that he had left for London the previous day. Warm and full, he made the journey back to his home.

The respite from the snow lasted two weeks, and then again the countryside was blanketed in white. While not a blizzard, it was still icy cold. Dafydd closed his cottage tight against winter's blast, and sat before the fire whittling a piece of wood. He was startled by a loud knock upon his door. When he opened the door, he found a messenger from the king on his doorstep.

The young man stood, awkward and stiff upon the front step. He had a basket slung over his arm.

"King Christopher bade me deliver this basket and ask after your well-being." Every line on the young man's face gave away his contempt for this distasteful task.

Dafydd reached for the basket and murmured, "My thanks." He stood uncertainly, and then he plucked the cloth cover from the basket. Hastily he wrapped the small lion he had whittled in the cloth and handed it back to the messenger. "Please tell the king I am well, and send my especial thanks for his bounty."

The messenger's face wrinkled in distaste as he took the packet. "I shall," he replied haltingly, and he turned on his heel and mounted his horse. He rode away without a backward glance.

Once he had closed the door again against the cold, Dafydd turned and set about unpacking the basket. He smiled as he unearthed an onion, a few small potatoes, a carrot, and a small piece of venison wrapped in oiled cloth.

In truth, Dafydd wished more for the company of the king than the food he seemed intent on pressing upon him. He had promised to return, and he had proven that he was a man to keep his promise. Dafydd set about cutting up the vegetables and the meat to make his dinner.

THE snow intensified the following day. In the morning Dafydd cleared a small path from his cottage to the stable and ensured his horse was fed enough to last through the day. He gathered what wood he could from the pile behind the stable and trudged back to the cottage. The stew he had made from the king's bounty still bubbled in the large iron pot hung over his fire. All that was left was to make a small loaf, and wait for the weather to clear.

As always, idleness and an encounter with anything associated with King Christopher set the cravings roiling in his belly again. As time passed the cravings became clearer in his head, yet he was still cautious to not lay a name to them. Still, at times like these he replayed the conversation betwixt them in his head and wondered how it would have been if he had not been hesitant. The dreams these musings engendered filled him with warmth.

As darkness fell the wind howled louder. Dafydd pulled the loaf from a niche inside the fireplace and set it on the table to cool. He filled his bowl with stew and sat down to eat. As he raised his spoon, there came a thunderous knocking at his door. Startled from his reverie, he hastened across the room and wrenched the door open to find the king standing upon his doorstep, as though he had drawn him with the power of his dreams.

"I have stabled my own horse," Christopher shouted above the howling of the wind.

Dafydd stood back and allowed him to enter. He shouldered the door closed behind him, and turned to watch as he shook the snow from his cloak.

"'Tis late, your majesty," Dafydd said softly. "An odd time for a visit."

Christopher turned, his eyes blazing with barely controlled fury. "And what have I interrupted that is of import?"

"Nay, your majesty." Dafydd held his hand up in supplication. "'Tis glad I am you have come, 'tis only I would have thought you would prefer the comfort of your own hearth on a night such as this."

Shoulders squared, Christopher turned to stand before the fire, and held his hands out toward its warmth. "There is no comfort in Lysnowydh." His voice was low and angry. "All within my keep seek to destroy whatever comfort I once had."

At a loss for a moment, Dafydd moved closer. "You have the meager comfort of my hearth, your majesty, for as long as 'tis needed."

"Tis well," Christopher said. He turned slowly, and the anger began to drain from his features. "I am sorry, Dafydd, for bringing my anger upon you." He sighed. "Again the council rides me to find a mate, and again I have disappointed." He reached up and pulled a wineskin from beneath his jerkin.

Dafydd took two mugs from the shelf above the hearth and set them on the table. He swung the iron pot out and ladled another bowl. "Tis not necessary to feed me, your majesty, or repay me for things I give you freely," he said as he turned back and poured two mugs of wine. "Tis but your company I crave."

"I knew 'twas right to come here," Christopher said, and now all the anger drained from his face, replaced by bemusement. "Not many have the courage to speak to me thus." He took the bowl of stew and the mug of wine and sat down before the fire.

There was still only one chair in the cottage, and again Dafydd sat upon the hearth. He broke the cooled loaf in half and gave a portion to the king. "Tis not my intent to offer disrespect to you, your majesty," he said quietly. "I but speak what is in my heart."

"Aye," Christopher said, his mouth full of bread and stew. "Tis not disrespect." Tis honest truth with no coloring of demand." He picked up his wine and took a healthy draught. "In my keep, most seek to bend me to their will, although none would freely admit such."

When Dafydd had finished his bowl, he set it aside, and refilled both the mugs with the rich wine. He laid another log on the fire and resumed his seat upon the hearth.

Christopher sighed in contentment and sprawled back in his chair. "Mayhaps now I might tell you that story, the one of beauty and softness."

Dafydd cocked his head to the side. "You shall find none of those here. 'Tis why I asked for the story, to slake my curiosity."

"Art wrong," Christopher said, and his eyes twinkled. "Beauty and softness, you already possess. I shall slake your curiosity if 'tis what you desire." He held the empty bowl out.

Dafydd reached for the bowl. "It is what I desire, your majesty," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Christopher laid his hand on Dafydd's as he took the bowl. He waited until Dafydd raised his eyes to look at him. "Be careful what you ask for, Dafydd. Once the wheel is set in motion, 'tis not easy to halt." His fingers were a gentle caress on the back of his hand. "In truth, I read that desire in you the last time I was here; 'tis one of the reasons I have returned. 'Tis not my wish to force your decision."

"Aye," Dafydd said softly. "Yet one that I have had upon my mind since last

you were here. I am ready to lay name to the desire."

The lines around Christopher's mouth softened, and his eyes flared. "Tis well." He released Dafydd's hand, and sat back with his brimming mug. He took a deep swallow and watched as Dafydd resettled. "I will stay the night. Is your desire to share yon bed with me?"

Dafydd met the king's steady gaze and said, "Aye."

The king held out his hand, and Dafydd moved closer. He did not flinch as Christopher laid his hand on his shoulder, nudged him closer so that he leaned against his legs. "Have you bedded with a man before, Dafydd?" he asked gently.

"Nay," Dafydd murmured.

"There is pain," Christopher said. "And yet I shall be gentle."

"I do not fear pain," Dafydd said, his voice stronger.

"Turn and look at me," Christopher said. He waited as Dafydd shifted around to face him. "Tis well; I see no fear in your eyes." He took Dafydd's hand and urged him up so that he knelt between his splayed knees. He bent forward and touched his lips gently to Dafydd's, and whispered against his mouth, "I would see you."

With a small gasp, Dafydd moved back and stood. Leather belt, homespun jerkin and shirt, and worn doeskin boots and chausses removed one at a time. He stood before the king, hands in loose fists at his sides.

"Art magnificent," Christopher said as he rose. He skimmed over Dafydd's torso, touched lightly over muscled arms and flat abdomen.

Dafydd groaned low in his throat as Christopher curled his hand around his member and raised up on tiptoes for a deeper kiss. He swayed with the intensity, held out his hands to anchor himself against the king. Christopher slid his hand free and pressed his clothed body against Dafydd's naked flesh and allowed the kiss to continue for just the moment. At last he broke contact and stepped back.

Firelight bathed them as Christopher began to remove his own clothing. Soft cotton and furred jerkin, sword belt and fine velvet chausses: a stark contrast. When he stepped back, Dafydd looked upon his golden skin, peppered with the scars of battle, yet smooth and soft.

Fingers twined, they stood in the warm glow of the hearth, explored with lips and fingers until Dafydd shuddered with need. Christopher whispered against his ear, "Go; lie upon the bed."

Dafydd settled amongst the furs, spread wide to accept the king. Christopher stalked across the room and knelt upon the bed at his side. The glow of the fire barely touched them now.

"Touch me," Christopher breathed as he moved between Dafydd's outstretched legs.

Hand unclenched from a fist, Dafydd skimmed over the king's furred thigh and higher to touch his flat belly, the sculpted planes of his chest, the curving scar upon his shoulder. He watched the changing shadows upon the king's face and then trailed his hand down until he brushed over his length and elicited a gasping moan. Emboldened, he closed his hand around Christopher's shaft and stroked gently.

Christopher shifted closer, raised Dafydd's legs to rest upon his knees, laid his hands upon his hips. He raised his fingers to his mouth and suckled upon them, and then he began to touch with the promised gentleness.

Dafydd's eyes grew round with desire as he watched Christopher's fingers disappear into his mouth. He arched up with a moan when Christopher closed his fist around his length again.

"Shh," Christopher crooned. He lowered his hand, teased wet fingers around Dafydd's hole, massaged against the puckered flesh until he elicited another moan. All at once he pushed two fingers deeply inside, slid past the tight ring of muscles, and feathered kisses against Dafydd's chest. He could feel his wildly fluttering heartbeat beneath his lips and inside his passage. "Open for me, Dafydd."

Eyes open, Dafydd released his grip upon the king and settled back down against the furs. As his body relaxed, Christopher eased his fingers free and pushed in again. He rose upright and kept his eyes locked with Dafydd's as he twisted his fingers inside deeply.

"Raise your legs; hold them thus," Christopher directed. He watched as Dafydd complied and then slowly drew his fingers free. He turned to spit into his palm and slicked his shaft. "Give me your hand."

Fingers wound tightly together, Christopher pressed close, and slowly began to sink inside. Dafydd tightened his grip and his eyes slipped closed as he arched back and wailed softly. Sunk in completely, Christopher raised their joined hands and held them against his mouth. He waited for Dafydd to subside back against the furs.

"Open your eyes," Christopher murmured. "That I might hold you within mine own as you break."

With another keening moan, Dafydd opened his eyes. Christopher reached up to caress a finger against his cheek. He leaned down as far as he could and brushed his lips over Dafydd's, then he angled back, and pushed in again, and again, each time increasing the pace.

As their bodies twisted together, Dafydd's grunts of pain gave way to moans of pleasure. Christopher wound his hand between their twisting bodies and stroked Dafydd in time with his thrusting hips.

"Ah, Dafydd," Christopher moaned at last. "Come with me." And he thrust hard one last time as he shuddered with release.

A wordless moan was all Dafydd could muster as he exploded against the king's body. His eyes closed against the sudden rush of some emotion he was unable

to define. When the shivering stilled and he lay back against the furs, Christopher slipped free and molded his body along Dafydd's side.

"Art a beautiful man, Dafydd, and filled with kindness," he whispered raggedly. "Mayhaps you see now that your story has been here all along."

"Nay, your majesty," Dafydd murmured. "'Tis your beauty that has overwhelmed me and your kindness surrounds me always."

"Sleep now," Christopher whispered. "In the morning I shall amend your story with a tale of love."

With their bodies pressed against each other beneath the warm furs, they drifted to sleep.

DAFYDD awoke the next morning with unaccustomed soreness settled across his bones. He shifted beneath the warm furs and his knee nudged against the king's. Frozen for a moment, he took time to remember the incredible evening past. Carefully, he turned on his side and found the golden-haired king slumbering peacefully beside him. His mouth went dry, and all at once he craved solitude to better sort out the cataclysm of feelings that raced through the pit of his belly.

Inch by inch he disentangled himself from the warm nest of the bed, and shivered when his sleep-warmed skin was exposed to the cool of the early morning cottage. First things first: nature called strongly. He used the pot in the corner, and then moved toward the fire. The need was great to rekindle the hearth before the embers died out completely. Soon enough the fire would warm his skin again. With a steady breath, he brought the flames to life, fed small bits of scrap wood in until it blazed merrily again. Only then did he turn to retrieve his scattered clothing.

"Come and join me," came a hoarse whisper from the bed.

Soft color suffused Dafydd's cheeks, and he turned to find the king awake, and gazing upon him.

"I must needs tend the horses, bring water, begin my daily round of tasks, or you shall not eat this day," he said softly, though in truth he longed to clamber back into the bed, feel the heated touch of Christopher's fingers yet again.

With a casual grace, Christopher arose from the bed, wrapped his arms solidly around Dafydd's waist, and pressed a soft kiss against the fluttering pulse in his neck. He swept his hands down to cup his ass firmly as he held them tightly together. "Then we shall have to cast a deal between us. I will let you dress and tend to your duties, yet I will reclaim what is mine when you least expect it." He rose on tiptoes and claimed a kiss.

Dafydd swayed in the warm embrace and his voice was strangled sounding when he spoke next. "Aye, I agree to these terms."

Christopher's soft laughter washed over him, and then he was bereft as the king turned and sauntered to the pot in the corner. "Be quick," he said over his shoulder. "I have a rather large appetite this morning."

After dressing, Dafydd pulled on his mantle and heaved his shoulder against the door, pushed it open against the drift of snow that covered it. The air was still; the storm had blown itself out in the middle of the night. He allowed his tumbled thoughts to accompany him to the stable.

The horses were restless, and Dafydd soothed them with a soft touch. As he scooped oats into the trough, he allowed the overriding thought to emerge. Although he had never experienced the joining of his body in quite that manner, the memory was a pleasurable one. He vowed to take the day as it came, and fully expected that once fed, the king would take his pleasure once again, and then leave forever. Twould be a meager memory to hold, and yet it was all he expected.

Once the horses were settled, he filled a bucket with clean snow and returned to the cottage. Christopher was dressed, and sitting before the fire. Dafydd swung the kettle out and filled it with snow, then returned it to the fire. When the water was warmed, he added oats to form a thick stirabout and at the last minute threw in a handful of precious raisins.

"I shall have to set you to work in my kitchens," Christopher said as he accepted the bowl.

"Tis but simple fare," Dafydd replied, as he scooped up the oats with relish.

"Tell me," Christopher said when his bowl was scraped clean. "How do you spend your days here in the woods?"

Dafydd reached forward and retrieved both the bowls. "In summer I spend the days foraging for wood, and tend to my garden plot. In winter I forage when I can, spend the day indoors when I cannot."

"And do you not get bored?" Christopher asked with genuine curiosity.

"Nay," Dafydd replied. He rose to begin his round of tasks. "I have always enjoyed solitude." He drew a pitcher of ale from the barrel in the corner, and poured a mug for the king.

The king kept up a rousing banter as Dafydd worked, regaled him with many tales of his campaigns, and of life in the castle. He watched as Dafydd cleaned the dishes, cut up dried meat and onions, then dumped them into the pot that had contained the oat cereal. While the king talked of minstrels and a journey to the French court, Dafydd stirred and added to the pot until it became a rich stew that bubbled slowly.

When Dafydd began the process of making bread, Christopher spoke with glowing pride of the squires he trained. He shifted his chair closer to the table and watched as Dafydd kneaded the bread with strong hands.

"I thought," Dafydd said when Christopher's rich voice ceased, "you would

have been off for home ere now."

Christopher frowned. "I will ask you the same question I asked last night: what am I interrupting? You go about your work whilst I am here. What hurry have you in seeing me gone?"

Dafydd's hands stilled in the mass of dough, and he looked up, his lower lip caught between strong teeth. "There is no hurry," he said hoarsely. "Tis just that you prolong the agony by staying overlong."

Quick as lightning, Christopher was on his feet and around the table. He stood close behind Dafydd, leaned against him, and pressed him against the rough table. "What agony?"

"Your majesty," Dafydd said, "I can be naught to you. Take your pleasure and let the debt betwixt us be settled."

Christopher tugged roughly at the lacings that held Dafydd's chausses with one hand while he pushed him flat against the flour-covered board with the other. When Dafydd struggled upward, Christopher growled angrily in his ear, "Stay." He succeeded in tearing the chausses open, and shoved them roughly down before working on his own.

"I am a man of my word," he hissed against Dafydd's ear. "Were it only that I wanted pleasure of your body, I would have taken it and left, not filled you with tales of my life." Both their bodies bare below the waist, he turned and spit upon his fingertips. "Perhaps I did not make my intentions clear." He nudged Dafydd's legs apart, and roughly fingered him. "When I said 'claim what is mine,' 'tis what I meant." Fingers removed, he positioned and thrust hard into Dafydd's prone body. "I meant that you are mine."

Dafydd moaned against the table and coughed as he inhaled the flour. He struggled to free one hand from the soggy bread dough and brushed it against the surface of the table. All protestations died on his lips as the king's hands gentled on his body, the firm grip turned into a gentle stroking.

"When I said I would tell you a love story this day," Christopher's voice became a soft croon as he pulled back and pushed in slowly, "I meant I would tell you the story of a cold and weary king who happened upon the cottage of a wild woodsman, and in this woodsman's narrow bed, he found what he believed was love." He snaked his hand around Dafydd's hip, found and gently stroked his erection. "Sudden though it seemed."

Eyes closed, Dafydd rocked back against the thrusting hips of the king. The bread dough was ruined; he gripped it so tightly. No words were formed; only incoherent moaning of delight and desire.

Christopher moved his hand in a gentle caress over Dafydd's back, covered his in the dough, all the while thrusting harder and deeper and stroking more firmly. "Sweet... Dafydd...," he whispered. "Art mine."

Shuddering against the table, Dafydd released into the king's hand, felt himself filled with the warmth of Christopher's seed, heard the grunts of pleasure, felt his knees give way with weakness. As quickly as it had begun, it was over.

"Come," Christopher said and he straightened up, pulling Dafydd up against him. "I would feel you in my arms. The chores are done for the day."

"The bread," Dafydd said, freeing his fingers from the sticky mass.

"Tis I who ruined the bread," Christopher said ruefully. "I will not grumble when there is none for the meal." He bent down, helped Dafydd step from his chausses and boots. He pulled him along toward the bed, and divested them both of the rest of their clothing. "Give me your warmth."

Dafydd tumbled across the bed, pulled Christopher down against him, and tucked the warm furs about them. Their legs twined together, arms encircled each other's bodies. When they settled, Christopher pursed his lips against Dafydd's chest, above his pounding heartbeat.

"Tomorrow I will return to my castle, with you by my side."

"Your majesty," Dafydd said, "your people expect you to return with a fair maiden who will bring you an heir. I cannot have a place by your side."

"Aye, you can and you will," Christopher said firmly. "I will brook no argument, from the council, and least from you. Mayhaps a man cannot know his heart so quickly, but I know I can, and do. Art not idle words I speak."

Dafydd held Christopher closer beneath the furs, afraid to burst the bubble. He pressed his lips against the top of Christopher's head.

Christopher settled closer, stifled a small yawn. "Drowse with me, and when we awake I shall take you once more, with gentleness and care."

"You honor me," Dafydd whispered.



DUSK was descending upon the countryside as the king and the woodsman returned to the castle the following day. The bailey was rutted with mud and teeming with subjects who had come to welcome the king upon his return. Many curious glances were sent the woodsman's way, yet he remained impassive and focused on the blond hair of the king.

As they entered the hall, the king's manservant Alain approached.

"Ready the room that adjoins to mine," Christopher said. "Air the bed, sweeten the rushes, make sure water is heated."

"Aye, my lord," Alain replied, and he turned to carry out the king's commands without a backward glance.

Christopher led Dafydd to the great fireplace where the council awaited. Father Geoffrey had been the priest in the castle since the old king's time and Sir Robert the seneschal for many years. Rounding out the council were Sir Richard, the king's marshal, and Sir Henry and Sir Walter, landless knights who had thrown their allegiance in with Christopher's father.

"Your majesty," Father Geoffrey said, his brow furrowed in a frown, "we expected your return yestereve."

Christopher eyed them silently, and then said, "Know this. In future 'twill not be your duty to burden me with what I can and cannot do. I rode forth in high fury and sought refuge from the storm in the woodsman's cottage. I passed the day with him and now have brought him back to the keep. He is to reside here, with me. All in Lysnowydh will make him welcome."

Dour looks of disdain filled their faces as they cast their eyes from the king to the woodsman. "Your majesty—"

"Silence," Christopher said firmly. "I shall meet with you shortly, yet be forewarned that I will brook no arguments from you. I know what you desire, yet you know not what is in my heart." He turned toward Dafydd. His expression softened

and his voice was easy again. "I will send you to your quarters to bathe, and will join you to sup before you sleep."

"Aye," Dafydd replied softly. They had spoken on the ride back to the castle and Christopher had prepared Dafydd for what life in the castle would be like. Though he was loath to leave the king's side, he turned and strode back to the stairway where Alain awaited.

"This stairway," Alain said as they ascended the narrow passageway, "is for the king and his immediate family only. No others have access." At the top was a small landing with three doors. "This is the king's chamber," Alain said, indicating the farthest doorway, "and this is your chamber."

Dafydd followed him into a room that was as large as his entire cottage. The walls were hung with tapestries, the floor covered with rushes sweetened with clover. A large hearth took up one wall and had a fire blazing within. The bed was good-sized, hung all around with curtains. There was a chair by the outer wall, and a small window fitted with a pane of clear glass. Adjoining this room was a small still room.

"The only chamber in the castle that is better appointed than this one is the king's own," Alain said with glowing pride.

Before Dafydd could respond, Alain continued through the room and disappeared through a door on the other side. Dafydd followed and found himself in a room that was about half the size of the sleeping chamber.

"The bathing chamber," Alain said. "The old king had it built especially for his wife, yet it was clear he enjoyed the convenience it afforded. The tub is oversized, with a small hole in the bottom that can be plugged to hold water, and when it is pulled out the water travels through a pipe, and is let out through another hole in the bottom. 'Tis used to water the kitchen garden." He walked toward the fireplace. "There is always water heating here, for any time you care to bathe. There is an entrance for this room alone so that I can keep the water replenished without disturbing either you or the king in your rooms."

Dafydd nodded, intrigued by the setup. The tub was larger than the one he had at home, and the easy drain removed half the work.

"The king will join you after he meets with the council, and I will bring the meal to be served in your room," Alain said softly. "Tomorrow I shall send my son John to serve you, but for this night I will assist in your bath."

"I need no assistance," Dafydd said quickly, "and I do not need a servant."

Alain smiled softly. "You are not familiar with the ways of our castle. Perhaps you do not require help with your bathing, but a servant you will need, and to serve you would be an honor for my son, and my family."

"In what way?" Dafydd asked.

Alain moved to a barrel set beside the tub and began to scoop buckets of water into the bottom of the tub. "I have served the king these many years, since he was a

young man barely weaned from his nurse."

Dafydd reached for the bucket, and Alain handed it to him. He swung the heavy pot out from above the fire and began to dip out the hot water to mix with the cool.

"The king does nothing by half measures. I see where his passions lie, even when his council cannot." He paused for a moment. "I see how he cares for you."

The tub filled, Alain turned to remove a pot of soft soap and a scrubbing brush from a cabinet by the tub. He unfolded a linen towel and hung it on a rack beside the warm fire. He set a loose-fitting garment over the rack and then turned to face Dafydd again.

"While you bathe I will bring the meal up to your chamber. When you are done, leave the water for the king."

Dafydd reached out and touched Alain's arm as he turned to leave. "My thanks," he said softly.

"'Tis my pleasure."

Once alone, Dafydd stripped from his clothing. The water was blissfully warm, and soothed his tired and sore muscles. The soap was fragrant, unlike the simple lye soap he used at home. He did not linger in the tub. He dried quickly, donned the bedrobe, and found it tight across the shoulders.

Back in his own chamber, he found a small table drawn up before the hearth, and two chairs. He sank into one of the chairs to wait.

While he waited he digested what Alain had told him, thought back to the reception in the main hall and realized he had many questions. He did not have to wait long as soon there were voices in the bathing chamber, and then Christopher, similarly clad in a bedrobe, swept into the room.

Dafydd stood and Christopher pulled him into an embrace, molded his body against his larger frame. "Mmm," he murmured. "I trust you find the room comfortable."

"Aye," Dafydd said, nuzzling against the top of Christopher's head. "Though a trifle rich for my taste."

Christopher chuckled. "Get used to it; 'tis what you deserve now you are here." He stepped from the embrace and turned toward the table. "Sit. Let me serve you."

"Nay, your majesty," Dafydd said. "'Tis my place to serve you."

"Two things," Christopher said as he pressed a hand against Dafydd's chest and eased him into the chair. "In these rooms you must call me Christopher." He removed the cloth that covered the simple meal. "And you must allow me to repay your hospitality."

"Meager hospitality compared with this," Dafydd said softly.

"No more," Christopher said, the familiar hint of steel in his voice. "You housed me grandly and gave me all the comfort I have ever desired."

Under the cloths rested half a pheasant, a small loaf of soft white bread with a crock of creamy butter, half a wheel of cheese, and a small apple pastry. Christopher divided the meal between them, and poured a measure of light wine into each of their goblets. They ate in silence, as it was the first meal they had eaten since an oat stirabout that morning.

When the meal was completed, Christopher covered the dishes with the cloth again, rose, and extended a hand to Dafydd. "I instructed Alain to remove the dishes in the morning; we will be alone for the rest of the night."

Dafydd rose and followed Christopher to the bed. They climbed up, sat facing each other. The curtains were drawn on each side except for the fireside. Christopher took Dafydd's hand in his, raised it, and pressed a kiss to the back of his hand.

"Christopher," Dafydd said softly, "what is my role here in your home?"

With twinkling eyes Christopher replied, "You mean you will not be content to be my captive, kept here in luxury to serve my needs?" He squeezed Dafydd's hand and continued before he could respond. "I mean to instruct you in the arts of war, teach you swords, strategies, horsemanship. Prepare you so that one day you will be my marshal, ride beside me into battle. You are more suited for such work than collecting wood."

"What makes you think that?" Dafydd asked.

Christopher cocked his head to the side. "Your response makes me think that. A humble woodsman would hang his head and avow that collecting wood is all he is good for. He would not sit there and look at me with interest in the depths of his eyes. The prospect intrigues you."

"The prospect of war?"

"Aye. You are not a stranger to it. There is something hidden within you that I have yet to discover. Dispute not what is in your heart, Dafydd."

Dafydd did not shield his eyes, did not look away. His massive frame filled the confines of the bed. When he replied his voice was husky with emotion. "I will not deny that the prospect of riding to battle fills me with anticipation, or dispute that you have the truth of it that it is not unknown to me."

Christopher smiled and shifted closer. "There will be time on the morrow for talk of that; 'tis not the only reason I brought you here." He moved closer, his lips brushing over Dafydd's. "This room is the chamber set aside for the king's consort. In most cases a queen, but in my case, 'tis you."

Tentatively Dafydd reached out, placed a hand on the king's thigh. "Tis one area where you have the better of me," he whispered. "I have knowledge of the woods, of battles, of riding to war." He tightened his hand slightly. "But amorous pursuits are new to me."

"Then I shall gain great pleasure in teaching you," Christopher said. "It pleases me that you are such a willing pupil." He reached up and caressed the back of Dafydd's neck tenderly. "I know that after the two days past you must have a day or two to recover because I do not wish to cause you further pain."

"The pain does not trouble me," Dafydd murmured.

"Aye, but it troubles me," Christopher said as he ran his thumb over Dafydd's cheek. "And there are other ways to pleasure each other." He sat back. "Give me your hand."

With a puzzled look, Dafydd released his hold on the king's leg and raised his hand. Christopher took it, folded the fingers in toward the palm, leaving the index finger extended. He raised the hand to his face, brushed his lips over the tip of Dafydd's finger, and elicited a small moan. Pink tongue extended, he circled the digit and then closed his lips over the tip.

Dafydd gripped his other hand tightly in the furs that covered the bed and groaned again.

Christopher continued sucking on Dafydd's finger. He wet his lips and pushed down, allowed his tongue to caress on the upward path, nipped lightly with his teeth. He reached down and roughly pulled on the belt of Dafydd's bedrobe, pushed the halves of the robe open and exposed his swelling erection.

"Mmm," Christopher said, his lips still caressing the tip of Dafydd's finger. "Imagine my mouth here." He closed his hand around Dafydd's cock. He angled his head back, still holding Dafydd's finger close to his mouth. "Would that please you?"

Struck mute by the eroticism, Dafydd could merely nod his head. Christopher's eyes twinkled again, and then he broke the gaze and continued the assault on both finger and cock. He sucked his finger expertly, stroked his cock from the tip to the base of his shaft, then cupped and fondled his balls.

Dafydd moaned and pushed his hips up with each downward stroke of Christopher's hand. Christopher grated his teeth lightly up to the tip, released the finger, and blew a gentle stream of cool air over him. Dafydd moaned again and sank back against the soft furs enclosed in the whirling sensations.

"That's it," Christopher murmured. "Lie back and enjoy." He bent forward and spit a glob of saliva on Dafydd's cock and then took his finger back into his mouth. He watched, judging by the look on his face, and the vibrations through his cock, gripped tight just as he was taken with orgasm. He stroked firmly until the crisis was passed, and then relaxed his fist into gentler stroking as he watched the emotions that crossed Dafydd's face.

When Dafydd's eyes fluttered open, Christopher gently released his cock and raised his hand to his mouth, lapped up a small taste. "Good," he said softly. "The next time I will taste you more completely." He reached down, opened the front of his own bedrobe, and revealed how the encounter had affected him. He moved to straddle over Dafydd's body, raised a hand to tease a finger along the seam of his lips.

The warmth that suffused Dafydd's body showed plainly on his face. He reached up to close his larger hand around Christopher's, opened his mouth, and drew the finger within. Christopher groaned and arched forward, his cock dragging against Dafydd's belly. Mimicking the movements that had been shown him, Dafydd sucked on the finger, teased his teeth along the edge, and caressed the rest of his hand gently.

Christopher closed his own hand around his cock and stroked languidly, his knuckles rasped gently over Dafydd's belly. His hair fell across his face and he leaned forward and murmured nonsensical testaments to how good it felt. Dafydd reached up and twined his fingers together with Christopher's to stroke his shaft.

"Ahh," Christopher sighed at last, "I shall enjoy feeling your mouth on my cock, sucking, teasing." He paused to moan and thrust his hips forward harder. "Swallowing what I give you."

Dafydd squeezed Christopher's fist tighter and wrapped his tongue around his long finger. Head thrown back, mouth open in a prolonged wail, Christopher arched forward again and came, sending thick ropes of his essence across Dafydd's chest. Dafydd pulled his mouth free from Christopher's finger and moaned. Words failed to form in his mouth to adequately express how the encounter made him feel.

Together they released their hold, and Christopher eased down to mold his body alongside Dafydd's. He nuzzled along his neck, groped for the furs to cover them.

"When we are both at home, I will sleep here with you."

"Aye," Dafydd said softly. "I crave your warmth beside me."

"You shall have it," Christopher said, his palm flat on Dafydd's chest, feeling his strong heartbeat.

The fire burned down to embers, and curled together the woodsman and the king fell asleep.



DAFYDD awoke the next morning and found himself alone in the great bed. He passed his hand over the furs and found them cold; the king had left the bed long since. The curtains were drawn closer than they had been the previous night, and through the slit he could see the fire burned brightly once again. Before this registered, a figure passed between the hearth and the bed. Dafydd sat up and yanked the curtains open.

"Ah, you are awake, my lord."

"Who are you?" Dafydd asked, remaining in the bed.

"I am John, my lord," the young man answered as he gave a small bow. "Here to assist you."

"I told your father yestereve that I have no need for a servant," Dafydd said softly.

"Please, my lord," John said and he dropped to his knees. "Please let me prove my worth to my father, and the king he loves so well. Do not send me from you in disgrace. I will do all you ask of me."

Dafydd closed his eyes. It was a strange world he found himself in, and though he did not want to upset the natural way things progressed here, he found it difficult to adjust. He heaved a great sigh, and spoke softly. "I do not mean to disgrace you, but I find it hard to change the ways I am used to." He opened his eyes. "Leave me to dress myself, and call me Dafydd when you return."

John's eyes brightened, and he rose from his kneeling position. "Aye, my—" He paused and grinned impishly. "Dafydd. I shall return with your breakfast."

After John hurried from the room, Dafydd stepped from the bed and stretched. On the hearth he spied a neatly stacked pile of clothing, but could not find his own clothing. He peeked into the bathing chamber, but they were not there either. The new garments fit him perfectly and as he dressed he realized they had been made for him with his old clothes as a pattern. Soft leather chausses, a cotton shirt, and a woolen

jerkin completed the ensemble. He found his old boots had been brushed and cleaned, and as he finished tying them John returned with the food.

"Bread and cheese," he said as he set the tray on the table. "I did not know if you preferred wine or ale so I brought both."

"Ale," said Dafydd. He broke off a hunk of bread and a piece of cheese and found he had a healthy appetite.

"The king bade me give you a message," John said. "He said he would see you this eve, and that today I am to have the seamstress measure you for a new wardrobe and show you the grounds of the castle." He smiled. "He said I was not to wake you and let you sleep for as long as you desired."

Dafydd grunted and continued to eat, following the bread and cheese with a healthy measure of ale. He watched as John pushed back the curtains on the bed, turned away as he began to fluff the furs. "John."

"Aye... Dafydd," he said softly.

"Leave that and come here."

When John stood before him, Dafydd sank into one of the chairs and bade John sit in the other. "I am a simple man," he said softly, "used to living alone in my cottage in the woods. 'Tis no secret that until two days ago I was simply a poor woodsman. By great fortune the king deigned to shelter with me from a storm, and now I find myself living here in his castle. Yet, as I said, these ways are uncomfortable for me. There are still too many things to adjust to, and I am not comfortable with you doing things I can do for myself."

John laced his fingers together. "And I know no different. My father has served the king these many years, and he hoped that one day the king might have a son that I could serve." He looked away, soft color on his cheeks. "My father has told me that it is likely the king mayhaps will not father a son, and he has told me the reason why." He looked back into Dafydd's eyes. "Perhaps you are not comfortable with me here, but your presence has been my salvation. Were it not for you I would be pressed into the king's army, and I have not the desire or passion for that. This is what I know, what I was trained for. If you will give me the chance, I can adapt to your requirements, and still perform the functions that are expected by both the king and my father."

Dafydd nodded. "Perhaps together we can manage."

"Aye," said John with a grin. "I believe we can."

THE castle was large, and as they made their way through it Dafydd began to see the logic in having a servant. It would be difficult to maneuver through the many passageways alone. The main hall was centrally located, and off of it was a private

solar for the king's family as well as the council chambers. The rest of the ground floor was divided between common sleeping chambers, the kitchens, storerooms, and workrooms.

The seamstress clucked over Dafydd, exclaiming about how large his arms and legs were. When she had measured him she showed him her store of fabrics.

"I have need only for shirts and chausses," he said softly. "These you have already provided are suitable; perhaps another set like this is all I will need."

"Nonsense," the seamstress tsked. "The king's consort needs much more, and far richer clothing than what I have already given you. If you will not choose, then I will choose for you. This bold green will suit, I believe, as well as this midnight blue. A cloak lined with rabbit fur." She sorted through the stacks and found a bundle of furs. "And of course you must have a bedrobe." She turned and winked. "Or mayhaps two in case one is torn."

Dafydd turned, his face flamed bright red. Nothing was sacred amongst these people.

"Have you cleaned my lord's cloak?" John asked, cutting across the uncomfortable silence. "I must needs show him the stables."

"Aye," said the seamstress with a merry laugh as she handed over the garment.

"My thanks," Dafydd said as they made their way across the wintry bailey.

"The castlefolk know why the king has brought you here," John said. "And they love the king so they mean you no disrespect. Matilda has been in service with the king's household long enough that she gives herself liberties, and yet none deny her the right to take them."

Dafydd had seen the stables many times before. He spoke with the grooms and saw that his horse was comfortably stabled. As they made their way back toward the door they came across the seneschal.

"Sir Robert," John said and he stopped to incline his head. "I was just showing Dafydd the grounds."

"Aye, I know what you are doing," he said and he moved to block Dafydd's path. "I am left with one question, however."

Dafydd rose to his full height, sensed that all was not well.

"Where is the castle to procure their wood now that the woodsman is fucking the king?"

John gasped and lunged forward to place himself between the two men.

"You have a good store of wood to last through the winter," Dafydd said, his hands clenched in fists at his sides. "When the warm weather comes, I shall replenish the supply."

"Ah, so you mean to live above your station in the royal apartments, and then

dirty your hands with menial work to earn your keep? I doubt you will have the strength come spring."

"Sir Robert," John said, "you hardly have the right to speak thus."

"Watch yourself, whelp," Sir Robert said, and he raised his hand as if to strike the back of it across John's face. "Were you not elevated to the status of servant to the king's whore you would still be sopping out the pig sties. Mind your mouth."

Dafydd reached out and gripped his hand around Sir Robert's wrist tightly, stopped him from striking John. "Mayhaps I live above my station in your eyes, but I have been invited, and as such you will keep your hands from me, and mine." He released his grip and stepped back. "And keep your filthy thoughts to yourself as they serve no purpose here."

Sir Robert raised his head and stared down his nose at Dafydd, then turned on his heel and strode away through the puddles that dotted the bailey.

"I shall alert the king, my lord," John said. "Sir Robert has no call to address you such."

"Nay," said Dafydd. "Allow him to believe he is the victor this time." He turned, and smiled. "And I asked you not to call me lord."

John dipped his head and grinned sheepishly. "Aye, Dafydd, you did as much." He cast one more glance at the seneschal as he disappeared up into the castle, then turned back. "Let me show you the battlements, and then 'twill be time to sup."

The narrow walkway that ran around the top of the castle walls afforded views on three sides of the castle. The fourth side overlooked the ocean far below. John allowed Dafydd time to circle the walkways on his own, and gaze out over the sea toward Wales. The air grew cooler as the sun dipped lower, but thankfully the skies remained clear.

Eventually they made their way back down to the castle and the evening meal.

DAFYDD had time to return to his room and wash his hands and face. He found the first of the promised bedrobes laid out neatly across the foot of the bed. When he came down to the main hall, the rosy glow still covered his features.

Christopher stood amid his councilors, yet he broke away from them as soon as Dafydd entered the hall. He reached for Dafydd's hand and raised it to press a light kiss on the back of it. "I've missed you, Dafydd," he said softly.

The color bloomed again over Dafydd's ruddy tan and he murmured, "And I you, your majesty."

"Come," Christopher said. "I would make you known to my council."

The council received Dafydd with polite greetings, their eyes shifted amongst one another when they thought the king was not looking. Dafydd shifted uncomfortably; yet one more brick in the wall that had been built that day. At last they moved to the table. The king seated Dafydd on his left.

A page approached with a bowl and held it so that the king might wash his hands. "Thank you, young Patrick," the king said as he reached for the towel that hung over the page's arm. "You will make a good squire some day."

"Sir Cuthbert says I'm almost ready to advance, your majesty," Patrick said. He bowed his head politely.

"Have you learned your lessons well?" Christopher asked.

"Aye. He says I'm not to fart, or belch, or make any noise with my body parts when I stand behind you."

Christopher smiled, and turned to wink at Dafydd. "Sir Cuthbert is most correct, and I shall tell him that you have learned well. Mayhaps I should also mention your cheekiness that he might lesson you to better manners."

Patrick turned white and gasped, "Nay, your majesty, in truth I meant no disrespect." He backed away, and turned to retreat when Christopher stopped him.

"Offer the bowl to Dafydd, young Patrick. He would like clean hands for the feast as much as I would."

"I am sorry, your majesty, truly I am," Patrick said. He turned back and nearly spilled the water in his haste.

Dafydd dutifully dipped his hands in the water, and dried them on the towel. "Thank you," he said softly.

"'Tis well young Patrick, yet I shall watch you more closely in future," Christopher said as Patrick turned to hurry away.

The meal was far grander in scale than any Dafydd had yet experienced. They started with a bowl of clams nestled on ice. Next came a whole bass poached in a savory broth. There were pheasants and game birds stuffed and roasted until crisp. A side of venison served with a rich wine sauce, bowls of new peas and carrots, a small salad of leafy greens, and fresh white bread served with creamy butter. To round out the meal came pastries and fruits and cheeses. A sweet wine that Christopher said was bottled within the castle accompanied all.

When the meal was completed, the nobles and peasants alike sprawled back in contentment. Christopher stood and raised his goblet high, and the assembled mass fell silent.

"I would like you all to make Dafydd welcome to our home. He has been living this year past within the realm of the kingdom and is known to many of you. I have asked him to move from his home to mine, and he has agreed. Please offer the hand of welcome as you are wont to do."

There was a quiet murmuring, and then Sir Richard stood and raised his goblet. "Welcome to our home, Dafydd," he bellowed. "May you stay as long as you please and prosper as we prosper."

"Hear, hear!" The assent was scattered at first, and then grew in volume.

"My thanks, Sir Richard," Christopher roared, and raised his goblet to the elder man.

Dafydd raised his goblet in return, and they drank a long toast.

The crowd returned to their seats, and the hall was filled with quiet murmuring. Christopher whispered against Dafydd's ear, "Let us retire." He moved closer as he made ready to stand and his lips brushed over Dafydd's ear. "Twas a long day."

DAFYDD settled back amid the furs, watched as the fire cast strange shadows on the walls. The new bedrobe fit perfectly, but he left it lying across the foot of the bed. The furs tangled around his limbs and left patches of skin exposed. He did not have long to wait before Christopher appeared, his bedrobe loose on his shoulders, open down the front.

He set a small stone crock on the table beside the bed. "Ah, you have the right of it, I see," he said as he shrugged out of his bedrobe and laid it beside Dafydd's. "Tis a sight for sore eyes." He traced a hand up Dafydd's long leg, plunged it under the furs and caressed until Dafydd moaned. "Did you enjoy your day?" he asked gently.

"Aye, my king," Dafydd said softly. He had determined to keep the ugliness with Sir Robert to himself, and had instructed John to remain mum as well.

Christopher stilled his hand. "What did I tell you, Dafydd?"

"Ah, Christopher," Dafydd murmured softly, "it pleases me to call you my king. Mine, as if you belong to me and no other."

"Art a naughty one, telling me sweet lies like that," Christopher said as he tugged on the furs, pulled them from Dafydd's body.

"'Tis not a lie," Dafydd said breathlessly, his body swelled under the king's watchful eye.

"Give me your lips that I might judge," Christopher said, and he bent down over him. "A lie will taste like bitter ashes in your mouth, yet the truth will be as sweet as honey."

Dafydd arched up and the king's mouth closed over his in a deep, sweet kiss. "Tis only the truth, my king," Dafydd whispered when the kiss broke naturally.

"Mmm-hmm, I see." Christopher straightened up, pulled Dafydd's legs to

spread them open over his lap. "Art intriguing by the firelight, sweet Dafydd."

"As are you."

Christopher smiled, and leaned over to retrieve the crock he had set beside the bed. "This comes from France," he said as he pulled the stopper from the top. He dipped his fingers inside, and when he pulled them out they were covered in a heavy cream. "I send for it specially." He lowered his fingers, teased against Dafydd's opening with a slickened finger.

Dafydd gasped, letting his breath out in a long moan. Christopher slipped his finger inside, and then pulled out. With a gentle rocking motion, he worked the finger all the way inside, rested his thumb along Dafydd's sac. He bent forward and pressed his lips against his chest, right over his fluttering heart.

"Christopher," Dafydd moaned, "it feels like you are touching my heart."

"I am," Christopher murmured. "Just as you touch mine." He slid his finger free and rocked it in again. He judged from his moans, and the way his cock twitched in response when it was time to add a second finger.

Tentative still, Dafydd reached down, circled his fingers around Christopher's wrist, felt the tendons bulge as he worked his fingers in and out in a steady rhythm. "I… like the way you make me feel," he whispered softly.

"This is why," Christopher said as he angled his fingers inside deeply, "you are here. I have not felt this way with any other. This is why you are my love story."

Dafydd tightened his fingers around Christopher's wrist. "Please, my king," he groaned. "I would feel more than your fingers inside me."

"Greedy," Christopher said as he bent down to claim another kiss. Slowly, he eased his fingers free and reached for the crock again. "If you want it then give me your hand."

Palm up, Dafydd extended his hand and felt the cool cream. Without being told, he knew what was expected. Christopher's cock pulsed within the warmth of his fist as he stroked the cream from base to tip.

"And now I am greedy," Christopher said as he pulled back. He shifted one of Dafydd's legs up against his chest. "Hold it, here."

Dafydd hooked an arm under his leg and held it in place while Christopher moved into position. The small burst of pain washed through him like a bolt of warmth. He groaned, and rolled his hips up to allow the king to settle inside deeply.

"Cariad," Christopher whispered. He slipped his hand below Dafydd's ass, caressed him gently. "Easy." He pulled back, and pushed in again.

"Christopher," Dafydd moaned. He raised a hand and felt his muscles bunch and tense as he worked inside him.

"Hush," Christopher said. As Dafydd's muscles loosened, he increased the

pace, rocked in deeply, his belly slid over Dafydd's cock. He angled back and slammed in hard, rocked against his spot.

Dafydd arched up, breath caught in his throat for a split second. Then with a loud wail he erupted. His muscles spasmed around Christopher's cock, and he reached up to wrap both arms tightly around the broad shoulders above him.

Unable to hold back against the force of Dafydd's release, Christopher came with an equal wail and filled Dafydd to overflowing.

"Do you know what it means?" Dafydd asked when Christopher eased down beside him. He twisted their bodies until Christopher lay in the curve of Dafydd's, faced the fire.

"What what means?" Christopher asked as he pulled Dafydd's arm over him, tucked his hand up against his chest.

"Cariad," Dafydd breathed.

"Aye," Christopher said. "Tis why I used the word."

Dafydd buried his face against the mane of Christopher's hair. He would bear all the stares of the castlefolk and the berating of the seneschal just to hear the king call him "beloved".



THINGS settled into a routine as Dafydd established himself as a part of the king's household. Most evenings the king joined him in his bed, and most mornings found him awaking alone. The castlefolk were won over by his quiet manner and his unobtrusive ways. Once they realized he was not there to take advantage of their beloved king, they left him in peace. They were not all accepting. Dafydd still encountered iciness from Sir Robert, and on more than one occasion he suffered the black scowls of some of the younger nobles who made the castle their home.

Winter months were always difficult in Lysnowydh. Training of the troops that were amassed at the castle moved very slowly. Most outdoor drilling had to be cast aside in favor of swordsmanship lessons, and battle strategies with the nobles. Dafydd embraced these studies, and proved himself to have a natural knowledge of war. He said very little, even to Christopher, regarding how he had come by the knowledge.

Fairer days saw the troops outside; they rode for exercise both for themselves and their mounts. Dafydd was outfitted with a warhorse, a shield, and a sword.

Christopher was a patient teacher, both in instructing Dafydd the proper way to sit his horse, and when they shared their bed at night. The tender feelings that had been awakened in the storm-bound cottage in the woods blossomed tenfold as the days turned into weeks. Dafydd's heart sang with happiness.

At long last the weather began to break. Each day the sun shone brighter, and soon snow only remained in the shadows of the bailey. Spring was nigh.

Christopher sprawled in the chair in Dafydd's room, sharing a goblet of wine with him. These were the times Dafydd treasured the most—when the formidable king became just another man, when they talked of everyday things and twined their fingers idly together. When the world was narrowed to just the two of them.

"Although Lysnowydh is protected on one side by the ocean, we must needs ride several miles before there is access to a usable beach." Christopher lowered his hand and rested it on the back of Dafydd's head.

Dafydd sat on the floor beside the king's chair, his long legs stretched toward the warmth of the fire. He tipped his head back and gazed up at the king's profile. "I have always felt somehow connected to the ocean," he said softly. "Mayhaps 'tis because the place of my birth is near the sea, and 'tis said that people who were born near the sea are connected to it in some way."

"Spiritually mayhaps," Christopher murmured. He took a sip from the goblet, then handed it down to Dafydd. "I was born here in Lysnowydh, and I too feel an affinity to the sea. 'Tis one reason why winter is so hard."

"Winter is almost ended," Dafydd said as he sipped the wine.

"Aye," Christopher replied. He smiled down at Dafydd's upturned face. "And with winter's end comes busy times for us all." He took the goblet, stood, and held a hand down toward Dafydd. "Come; we must to bed if we are to arise early on the morrow."

Dafydd swung to his feet easily. He shed his bedrobe and climbed into the bed. When Christopher settled in front of him, he nuzzled against the back of his head. On nights such as these, he kept himself awake after Christopher drowsed to revel in the feel of their bodies twined together beneath the warm furs.

DAFYDD awoke to the sound of voices outside the haven of the bed early the next morning. He had come to an understanding with John that he would rise and dress on his own, thus he was confused at the sound.

"Bread, cheese, a skin of wine. See if mayhaps there is a portion of last night's pheasant left. And apples."

"Aye, your majesty."

Dafydd pushed back the bed hangings. Christopher smiled at him. "Ah, cariad. I said we must arise early this morn." He approached and sat on the edge of the bed, reached over and caressed the side of Dafydd's face gently. "I am taking you down to the ocean today."

"But your duties-"

"Will await," Christopher said firmly. "I am allowed to spend the day with the one I love now and again." He bent forward and pressed a light kiss on Dafydd's brow. "And besides, as we said last night, it has been too long since we have touched our feet in the sea."

THE sky was a brilliant blue as they rode along the high ridge. It was half a day's journey from the castle to the path that led down to the beach. They had let the horses

run, the wind whipping against their faces. The air was brisk, but neither noticed the cold.

Christopher led the way down the steep path. Once at the bottom they walked their horses across the smooth white sand. The waves broke in a long line, and white foam skidded across the beach; the gulls cried at the interruption.

"A race to the end, and then back again," Christopher said, his words tossed into the wind.

Dafydd turned and began the charge down the beach; the sand flew up from under his horse's hooves. Christopher wasted no time in following him, raced fast enough to overtake him. Dafydd dug his heels in against his horse's heaving sides, and as they turned to begin the race back to the starting point he nosed ahead. They arrived back neck and neck.

"Too close to call," Christopher shouted breathlessly as he pulled the reins back and slipped from the horse's back.

Dafydd pulled up, turned, walked back, and then slipped down to join Christopher on the sand. "Nay, my king. I believe you have won."

Christopher reached for Dafydd's hand and pulled him close. "Aye," he said, his lips hovering over Dafydd's. "I have won." He deepened the kiss, and loosened his hand on the reins. The horses wandered off to crop the dense beach grass that grew next to the cliffs.

Together Dafydd and Christopher walked closer to the water's edge. The wind whipped the hair back from their faces as they stood hand in hand looking out over the wild waves. They stood for several moments in silent meditation, felt as though the world had narrowed down to just the two of them.

Eventually they began to wander along the shore, headed for a protected cove where they ate their lunch. Neither said much, both lost in private thoughts. When the meal was ended, Christopher stretched out on his back, hands folded on his chest. Dafydd licked his fingers clean, and then stretched out beside the king with his head rested against his side.

"Tell me a dream, Dafydd," Christopher said softly. "A wish, an inspiration, a memory."

"A memory," Dafydd said softly. "Of walking along the shore with my mother. We collected driftwood, and I found a shell that was tinged pink inside. I gave it to her, and she smiled. We brought the wood back to the keep, and the shell was gone. Dropped out of her arms as we walked. I ran back to find it, but 'twas gone."

Christopher dropped an arm down to rest across Dafydd's chest. "You haven't told me much of your past."

Dafydd sighed. "There is not much to tell. I was the fourth son of seven children, five boys and two girls. Rhys is the oldest and heir, Owain is next, and he holds Mother's dower lands. Meical is a priest. There was no room for me." He was

silent for a moment. "I learned warfare with my brothers, yet was not needed in my father's quest to keep his small estate. When I reached manhood, it was time for me to move on, to make my way in the world somewhere other than home." He turned, met the king's eyes.

"Training in militia is rare to come by; you could have taken on as a mercenary. Many a noble would have been proud to have you fight alongside him," Christopher said.

"Aye, but such was not my way. I learned rough and tumble with my brothers, yet at heart I craved peace. I am not one to make war for the sake of making war."

"I have no wish to force you into my service," Christopher said as he tightened his arm across Dafydd's chest.

Dafydd was silent for a moment, and then spoke with measured words. "In my youth I thought I would stand beside my family, help my father protect what was ours. When he said he had no use for another mouth to feed, I set out on my own. I came to Lysnowydh and sought solitary work, collecting wood." He raised his hand and covered the king's arm. "My allegiance is firmly with you now, my king. Standing shoulder to shoulder with you is what I want. I have left my family behind."

"Do you miss them?" Christopher asked quietly.

"Aye," Dafydd replied. "But I hold no ill feelings. Such is the way for a younger son; 'twas misguided for me to have expected otherwise."

"I speak not as the king, but as a man. I was the only living child born to my mother and father, and it was assured that I would one day become king." He sighed. "The crown is heavy on my head betimes; my father was taken before his time." He reached down for Dafydd's hand, twined their fingers together. "You are a very welcome addition to my household; your shoulder fits well alongside my own. Your presence makes the weight a little easier to bear."

Dafydd smiled. "You bear the weight on your own, Christopher, with or without me. I am satisfied to be a member of your household."

Christopher smiled. "I hope you are more than just satisfied." He rose and kissed Dafydd. The kiss was sweet, tinged with salt air.

Soon after, it was time to return to the castle. As they walked along the beach, Christopher gazed down intently at the shells. At last he stooped to pick one up. He caught up with Dafydd and deposited it in his hand with a smile, then turned and swung up on his horse.

Dafydd turned the shell over in his hand and found it was tinged pink inside. He looked over at Christopher, but he had already picked his way up the path. Dafydd put the shell in the pouch that hung at his waist, mounted his horse, and followed Christopher up the path.

THEY returned back to the castle at dusk, windswept and full of smiles. In the main hall, Christopher signaled for Alain, and bade him prepare the bathing chamber. He tucked his hand in Dafydd's and they crept conspiratorially around the edge of the hall and into the kitchen, where they feasted on a late meal of roasted venison.

Once upstairs Christopher dismissed Alain for the night. He turned toward Dafydd; his eyes twinkled with mischief. "Undress," he commanded. "We shall bathe together."

Dafydd grinned and began to strip out of his clothing. He slid into the large wooden tub and waited.

Christopher disrobed in a leisurely manner, then climbed the steps and settled in the tub facing Dafydd. "Turn about; let me wash your back."

Dafydd turned and felt Christopher's body slide alongside his under the warm water. He closed his eyes as the cloth was dragged over his back, inhaled the fresh scent of the soap. He sat still and allowed Christopher to wash him thoroughly, including his hair. He hadn't enjoyed the bath in this way since his days back in the woods alone. When Christopher was done, he turned and took the cloth from him.

Christopher presented his back, and Dafydd washed him carefully. When he was done, he leaned back against the tub, and pulled Christopher to rest in the curve of his body. "Stay, until the water cools."

"Aye," Christopher murmured. "Tis why I wanted us to bathe together—to prolong the memory of this day."

"The day will remain in my heart, my king."

When the water had cooled, they rose from the tub and dried themselves with the warm towels that hung before the fire. Christopher tossed his aside, reached for Dafydd's hand, and began to draw him along toward him.

"We shall sleep in my room this night."

Dafydd colored softly. He had only been in the king's chambers a few times and this was a mark that Christopher truly did mean to honor the memory of the day.

Once in the room, Christopher sank into the fur-covered chair before the brightly burning fire, sprawled back, his legs splayed wide. "Come, cariad," he murmured.

The floor before the hearth was covered with warm furs. Dafydd came forward, sank to his knees before the king's chair. Their eyes met through the warm firelight, and Dafydd raised a hand to press lightly against the king's knee.

"A perfect end to a perfect day, Dafydd," Christopher said softly. He cupped Dafydd's face tenderly.

"Nearly perfect," Dafydd murmured in response. He moved closer, touched his

soft lips to Christopher's inner thigh, raised higher to nose along the folds of his sac. "This makes it perfect."

"Ahh," Christopher groaned and slid forward in the chair, his blond hair spilling down over the back. "Not just perfect. 'Tis heaven."

Dafydd rose up on his knees, steadied the base of Christopher's cock, and closed his mouth over the tip. Teeth sheathed in lips, he sank down halfway, breathed in deeply to inhale the rich scent of his sex. His tongue swirled around the tip, teased against the slit.

Christopher tipped his head down to watch, one hand gripped tightly to the arm of the chair, the other cupping the back of Dafydd's head tenderly. "So good."

An inch further, and then he pulled up and sat back to meet the king's eyes while he kept the tip of his cock inside his mouth. Just as the king had instructed him, he nipped lightly with his teeth, felt Christopher tighten his hand in his hair. He angled his head back down and sank lower this time.

"Have I told you," Christopher murmured, "that your mouth enflames me?" He groaned softly.

Dafydd exhaled through his nose, and sunk lower still. He hollowed his cheeks with suction as he pulled up again, ended with his lips pressed gently against the wide head of Christopher's cock in a wet kiss. The next time his mouth lowered his hand raised to meet his lips. Connected this way, he began to move faster, mouth and hand working together.

Christopher moaned and tightened his hand in Dafydd's hair. He curled forward, watched as Dafydd's lips stretched over him. "Close," he whispered.

Dafydd's mouth slid up, with a hint of teeth, and he uttered one word: "Come."

With a wail, Christopher arched forward and filled Dafydd's mouth to overflowing with his release.

Dafydd sucked, and swallowed, eased the pace when Christopher eased back against the chair, spent. He slid up from the tip, circled the ridge at the head with his tongue, and then sank back to the floor. He watched as Christopher settled, then reached up and twined their fingers together. The fire popped, and Christopher opened his eyes.

"Christopher," Dafydd said softly, and squeezed at his fingers gently. "I love you."

Christopher drew in his breath and bent forward, his arms around Dafydd's back. He pulled him forward, up to cradle against him, and held him tightly.

"Love you," Dafydd said again.

"Sweet Dafydd," Christopher murmured against the top of his head. "The day truly is perfection to hear you say the words."

"The day crystallized the emotion for me," Dafydd said, his cheek pressed against Christopher's chest, right above his beating heart. "Helped me to see the truth that has always been there."

"Always, cariad," Christopher whispered. He pulled back and met Dafydd's lips in a deep kiss and tasted the inside of his mouth. Slowly he began to rise from the chair and pull Dafydd along steadily with him. He pressed his lithe body full length along Dafydd's larger frame.

The fire bathed them in warmth. Christopher turned and eased Dafydd down into the chair, remained standing above him.

"You call me your king, Dafydd, and in truth I am, but yet I know when you say it there is a deeper meaning." His eyes were solemn as he sank down to kneel before the humble woodsman. "I kneel to no man, Dafydd, save for the Lord God our savior." Both hands rested lightly on Dafydd's knees. "You have ensnared me, my love." He shifted closer. "And have captured my heart and wrapped it in chains. I kneel before you because you are also my king."

Tears welled in Dafydd's eyes, yet they did not spill over. He did not dispute the king's words, as he believed Christopher spoke the truth.

"I give to you what I give to no other."

Dafydd closed his eyes as Christopher's mouth closed over him. He tensed as he felt soft lips tease at the sensitive ridge then slowly work down until he was firmly lodged within the king's throat. For a moment it felt as though their hearts beat as one. Tingles chased through his body as Christopher slid up again and nipped lightly at the broad head of his cock with his teeth.

Soft hair tickled against Dafydd's thighs as Christopher worked. Dafydd still found it hard to last, to hold on to the feelings of pleasure and keep himself on the brink. His admission made the act doubly sweet. He reached down for a clump of Christopher's silken hair just as he arched back with the first jolt of release; he barely heard Christopher's moan of encouragement.

For the second time that day, the world had narrowed to just the two of them.

Christopher nuzzled against him, licked away each drop of sweet essence, and then subsided with his tawny head nestled against Dafydd's thigh.

"I love you, Dafydd, with all that I am."

Dafydd tightened his hand in Christopher's hair in response, too spent for words.

The fire burned down to embers and Christopher stirred. Although he had given the order that they were not to be disturbed, he knew it approached the hour when someone would come to add fuel to the king's fire lest he awake and be cold. He roused himself and pulled Dafydd up to follow him to the bed. He paused long enough to close the curtains that surrounded the bed securely.

"On the morrow," Christopher said as he molded his body along Dafydd's under the rich furs, "I shall spend the entire day with you."

Instead of reminding the king that duties had been cast aside on this day, Dafydd murmured, "I shall be glad of it."

Christopher's lips settled over Dafydd's nipple. "Mayhaps you shall not be glad of it by day's end. Tomorrow we begin to drill the squires. Mayhaps by day's end they shall hate you as they hate me."

"Their hate I can bear with your love in my heart."

"Our love," Christopher said softly as he settled closer.

"Ours."



In the early hours of the morning, Dafydd awoke to find the king still pressed against him. It was rare when they woke together this way, yet he was glad for it on this morning. He moved closer, settled his hand around Christopher's back, and pulled him closer. He felt his lips brush over his chest and goose bumps rose on his arms. They were silent, allowing each other to savor the precious moments.

All too soon the day would begin. Eventually Christopher rolled above him, fit himself between Dafydd's legs. He nuzzled at his mouth, and whispered against his lips, "There is enough time to fulfill my desire."

"What is your desire, my king?" Dafydd murmured as his large hands cupped Christopher's ass.

There was just enough light filtering into the bedspace that Christopher's eyes glowed brightly. "To hear you say the words again." He raised his hand to press a finger against Dafydd's lips. "Whilst I am buried deep inside you."

Prevented from speaking, Dafydd groaned. His cock swelled against the one pressing down against him from above.

"Shh," Christopher crooned as he rose to his knees and pressed Dafydd's legs up and back.

Gentle fingers stroked over chest, belly, and cock. He leaned forward to scoop a finger full of cream from the pot at bedside and teased the slickened fingers between the warm crevice of Dafydd's ass. His thumb teased along Dafydd's sac while his fingers pressed inside.

Dafydd hooked an arm under the back of his leg and pulled it up against his chest. Now he groaned deeper as he concentrated on relaxing tight muscles.

Christopher bent forward, rocked his fingers in and back, gained more distance with each thrust. He feathered his lips over the warm flesh of Dafydd's chest, teased over peaked nipples. When his fingers pressed in down to the third knuckle, he swept his tongue over the path his lips had traced, twisted his fingers deep inside and then

slowly began to withdraw.

"I am impatient this morn," Christopher groaned. "Eager to join my body with yours, eager to begin this new day."

"I am ready for you, my king," Dafydd groaned.

More light filtered in as the sun rose higher in the sky and bathed the windows with its warm light. It touched on Christopher's blond mane and made it glow like a halo. Dafydd watched through narrowed eyes and felt him scissor his fingers as he pulled them out. He watched as Christopher picked up another finger full of cream and coated his cock from base to tip.

"Ah, cariad," Christopher whispered as he pressed himself against Dafydd's entrance. His shoulder fit along the curve of Dafydd's leg as he began to push in slowly.

Dafydd raised his hands, gripped against the king's shoulders tightly, neck arched and mouth open in a prolonged moan. He waited until the king was fully seated before opening his eyes.

"I love you, Dafydd," Christopher said softly.

"And I love you, Christopher," he replied softly. "You are the king of my heart, my body, my entire world." He felt Christopher swell inside him, heard him moan, and closed his eyes as he began to move.

The bedsprings creaked with the force of Christopher's thrusting hips. Both of their moans mingled with the sound, and escalated toward release. Dafydd forced his eyes open just as Christopher slammed against him and held, felt the warmth of his release fill him. With the next thrust Dafydd came, bathing them both with warmth.

At last, Christopher subsided atop him, and breathed softly against his neck. Dafydd wrapped strong arms around him, enjoying the moment before it had to be broken.

"Beunydd," Dafydd murmured softly.

"Aye," Christopher replied. "Always."

Before long there was a stirring outside the haven of the bed, and Christopher rolled away, wrapped himself in a fur, and got up. Dafydd heard him speak.

"Bring food to Dafydd's sleeping chamber. I will dress myself this morn."

"Very well, my lord."

After Alain departed Dafydd slipped from the bed.

"Go and dress. Alain will bring the food soon. I shall join you and we shall sup together."

"Aye," Dafydd replied. As he walked past Christopher he bent over for a kiss, and then continued through to retrieve his clothing from the bathing chamber.

In his own room, he donned a fresh shirt and chausses. After he put on his belt he rummaged through the pouch and found the shell. Carefully he placed it on the mantel above his hearth.

THE troops were assembled in the outer bailey, arranged in descending order from the young nobles down through the ranks to the squires. Peace reigned inside the kingdom of Lysnowydh, yet they were always primed and ready for assaults that came from the outside. Many feared the Welsh and for this reason they were distrustful of the Welshman in their midst.

Dafydd watched the transformation on Christopher's face as they approached the troops on horseback. The hard mask he generally wore replaced the soft, gentle lines that had fallen over his face during the previous day.

When they reached the assembled mass, Dafydd took his place toward the middle of the gathering. He had not quite the status of a landed noble, but was above the rankings of the lower squires. Looks of approval at his humble ways were mingled with the constant looks of disdain.

The quiet in the bailey was great; all waited for the king to speak.

"Over the winter past Lysnowydh suffered a great loss with the death of our king, my father. All have grieved; he was a man who was more than great. My heart is heavy still with the loss.

"And now that winter has passed, we leave behind us our public grief, and carry the memory in our hearts. With spring comes change, and we must needs move on, as he would want.

"Tis not my intention to change our ways greatly, yet some changes will be wrought. For now Sir Cuthbert will still have charge of the squires. You will look to him for guidance, and for leadership."

Christopher paused while a murmur arose. The nobles twisted in their saddles and cast pleased glances back at the grizzled battle lord who had ruled the squires for years within the kingdom. His face was wreathed in smiles, as were the faces of his young charges.

"Sir Richard," Christopher continued, "will remain in his duties as marshal, until such time as I choose a new marshal from among your ranks. He desires to return to his own holding and spend his golden years in the company of his children and grandchildren."

The murmur grew louder, dissent mixed with approval, until one of the more vocal lords made himself heard. "Your majesty!" he shouted.

"Aye, Sir William," Christopher replied.

"You cannot mean to offer Sir Richard your thanks in such a manner. He has

served your father lo these many years. He has stood in support of you both. 'Tis little thanks to push him off in such a fashion."

"In future, Sir William," Christopher replied coldly, "should you wish to question my thoughts or authority you would be well served to do so in private. The choice is mine, and not any of yours."

The only noise that followed was a shuffling of the horses' hooves, and the jingling of their harnesses. At length, Christopher continued.

"Over the next weeks, drill and practice will continue. Within a month my choice will be made." He paused, and those closest saw his face set into harder lines, his shoulders squared. "Dafydd!" he called, his voice ringing clear across the open space. "Join Sir Richard at the head of the formation."

Murmuring arose again as Dafydd moved from the position he had taken around the outer edge of the assembly. Some voices were louder than others and he knew it was because the speakers intended for him to hear them. He turned his head neither left nor right, and took his place next to Sir Richard.

"Henceforth," Christopher said, "this will be your position."

"Aye, your majesty," Dafydd replied quietly.

OVER the next several weeks, the castle awoke from the slumber of winter. The surrounding countryside bloomed with a bustle of activity.

Inside the walls of Lysnowydh, the servants began the monumental task of clearing away winter's gloom and replacing it with spring sunshine. Rooms were aired, rushes cleared, floors scrubbed, and the great hearth was cleared of the coating of soot and ashes it had accumulated over the long winter months.

Outside, the barren fields were plowed and planted. Cattle were set out to forage for tender grasses after their long winter of eating nothing but oats. As in previous years, the herd had diminished, as had all the herds from the other kingdoms nearby. Soon the raiding would begin.

The troops continued to drill under the steady watchful eyes of Sir Richard and the king. Many showed strength in the areas of strategy, and others in sheer physical prowess. Only one showed promise in both areas. It was not a surprise to Christopher that Dafydd knew the ins and outs of strategies, and anyone need look at him to see his physical strength.

In quiet conversation Sir Richard agreed. They watched from horseback in a central location on the practice field just outside the castle walls.

"Tis easy to see he handles it naturally," Sir Richard remarked. Gray sprinkled through hair that had at one time been as tawny as the king's own was the only sign

that Sir Richard was past his prime. He had served with Christopher's father for many years.

"Aye. He has not told me much of his past, yet from what he has said his family was foolish to let someone of his skill slip through their fingers."

"Such is the way for younger sons," Sir Richard said with a sigh. "Tis why I've worked my fingers to the bone to ensure that I can provide for my own brood."

Christopher nodded, intent as he watched Dafydd work with Sir William, pressing him back nearly to the wall in the mock sword battle.

"Your majesty," Sir Richard said quietly, "you are aware of the talk amongst your men. It does not sit well with them that you would put your consort above them. Mayhaps they think he has earned this consideration because he services you in your bed. He is not even of the landed gentry." Long years of service coupled with the memory that Sir Richard had watched over Christopher as a youngster allowed this plain speaking.

"Any that feel this way should bring their concerns to me directly, not ask you to carry tales. 'Tis cowardly to speak such yet not say it to my face." Christopher turned with a scowl.

"Were they to bring their concerns to you they would feel your wrath in one form or another. Whether a blow that would knock them from their mounts or banishment, they hold their peace." Sir Richard spoke calmly.

"Art cowards then," Christopher said heatedly. "Too afraid to voice what they hold to be true."

"Mayhaps, but you must needs answer the question, if only in your heart. Do they have the right of it? Would you put him above them because you are blinded by love? Or does he truly deserve to be elevated such?"

Color mottled Christopher's features, and he opened his mouth to retort, yet did not. After a moment he said softly, "And what think you, Sir Richard? Am I allowing Dafydd to advance on his back?"

Sir Richard turned away and chuckled softly. "Art a wily one, your majesty. You know I cannot answer that question. Dafydd has enchained me with his ways nearly as much as he has you. I see his worth, and I have taken his measure. The decision is yours alone. Were you to ask me if I think he can carry off the duties, then my answer would be yes. He has shown that he is able."

"You accuse me of wiliness, you old fox, when you know full well 'tis you who is guilty of that offense." The color subsided in his face, and he grinned. "I will consider your words, yet the decision will be mine alone."

"As it should be."

"My lord!"

All heads turned at the shout that cut across the sounds of mock combat that

filled the yard. A boy from the village rode toward the king at full clip.

"Aye, young Roland," Christopher said, noting the boy's disheveled appearance.

"Raiders, my lord. They came in the night whilst we slept. Father says near a dozen, mayhaps more head of cattle have been thieved." His horse shied, and heaved with the effort of a hard ride. "I came to tell you once we was certain."

"From what direction? Were their tracks easy to follow?"

"Aye, my lord. Father says they came from the west, from the direction of Strasnedh," Roland said, still breathless with the exertion of the hard ride.

"King Warin," Christopher said under his breath. He wheeled about to face his men. "Sir Richard, Sir William, Dafydd, and Sir Thomas. To me." He wheeled about. "Sir Robert, give young Roland some water and let him rest in the shade until we have made our plan." He rode off in a cloud of dust with the others following behind him.

Each year the raiding between Strasnedh and Lysnowydh commenced soon after the first thaw when the cattle were set out to graze. Strasnedh usually attacked first, yet Lysnowydh always responded with haste. King Warin was a hard man and he did not treat his subjects with the same even hand that the king of Lysnowydh used.

"We shall wait until nightfall," Christopher said when the four men gathered around him. "He will expect that and will have his archers set atop his castle walls. In the wee hour of the night, whilst they begin to doze, that is when we will steal in and reclaim what is ours."

"Tis a sound plan," said Sir Thomas.

"Aye," Sir William agreed.

Sir Richard held back and watched. He knew, while the others did not, that this would prove to be a test of their worth.

"We must needs travel lightly," Christopher continued. "No armor or shields that will weigh us down or give us away with the sounds they make."

After a moment's hesitation, the two lords agreed that this was also a sound plan.

"I will lead the charge, with only a few to accompany me."

"Aye, your majesty," both lords echoed. "We shall accompany you."

"Nay," said Dafydd softly. All four turned to look at him, and he continued. "You cannot put yourself in such risk over cattle, your majesty."

"What risk?" Christopher's voice rose. "Do you wish to mollycoddle me and wrap me in cotton?"

"Nay, 'tis not a sound plan to set yourself in your enemy's clutches with no armor, and no shield, and only a few men for protection. You would be best served to ride with the men, but not lead the attack. Send your swiftest and lightest men for the task."

Sir William and Sir Thomas disagreed loudly. "You know naught of our ways, Welshman," Sir William spat. "'Tis the way we operate here; we trust our king in all things."

"Not in this," Dafydd said. He turned to address the king directly. "I am no stranger to cattle raiding. You might think that the men will grow drowsy and thus you can sneak in without notice, yet amongst them will be one who will watch. You are too valuable to Lysnowydh to be lost in such a manner."

"Welsh swine!" Sir Thomas shouted. "Get you back to your woods. Leave the fighting to your betters."

"Silence!" roared Christopher, his face a mask of fury. "We will go forth this evening. Dafydd, William, and Thomas will accompany me, and it will be as I have said."

"You will go forth without me then," Dafydd said. He wheeled his horse about and galloped across the field.

"Christ's blood," Christopher gritted. He gave a terse command to Sir Richard then turned to gallop across the field in Dafydd's wake.

Dafydd headed toward the stables. The stable hands saw the fury on his face, looked up to find the king with an equally thunderous face fast approaching, and fled. Just as Dafydd slid from his horse, Christopher reined to a stop behind him. He dismounted easily, followed behind Dafydd, and grabbed his arm from behind.

"'Twas poorly done, Dafydd," he said. "To disagree with me before the men."

"I care not," Dafydd said. He moved closer, gazed down into the flushed face of the king. "Tis folly to make such a plan."

"Ah, so now you think I am foolish?" Christopher tightened his hand on Dafydd's arm.

"Aye," Dafydd said.

With a wordless cry of fury, Christopher pushed Dafydd back against the wall behind him, and pressed him against the wood. His face was mere inches away from Dafydd's, his voice deadly calm. "Understand me well. When I give an order, you are to follow it without question."

Dafydd tensed every muscle, met the king's eyes squarely, and said, "Nay."

"You have either courage or art a fool," Christopher said.

"Tis not a question of such simplicity," Dafydd said. "You ask me to follow you with poor plans. I will not stand by and watch you captured or worse over a few

head of cattle."

Christopher's eyes widened. He pressed closer, and covered Dafydd's mouth with his own. They groaned into the fierce kiss, frustration and anger melding with emotions on both sides that they kept hidden. Christopher clawed roughly at Dafydd's torso, finally lowered down to tear at the strings of his chausses.

Moving in a savage dance, he turned Dafydd around, pressed his face against the rough-hewn wood of the wall. He held Dafydd fast with his forearm while he opened his own chausses.

Grunts and moans filled the small space, along with the sound of Christopher spitting on his fingertips. There was no softness; only a release of caged emotions.

Feet kicked against feet and Dafydd widened his stance. He wailed at the brutal intrusion. Fingers clawed at the wood as the king rocked deeply inside him. In spite of the pain, his cock swelled, and he groaned as the king cupped him. He dipped his head in shame as he felt his release fill Christopher's hand. With one more hard thrust, he felt Christopher release inside him.

As quickly as it had started, it was over. Dafydd pulled away and kept his back toward Christopher as he righted his clothing.

"Your presence is required in the hall this evening for dinner," Christopher said harshly. "If you are not in attendance then you will not be welcomed here again, and sent henceforth to return to your hovel in the woods."

Dafydd shook himself once, and turned to face the king. Their eyes met in a steady gaze, and then he shouldered past with no other word.

Christopher watched as he crossed the inner bailey and made his way inside the castle. Then he turned and remounted his horse. He galloped across the bailey as the stable boys crept back.

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Anger and Passion

THE great hall buzzed that night with the news of the fight between the king and his consort. The hall was dotted with clusters of people who supported the king and longed for the banishment of the woodsman, and groups that genuinely hoped that things could be worked out.

When Dafydd appeared the murmuring died down. He looked neither right nor left as he entered the hall. When he had returned earlier, he had bathed and then spent the balance of the afternoon alone in his own chamber. He was determined that he would not back down from what he believed was the right of the matter.

The murmuring started again when he took up a position near the head table and his chair. He stood with his head held high, yet he avoided eye contact with anyone.

Christopher swept in through a side door, Sir Richard and his council behind him. He strode through the crowd to the head table. The murmuring in the hall died away as he took his position. He did not call for silence as all gave him their rapt attention.

"On the field of battle," Christopher began, "'tis important to know your enemy, yet 'tis more important to know that you have the absolute trust and support from those who back you. I have no usefulness for those who follow blindly and are too cowardly to speak freely with me."

In the silence that fell, the only sound was the rustling of the assembled mass. Dafydd remained rigid in his position near the wall.

"Over the past month I have been closeted with Sir Richard on more than one occasion in deep discussion about who would succeed him as marshal. Many have been considered; few have met all the standards I have laid out." He paused again. "Until today. My decision has been made."

Many people cast their eyes in Dafydd's direction. Sir William and Sir Thomas edged closer to the front of the hall. Dafydd remained where he was.

"Dafydd," the king's voice rang out clearly. "Approach."

The murmuring increased again as the crowd parted to allow Dafydd to pass. He stopped in front of the king and bowed, his voice soft, yet all heard as he replied "Your majesty."

"Kneel."

Dafydd dropped to his knees before the king, his head bowed, his hands folded before him.

Christopher took a step backward, and pulled his sword from the sheath. The watching crowd gasped as he raised the sword above his head, turned it and brought the flat down squarely on Dafydd's shoulder.

"From this day forward you shall be known as Sir Dafydd of Lysnowydh, king's marshal. Your courage knows no bounds, your bravery will be sought after; your ability is second to none in this kingdom." He raised the sword and put it back into its sheath. "Rise now and stand beside me to greet your people."

Dafydd closed his eyes and said a silent prayer as he rose. Christopher pulled him close and placed the kiss of peace on each cheek. His eyes glowed with warmth for a moment, and he whispered, "Well done."

Sir Richard bestowed the kiss of peace next. "I am pleased," were his soft words of encouragement.

Together they turned toward the assembled mass. Bitter scowls covered the faces of Sir William and Sir Thomas as well as many of Dafydd's other detractors. Genuine smiles appeared elsewhere. Dafydd caught sight of John skulking at the back of the hall with a grin that split the lower part of his face neatly in half. It was then that the news sunk in.

"Strasnedh has been raiding," Christopher said as the crowd fell silent again. "Tonight we shall go to reclaim what is ours. But first, we shall feast."

All turned to find their seats, and Patrick brought the bowl so they could wash their hands. While the first course was served, Dafydd sat quietly and listened to the king conversing with Sir Richard. He ate sparingly as his brain was still engaged in trying to make sense of the events that had just transpired. Eventually he noticed the silence, raised his head, and found Christopher staring at him.

He colored slightly and laid his knife aside. "When were you going to tell me?"

Christopher smiled. "I am not sure what you mean," he said softly. He speared another piece of roast boar, his eyes never leaving Dafydd's.

"You let me disagree with you, you led me to believe you were wroth with me, you...." His voice trailed off.

"Dafydd," Christopher said as he set his knife down and bent his head closer, "we shall speak on the matter when we are private. It has always been my intention

that you would be my second in command. Today you proved the worth I already knew you had." Under the table he reached for Dafydd's hand. "Twas not a test and I am sorry for hurting you."

Dafydd squeezed the king's hand, yet did not respond verbally. There were still things he did not understand; yet his mind was set at ease. He ate lightly, as he knew they still had the cattle raiding ahead of them.

SHORTLY past midnight the king, his newly appointed marshal, and a select group returned from successfully retrieving the raided cattle from Strasnedh. The plan that Dafydd had laid out earlier in the day had been modified and carried off without a hitch. Once the cattle were safely tucked away within the herd, the men sought their beds.

Wearily, Christopher and Dafydd climbed the stairs to their rooms after Christopher assured Alain and John they were not needed.

"Art sleepy?" Christopher asked as they entered Dafydd's chamber.

"Aye," Dafydd replied. "And yet I would speak with you now we are private."

Christopher smiled and sat to remove his boots. "Tis as I expected. Undress and get into bed, and I shall answer your questions."

Dafydd grunted and began to remove his clothing.

"I knew," Christopher said, his voice muffled as he removed his shirt, "that you would serve well as my second in command, knew it from early on. 'Twould not serve to place you such without the opportunity for you to show your worth. Too many times my nobles are willing to agree with my every word, or seek for themselves where they have no calling."

Naked, Dafydd settled on the edge of the bed, watched and listened. Christopher removed the last of his clothing and came to stand before him; he placed his hands on his shoulders.

"Your physical prowess was well noted by all, and such is needed to follow me into the heart of battle. I needed to prove to both William and Thomas that speaking your mind went further with me than their avid agreement with everything I suggested." He paused and smiled down into Dafydd's upturned face. "My plan for retrieving the cattle was flawed. You saw it; they did not." He cocked his head to the side. "If I had told you what I planned before I did it, the reaction would not have been the same."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Aye," Dafydd said softly. He chewed his lower lip.

<sup>&</sup>quot;What troubles you?" Christopher asked firmly.

<sup>&</sup>quot;In the stable...."

"Ah," Christopher said ruefully. "That was not well done. I can offer no explanation other than at times anger and passion become entwined. Slide back in the bed, cariad." He stepped back and let Dafydd settle himself. "Wait for me."

Dafydd slid back against the bed frame and watched as Christopher walked out of the room, toward the bathing chamber. In a moment he returned, bearing a steaming cloth.

"Spread your legs," he commanded as he climbed up on the bed.

"Nay," Dafydd murmured. "'Tis nothing. I just do not understand how the two become twined into one."

"'Tis hard to explain," Christopher said. "Open to me, Dafydd. 'Tis not a choice I give you."

Flushing with color, Dafydd spread his legs and let the king settle between them. He winced as the tender flesh was pulled, and groaned low in his throat as the warm cloth touched him.

"Your face, when twisted in anger," Christopher said softly as he bathed Dafydd's tender flesh, "mirrors the way it looks when 'tis twisted in passion. In isolated moments, 'tis one and the same." He moved the cloth gently, cleansed the area. "You arouse me, Dafydd, in all things. There is a certain power. Mayhaps not in forcing you to submit, but in coupling with that raw emotion."

He pulled the cloth away and set it aside. The room was dark, lit with the feeble glow from the fireplace and the night candle. Christopher bent closer, probed gently with his finger, and then moved closer still and pressed soft lips against Dafydd's hole.

Dafydd tensed and bowed up with the bolt of sheer eroticism that transmitted through his body. He felt Christopher gentling him and he relaxed back against the warm furs, focused on the feel of lips and tongue against such an intimate part of his body, and was not able to hold back the moan.

"Sweet Dafydd," Christopher murmured, "I am sorry I hurt you."

"Chris—" His voice was cut off with another moan. The moan rose to a wail of desire as Christopher reached up and closed his hand around his cock. He squeezed as he pulled up and teased his thumb around the sensitive ridge.

Cum welled from the tip of Dafydd's cock and lubricated Christopher's hand as he stroked down his shaft again. He massaged the tender area with his tongue while stroking and squeezing. Before long Dafydd arched up, his feet pressed flat against the bed as he erupted with orgasm.

Christopher rose up. "Look at me, cariad," he whispered as he continued to stroke.

When Dafydd's eyes fluttered open, Christopher transferred his slick hand from Dafydd's cock to his own. His moans escalated as he pushed through the tight

warmth of his own hand. Dafydd raised his hand and joined it to the king's. Together they stroked until Christopher growled loudly with his own release, his cum joining Dafydd's on his chest.

"Art mine, Dafydd," Christopher groaned, his voice husky. "Marked this way, met this way." He opened his eyes. "Art all mine."

"Aye," Dafydd breathed. "I am yours as you are mine."

OVER the next week Dafydd began to establish himself firmly as marshal. He found it easy with the younger lords, but met with resistance from the older supporters of Sir William and Sir Thomas. He was as deep as a clear pond in a summer forest, and most of the criticism rolled off his back. He made it clear through more subtle means that he would brook no insubordination.

The weather warmed steadily. Late one afternoon when the drilling was over for the day, he sat in the shade of the stable and mended a harness. His hands were sure on the leather and he was still loath to require others to do work he could easily manage himself. He found a peace in working with his hands, as it allowed his mind to wander.

Christopher found him there, as the shadows grew long. "One of the stable lads would fix the harness for you if you asked," he said as he sat beside Dafydd. His loose shirt was open at the neck, his hair rumpled from the day's work. He looked young and boyish, and far from kinglike.

"Aye," Dafydd replied, "but 'tis no trouble." He tugged on the leather. "It gives me a chance to think."

"Ah," Christopher said. He reached up and ran his fingers through Dafydd's hair. "And what weighty issues tumble through your mind this day?"

Dafydd worked in silence for a moment, and then he raised his eyes to survey the scene before him to ensure they were alone. "Mayhaps they are thoughts I should not have, yet I find they return to me often."

"Do you wish to share them with me?" Christopher asked gently. He lowered his hand to his lap.

"Tis something you said the night we returned from Strasnedh with the cattle," Dafydd said. "About passion and anger entwined in one look."

"Aye," Christopher said. "I remember."

"I would see it too, Christopher."

"I am quite sure you have seen it already," Christopher replied with a smile.

"Nay," Dafydd said, his hands tight on the harness. "I would see it from above you rather than below you."

"You would take me," Christopher said, "the same way I take you."

Dafydd's voice was husky with emotion. "Aye."

Christopher stood and strode away to stand in the open doorway of the stable. Dafydd watched and was afraid he had angered the king. When he turned, his face was in shadows, his hair a bright halo around his head.

"Tis much you ask," he said softly.

"Aye, but I have asked," Dafydd said.

Slowly Christopher closed the space between them until he stood in front of Dafydd. "Tonight," he said softly. "After the meal when we return to our chambers. Wait until the castle sleeps for the night, and then come to my chamber."

Color bloomed across Dafydd's face. "Aye," was his simple reply.

DAFYDD paced like a caged tiger and wondered yet again what had possessed him to make the request. The fire burned low in his hearth; several hours had passed since he had returned to his chamber from the evening meal. He had bathed and donned a clean bedrobe, and now it was time to face the outcome of his yearnings.

He picked up a candle and made his way through the bathing chamber and into the king's chamber. Here the fire burned brightly and a branch of candles burned on the table beside the bed platform. Christopher sprawled naked across the bed; his knowing eyes followed Dafydd's progress across the room.

Once at the bedside, Dafydd set his candle down on the small table, and turned to gaze down on the naked flesh of the king. He passed a tongue over suddenly dry lips as Christopher shifted from his position and moved across the bed. He knelt before Dafydd, gazed up at him through the curtain of his hair. He raised his hands and worked the knot free that held Dafydd's bedrobe in place. When the halves fell open, he moved to press his warm body close against Dafydd's.

Dafydd closed an arm around Christopher's back and pulled him closer. He cupped his cheek with his other hand. Christopher reached up, caged Dafydd's hand in his own, and lowered it down, his mouth closed over the tips of his fingers.

"Christopher," Dafydd said, his voice a soft moan.

There was no answer at first, just the swirling caress of Christopher's tongue on his fingers, the light nips of teeth, the promise of so much to come. And then Christopher spoke softly.

"I give you free reign, Dafydd. Whatever your heart desires, my heart will desire as well." He tipped his head back, a smile curved on his lips. "You know what to do." He eased back, let his hands trail along Dafydd's flesh, and then he resettled back amidst the furs.

Dafydd shrugged his shoulders, let the bedrobe fall to the floor. The furs were soft under his knees as he crawled toward the center of the bed where Christopher rested against a mound of pillows. He kept their eyes locked together as he lifted Christopher's leg, pushed it back to expose him more fully.

Christopher raised both arms above his head, arched up, and moaned. His cock expanded slowly from its nest of golden curls, arched up along his belly.

Hesitantly Dafydd ran his fingers down the king's chest, swept them over his hips. He watched and was encouraged as Christopher closed his eyes and his lips parted with yet another moan. He bent closer and pressed his lips against the head of his cock while sliding his fingers down lower to tease at his hole.

"Mmm, cariad," Christopher murmured.

Emboldened further, Dafydd nibbled down his shaft, nosed through the curls, pressed just the tip of his finger inside. Christopher tightened his muscles slightly, gripped down over the questing finger.

At length Dafydd straightened up again, and reached for the pot of cream and slicked his finger. The feeling, as he slid his finger inside, made him moan again. He watched as Christopher's cock twitched in response. When he raised his eyes, he found Christopher watching him, erotic pleasure etched plainly on his face.

"Imagine," Christopher whispered, "what it will feel like when 'tis you and not your finger."

Dafydd twisted his hand as he pulled his finger out then carefully pushed back inside again.

"You have made me eager for this," Christopher said. "Move up that I might see you."

Goose bumps raised along Dafydd's arms as he complied with the king's command. His cock curved up hard against his body.

"I want it now, Dafydd," he urged. "Fill me now. Claim me as I have already claimed you."

Dafydd's answering groan turned into a growl. He reached for another fingerful of cream. He watched as the wide head of his cock pushed inside, and closed his eyes with the overwhelming feeling as he slid all the way inside, holding tight against Christopher's body at the end.

"Tis good," Christopher moaned. "I want more." He lowered one arm and reached between their bodies. The backs of his knuckles scraped over Dafydd's belly as he gripped his own cock.

Dafydd began to move slowly at first, savored the feel of tight muscles gripping him. As Christopher loosened, he began to move faster. He heard the change in Christopher's moans when he angled to hit the hidden place deep inside that he knew brought him so much pleasure. With one more hard thrust the sensations

overcame him and he broke deep inside the king's warmth.

"Ah," Christopher groaned. He lowered his other arm to loop it up around Dafydd's neck; his cum spurted warm between their bodies.

"I love you, my king," Dafydd whispered against Christopher's neck as he subsided against him.

"I love you, cariad," Christopher murmured in response. "So very much."

The fire popped loudly in the hearth as Dafydd rolled to the side. Christopher groped for his hand and held him close.

"Stay with me."

Dafydd pulled him close in response.

"Here," he said softly, "is where I belong."



SPRING deepened into summer and love blossomed between the king and the woodsman. The troops began to settle into the new regime, and by midsummer Sir Richard departed for his own holding. Though he would be sorely missed, all but a small handful of the troops easily pledged over to Dafydd.

Once things were settled within the immediate domain of his kingdom, Christopher began to journey through the surrounding countryside, and further to London with diplomatic duties. Each time, the parting between them was bittersweet. Christopher knew that Dafydd could manage the troops and oversee the domestic disputes, and yet he missed the warmth in his bed. Dafydd shone in his willingness to carry on, and yet he missed the companionship.

As summer progressed and the days grew longer Christopher was called away more often, and on longer sojourns. In the lazy heat that blanketed the countryside, peace reigned. Dafydd patrolled the borders of the king's immediate realm with only John and a few of the younger lords to accompany him.

Dafydd still craved solitude more oft than not, and on this particular afternoon he had managed to outstrip the others so that only John accompanied him. They rode beneath the shade of the trees along the northern edge of the king's lands.

"We are nearing Strasnedh," John remarked.

"Aye," Dafydd responded. He carefully picked his way up an incline while John held back.

"Tis best to go no further, Dafydd," John called.

Dafydd continued up the incline. "There is valerian growing under yon tree," he called back. "And with the king gone I have need of it some nights."

"You verge onto King Warin's lands," John said worriedly. "Best to ask Alyce for whatever herbals you require."

"Surely the king of Strasnedh can spare a plant or two," Dafydd replied with a

chuckle. He slid from his mount and knelt to collect the leafy plant.

"He's not... normal," John said in a choked voice.

Sparing a glance up, Dafydd continued to work on freeing the plant from the ground. "None of us are normal, John."

"Nay." John's horse shied as his hands tightened on the reins. "Tis said he has... powers."

Dafydd removed a small cloth from his saddlebag and wrapped the valerian in it, tucked it carefully away before he led his horse back down the incline. "Best to speak your mind clearly, John," he said softly. "Aye, he has powers; he is a king. If 'tis something more you mean then you must needs say it."

John turned his head nervously. "Tis not my place."

"But you have made it your place by even mentioning it," Dafydd said as he swung up into his saddle. "You should know by now that you may speak plainly with me. What you say is between us two, and there is still much I do not know about the English."

"When we are out in the open, away from this border," John said and he cast his head from side to side.

Once their horses walked out across the clean-smelling heather, Dafydd spoke again. "What type of mystical powers does King Warin possess?"

"I did not say mystical," John protested.

"Aye, but 'tis what you meant," Dafydd replied knowingly.

John chewed his lower lip as the horses picked their way through the field. "There are rumors time out of mind that he practices magic in his tower, that he has the ability to change from the form of a man into that of a bird." Warmed to the topic, he began to speak more freely. "Tis said that he can see into the hearts of men and knows their secrets and desires, and for a price he can provide what 'ere you wish."

"Yet he raids our cattle to fill his purse," Dafydd said dryly.

"People have disappeared when they stray too close to his keep," John said softly.

"Disappeared into thin air?" Dafydd asked. "Have you seen it yourself?"

"Do not make jest with me, Dafydd," John replied crossly. "I only tell you what I have heard."

Dafydd pulled his horse in front of John's and stopped, his voice harsh. "I make no jest with you, John. I am no stranger to these things. Many stories exist in Welsh lore about shape-shifters, and disappearances. 'Tis I who make sure it is not you who jests, as I have seen these things with my own eyes."

John's eyes grew round, and he spoke softly. "Nay, Dafydd, I have not seen it.

'Tis just what I have heard." He paused, and swallowed nervously. "In truth I have never been within close boundary of King Warin's keep. I mention it only because I have heard that he has...." His voice trailed off and he looked away.

"He has what, John?" Dafydd's voice had softened. He reached out and laid his hand across the back of John's.

"He has strange fancies," John whispered brokenly. "Tis said he casts the green eyes of jealousy on King Christopher." He raised his head and met Dafydd's eyes steadily. "Mayhaps he would make you disappear, out of spite."

Dafydd straightened his back, and a muscle tensed in his jaw. He cast his eyes back along the way they had traveled. "I thank you for your warning."

"You do not think me too... forward?" John asked softly.

"Nay." Dafydd shifted his eyes down. "I hear and understand your concerns." He looked up at the sky. "We must return to the keep. 'Tis late and the valerian will not keep."

They turned and headed across the field at a gallop as the sun sank lower in the west. There was silence between them as each considered the conversation. Once they neared the keep, they spied a large contingent approaching from the south.

"'Tis the king," Dafydd said, and he spurred his horse into a gallop, leaving John to follow.

Christopher turned at the sound of a lone horse riding hard toward them, and his face was wreathed in smiles when he saw it was Dafydd. He broke from the formation and rode out to meet him. They had time for breathless greetings and a brief touch of fingers before the others caught up with them.

Together they returned to the castle. Dafydd removed the valerian carefully from his saddlebag as Christopher dismounted and watched him curiously.

"Art collecting weeds, cariad?" Christopher asked.

"Nay, my king," Dafydd said with a smile. "'Tis valerian."

Christopher looped his arm around Dafydd's waist as they made their way across the bailey toward the castle. "And what do you mean to do with it?"

"Dry it, drink it with wine to help me sleep."

"Alain's wife Alyce collects the herbals, Dafydd," Christopher said as they mounted the stairs. He turned to give instructions to Alain, and speak a terse word to Father Geoffrey. All the while he kept his arm firmly around Dafydd's waist. When the priest moved away, he whispered into Dafydd's ear, "Two weeks is too long away from you. They shall wait."

The words always filled Dafydd with warmth. He found Christopher's hand and linked their fingers together as they made their way up the stairs to their chamber. "As with all things, I would rather dry the herbals myself than rely on another."

"Ah, Dafydd, art a bundle of mysteries and surprises," Christopher said as they entered Dafydd's chamber. "Each day I open some new gift of surprise about you. Should you like me to make you a still room?"

Color covered Dafydd's cheeks, and he murmured, "There's no need. I outfitted the small antechamber you for my purposes." He pointed to the small room that adjoined his sleeping chamber.

"Next you will be mixing magic potions and changing into a dragon by moonlight," Christopher said with a chuckle as he flopped down in the chair before the hearth.

Dafydd dropped to his knees before the king and began to untie the laces that held the king's boots in place. "Art accusing me of practicing black arts?" he asked, struck by how odd it was to have his earlier conversation with John echoed thus.

"Nay," Christopher said, his fingers working on the lacing of his shirt, "'twas but a jest."

Both boots removed, Dafydd sat back on his heels and watched as Christopher lazily removed his jerkin and shirt.

"We ventured near Strasnedh today," he said softly. "In quest of the valerian."

"Mmm?" Christopher stood, tossed jerkin and shirt aside and began to work on the ties of his chausses.

"I have heard some rumors about King Warin."

Christopher stepped from the chausses and tossed them to join the untidy heap of clothing. He looked down to see the serious look on Dafydd's face, and resumed his seat. "That he is a shape-shifter, that he steals men's souls; rot such as that?"

"I ask you, Christopher, is it the talk of the peasants, or is there merit in the claim?"

In the silence they heard rustling in the bathing chamber as Alain prepared the bath. Christopher leaned back in the chair. "Warin has unhealthy appetites. 'Tis true that on occasion his lust has o'ertaken his sensibilities and he seeks for targets among the fiefdoms that surround his castle. Men and women have seemed to disappear overnight from their hovels and are never seen again. Once he has finished with them he sends them on to London as their families would have no longer have use for them."

A frown creased Dafydd's brow, and Christopher leaned forward, cupped his hand around his cheek. "Sweet Dafydd, there is much that you do not know, and much I would shelter you from. Let me bathe; my hunger for you is greater than my hunger for meat this night." He rose from the chair. "I will not be long."

Dafydd rose to his feet and let the king walk into the bathing chamber. He took the valerian into his still room and set it to dry on the rack. When he returned he undressed and stood by the hearth, mulling over the mystery of the king's words.

True to his word, Christopher soon swept back into the room, the ends of his hair still wet, his body smelling of clean soap. He stole up behind Dafydd and wrapped strong arms around him, breathing against his back, "I have missed you so much, cariad." His cock swelled to fit within the crack of Dafydd's ass. "I am impatient."

"Then you must not wait." Dafydd turned and closed the short distance to the bed.

Before he could climb up, Christopher reached up and tangled his fingers through Dafydd's hair, bent him forward to rest across the bed. He held him down firmly while reaching for the pot of cream. Dafydd spread his feet wider, raised his arms above his head to rest across the soft furs. He gasped as Christopher's slick fingers found him, and pushed inside roughly.

"You are eager," Christopher growled. He thrust his fingers in deeply, stroked with a quick rhythm. "You have missed it too."

"Aye," Dafydd groaned against the furs.

Christopher pulled his fingers free, guided himself closer, and pushed in with one hard thrust. He wasted little time in setting up a rapid pace, his fingers cutting into Dafydd's hips. Dafydd lowered one hand to stroke his own cock, tightened the other in the furs as he pushed back to meet each thrust. He turned his head, managed to catch sight of Christopher behind him. He moaned at the beauty of Christopher's face this way, bathed in the dying light of the summer sun, eyes closed, lips parted. They reached a shuddering climax together. Christopher bent forward over Dafydd's back, remained buried inside of him as he ran his lips tenderly over Dafydd's flesh. "When we are parted I dream of you, cariad."

Dafydd tightened his muscles around Christopher's length lodged inside him. "Then we share the same dream, as I dream of you, my king."

Christopher moaned at the tightness, then slowly pulled out. They climbed up on the bed together, lay atop the furs with limbs tangled together. "Alain will bring food later. I've not quite had my fill of you just yet."

There was silence between them for a time, and then Dafydd spoke softly. "I would not be sheltered, Christopher."

"Aye," Christopher said with a sigh. "And in most things you are not." He ran his fingers lightly over Dafydd's arm. "Mayhaps I would shelter you in this because 'tis an ugly side of the world."

"Tis not my intention to bring your wrath on John," Dafydd said. "But like as not you know 'tis he who shares the knowledge."

"I cannot fault him for the loyalty he shows you," Christopher said. He turned to nuzzle along Dafydd's chest.

"Why would King Warin covet what is yours?"

"Not what is mine," Christopher said with a snort. "Tis me he covets." He moved closer until he was lying half atop Dafydd. "There was a time we dallied together, Warin and I, until I put an end to it." He pressed a light kiss on Dafydd's chest. "Dafydd, what we share in our bed is fraught with pleasure on both sides. There are men, and mayhaps women too, who only find sexual pleasure through giving, or receiving pain. Warin is such a man."

Dafydd shuddered, and tightened his arm instinctively around Christopher.

"You must use caution when bordering along his kingdom; in sheltering you from the truth mayhaps I have endangered you." Christopher rose up and met Dafydd's eyes. "I know I need not fear for your safety; there are few who can best you. But have a care when you venture out alone."

"Aye," Dafydd said.

"And now," Christopher said as he rose up to straddle Dafydd's body, "I said I have not had my fill of you." He sat back and displayed his growing erection.

Dafydd growled and reached up to close a fist around his cock, and Christopher moaned and slid forward. Talk was set aside as they enjoyed each other's bodies again.

SUMMER progressed surely into fall. Christopher continued his journeys, and each homecoming was sweeter than the last. Dafydd still sought for the tranquility of the woods, yet he was cautious and did not venture alone. The troops grew strong and were in the main pleased with their marshal. A small contingent still rankled under his leadership, and they found a sympathetic ear in Sir Robert. None were openly defiant when the king was present, but Dafydd knew well of their contempt. As it happened, King Warin came to call one afternoon as the first snow sprinkled the countryside. He arrived in late afternoon with a few clean yet ragged men accompanying him. As luck would have it, Christopher was at home. He sat playing a game of chess with Dafydd while they waited for the evening meal.

"King Warin, your majesty," Sir Robert said as he approached with the neighboring king. His smile turned to a smirk as he looked from Christopher's upturned face to Dafydd's.

As Christopher stood he brushed his short cloak aside, bared the hilt of his sword. "Strasnedh," he said shortly as he gripped the other man's forearm in greeting.

"Lysnowydh," Warin replied, his eyes straying over to rest on Dafydd. "I see the peasants do not lie; you have taken a giant into your bed."

Christopher drew in his breath, and Dafydd stood, his hand going involuntarily to his hip and his sword hilt.

"If there is a purpose to your visit state it now," Christopher growled. "You

know you are not welcome within my keep."

"There was a time when you welcomed me with open arms," Warin said as he stepped closer and dropped his voice so that only the three of them could hear. "And open legs."

Dafydd clenched his fist around the sword hilt and Christopher moved slightly in front of him. "Arrogant bastard," he gritted. "If you came only to hurl insults then I ask you to leave now."

Sir Robert returned with a servant bearing a chair and a goblet of ale. Christopher turned and motioned them away. "King Warin will not be staying."

"You cannot turn me out, Christopher," Warin said as he waved a hand back toward the doorway. "Night approaches and snow falls. Hospitality demands you offer me a bed for the night, complete with someone to warm it."

"Nay." Christopher's voice was thunder. "You have timed your arrival knowingly, and this kingdom owes you no shelter or succor. If you have not a purpose in coming then you must needs leave to make your way back through the cold and gloom."

Sir Robert still stood close by with the goblet and Warin reached for it. "Mayhaps I just came to renew old acquaintances," he said as he raised the goblet to his lips, "and make new ones." He fixed his gaze on Dafydd as he drank the ale; it spilled out of his mouth into his beard.

When he was done Christopher wrenched the goblet from his hand. He moved close so that only Warin and Dafydd could hear his cold words. "Enough of this ruse, Warin. I know why you came, just as you know. Days are past when there was anything between us. Mark my words well: there is naught here I am willing to share. You have seen what you came to see, now 'tis time for you to go."

"Guard your dog well, Lysnowydh," Warin said, his lips curling back into a wicked smile. "He is a giant, yet he is no match for me. Were he to fall into my hands I could make him beg me for mercy." He moved closer. "Or mayhaps release."

Christopher unsheathed his sword as he raised his arm to hold Dafydd back. "Begone," he roared.

Many of the nobles who shared the hall rose from their seats. Although they had given their king his space in dealing with the king of Strasnedh they now showed their support by unsheathing their swords. King Warin smirked as he turned and made his way across the hall.

"Easy, cariad," Christopher whispered to Dafydd. "His goal was to goad you into action. By remaining unmoved you switch the tables upon him."

All watched as King Warin summoned his men and took his leave. The nobles sheathed their swords, but remained on their feet, uneasy. Dafydd clenched his hands into fists at his side. Once Warin was gone, Christopher turned and bellowed, "Serve the meal. The entertainment is at its end."



THE snow had melted by the next morning, but the air remained cold; winter was nigh. The strange visit from King Warin was the talk of the castle for a few days, and then it was forgotten. Forgotten by all but Dafydd. He could not read Christopher's mood on the matter, and knew it was best to leave it be.

A few mornings after the encounter, Dafydd woke to find Christopher still curled beside him in bed. Under the warmth of the furs he pulled him closer. "'Tis a rare treat to find you still abed with me in the morning," he whispered, his voice hoarse. He felt Christopher's lips curve into a smile against his chest.

"Aye, the cold weather keeps me longer against your warmth. Art like smoldering embers." He stretched luxuriously and settled himself in the curve of Dafydd's body.

"Your flattery sets me up for a fall," Dafydd said. "Like as not you intend to cushion the blow that you will be leaving again, e'en though winter sits above us like a lion ready to pounce."

"Flowery words from a humble woodsman," Christopher said softly. "And yet you speak the truth." He moved so that he was above Dafydd, gazed down into his eyes. "Storms threaten, and yet I must needs make one more trip to London."

Dafydd closed his eyes to hide his disappointment.

"Ah, cariad," Christopher crooned softly, "do not hide your sorrow from me thus." He moved up to touch his lips to Dafydd's fluttering eyelids. "Twill not change the fact that I must needs go, yet it fills me with the desire to conduct my business with haste that I might return to you quickly."

"A strong mate," Dafydd said as he opened his eyes, "does not weigh his partner down with disappointment or guilt."

"Pish," Christopher said. "Who feeds you such rot?"

"I feed myself," Dafydd said as he closed his arms around Christopher's back.

"Liar," Christopher said. "And yet I would let the lie stand because I do not intend to waste this precious time in seeking the truth." He pushed up on his knees, spread Dafydd's legs, and positioned his body so that their awakening cocks lay snug alongside each other.

The slow and gentle lovemaking they experienced on mornings such as this was sweet, and lasting. Although the day beckoned Christopher remained entangled within the warmth of their haven.

"You must promise me something, Dafydd," he said softly.

"Aye, my king."

"That whilst I am gone you will remain inside the walls of the keep. No venturing forth for plants, or patrols, or even just to feel the wind upon your cheeks. I'll brook no disobedience."

Dafydd shifted uncomfortably under such a direct command. "I am not a child, Christopher."

"Aye, and yet I saw your eyes as you looked at Warin, and I know your heart. You would avenge something you do not understand. He is best left to stew until 'tis certain that naught can touch you." Christopher rose and sat beside Dafydd. He took his hand and held it gently. "Tis not an order, cariad, 'tis a request. If you honor me, you will obey. And when I return this time 'twill be certain that neither he nor any other can take you from me."

"No one can, my king. Only I have the power to take that away." Dafydd moved to sit up.

"Then consider it a request you will honor in your heart, and not a command that I give you."

"Your requests I can honor," he said, and with a lopsided smile he continued. "And your commands as well."

"I shan't be longer than is absolutely necessary."

THE weather held fair for many days after the king had departed, and then winter sent the lion pouncing down upon Lysnowydh. Fierce thunder and lightning and freezing rain that turned to slush made the roads icy and slippery.

Dafydd fretted quietly, and walked upon the battlements when the worst of the storm had passed. There was a chance that Christopher had gained London before the storm had unleashed, but there was no way of knowing for certain.

That night Dafydd retired to his chamber early, and dismissed John with a curt nod. He crushed dried valerian, mixed it with a few strands of saffron, and sprinkled it upon a goblet of wine. His chair pulled up to the hearth, he drank deeply, and stared into the flames.

He was not possessed with second sight naturally, yet the ability existed within his family tree. At times such as this, with concentration, he could sense danger. This night he did not sense it, and internally he relaxed. It was his belief that Christopher was safe and warm. The valerian began to take effect; he went to bed and slept soundly for the first time in days.

Snow began to fall during the night, and by next morning everyone knew that winter had come to stay. Dafydd instructed Sir Cuthbert and the squires where to find the best supplies of wood, and watched as they mounted up to venture out. He longed to join them, but his promise had been made to the king.

The days were shorter now, and as the shadows grew the party returned, and upon their heels came the king. The bailey was a bustle of activity; horses picked their way through the puddles and narrowly avoided the children who ran out to greet the returning parties.

Christopher slid from his horse, his cheeks rosy with the cold, his eyes dancing with his homecoming. He scanned the jostling crowd, noting that the practice yard was empty. His breath billowed from his mouth in the cold air. "Where is Dafydd?" he asked breathlessly.

"Here, my king," came the deep voice behind him.

Heedless of the onlookers, Christopher swept Dafydd into a warm embrace. Cheek beside cheek he whispered, "I've missed you, cariad."

Dafydd locked his strong arms behind Christopher's back and whispered, "And I you."

"Your majesty," Sir Robert said quietly, "come and sup."

"I'd sooner sup from your lips," Christopher whispered for Dafydd's ears alone.

"When you have eaten," Dafydd replied, breaking the embrace. "Tis likely you have not eaten since a crust of bread this morn." He smiled warmly and twined his fingers through Christopher's.

"Aye, 'tis true," Christopher replied with a chuckle. "But I must needs speak with the council before I slake my hungers." His eyes twinkled. One hand twined with Dafydd's, he deftly untied a bundle from the saddle of his horse with the other. "This is for you. It would please me to see you in it tonight, for the meal."

Dafydd smiled and his cheeks turned rosy over his ruddy tan. He clutched the bundle against his chest and disentangled his fingers. "Do not be long. I find I am very hungry as well."

"Naughty," Christopher said with a wink.

While the king met with his council, Dafydd carried the bundle up to his room.

He unwrapped it to find a magnificent surcoat lined in rich fur. Tiny jeweled stones were sewn around the neck and down the front. He fingered it lovingly and wondered at the response of those who felt he still sought above his station.

He was driven to please Christopher, and in the end determined that his smile meant more than the detraction of the narrow-minded. He slipped the warm garment on, squared his shoulders, and descended to the great hall.

Christopher and the council had returned to the hall from their brief meeting. He met Dafydd's eyes across the wide expanse and smiled warmly. They were kept apart, each caught up in their own conversations, yet all saw the way their eyes touched upon one another when the chance arose, and many tongues clucked with gossip.

"Pity they cannot produce a child," said one dowager. "Tis clear theirs is a love match."

"Aye, but love between two men? 'Tis sacrilege!" proclaimed her companion.

"Nay," said the dowager softly. "Not between these two."

While the trestles were set, Christopher edged across the room and moved ever closer to where Dafydd stood in close conversation with Sir Henry. It warmed him to see so many were turned from their distrust of the Welsh simply by spending time talking to Dafydd. He kept to the shadows, watched and listened with his heart full of pride. Hidden thus, he was surprised to find Sir Robert approaching Dafydd with two of the senior squires in tow.

"There. Make sure 'tis loud enough he hears," Sir Robert said.

"Aye, he shall hear us. All shall hear." The squire's voice was slurred with the effects of too much ale consumed. They lurched forth from the shadows.

"The king's faggot has new finery," said Simon, one of the squires.

"Aye," said Hugh, the other. "But if you wrap a swine in fur, 'tis still a swine. All know the Welsh are naught but pigs."

Christopher's wrath was brutal and swift. He stepped from the shadows, his face white and pinched with anger. He struck Hugh full across the face, and glared down as he sprawled in the rushes at his feet.

"You will be sent from Lysnowydh, and will not return," Christopher said with barely controlled rage. He looked up at Simon. "And the same goes for any that share this view. Such will not be tolerated in Lysnowydh. And you," he lunged forward and yanked Sir Robert out into the light before he could skulk away, "should be drawn and quartered for this treachery behind my back."

Then, he turned and swept from the hall, his councilors on his heels, and Sir Robert still firmly in his grip.

Dafydd watched as the other squires went to the aid of their fallen comrades and heard their scattered words. He turned on his heel and left the hall, shedding the

surcoat as he went. Back in his room he shed the rest of his finery, donned his homespun and cloak.

He strode through the hall, looking neither right nor left. A fine snow was falling in the dusk-filled bailey but he seemed not to notice. The stable boys stood back when they saw the set lines of his jaw, watched as he saddled his horse, swung up into the saddle and cantered away from the castle walls.

The cottage was just as he had left it. Swept clean, with kindling in the hearth. Once the fire blazed he dug in his saddlebag. A stale crust was a far cry from the feast that would be served in the castle that night, yet he cared not.

It was not in his nature to run away. In truth he had known the feelings of the small contingent quite well before they had chosen to display them so publicly. It was not his intention to stay away and let them win; he wanted the time for quiet reflection.

A stamping of horse's hooves roused him from his reverie. He levered a log into the fire and turned just as the door burst open, admitted a flurry of snowflakes, and the king.

"Dafydd," Christopher said softly. "Cariad." He shouldered the door closed and continued into the room, the rich surcoat slung across his back. When he was close, he laid the coat across the table and opened his arms.

Dafydd walked into them without hesitation and laid his cheek against the damp fur at the king's shoulder.

"I do not want," Dafydd murmured, "to be the cause of strife betwixt you and your subjects."

"Nay," Christopher said. "You are not. 'Tis better to learn of insubordination whilst within my own castle walls than to find it whilst on the field of battle."

"They have long held these beliefs. Perhaps 'twould be best to—"

Christopher laid a finger across Dafydd's lips, stopped him from completing his thought. His eyes held the same steel they had in the great hall.

"What would be the best," he said, showing that the steel extended to his voice as well, "would be for you to stand with me before the priest and handfast." He tightened his arms when Dafydd pulled back. "Nay, do not pull away. I had intended to make this declaration tonight in the hall, in front of all. Yet you have lured me away, back full circle to this cottage in a winter storm. Perhaps 'tis the right of it this way, here where you first asked me for a love story."

"Christopher, you... honor me. Yet holy church will not allow—"

"Nay, Dafydd, the feelings extend beyond honor. I love you, and I cherish you. I ask you to handfast with me not simply for honor, yet because my soul cries out to be joined with yours in constant." He raised a hand, caressed gently at Dafydd's cheek. "The priest will allow it. 'Twas my primary purpose for going to London this

trip. There will be a mound of documents to produce for both the church, and the kingdom, but you will be mine—if you will have me."

Dafydd tightened his arm around Christopher's, and held him. He bent closer, his lips hovering above the king's, and whispered, "Aye, sweet Christopher, I will have you. My soul cries out to be bound with yours as well." And all of the emotion that welled between them was spilled into the kiss, until they swayed backward onto the low bed.

Christopher twisted and rolled Dafydd atop him. "I have a desire," he said softly, "to see you in your new surcoat... and naught else."

A moan collected in the back of Dafydd's throat. He rose and closed the space between the bed and the table. The firelight flickered across him as he removed his clothing. The rustling sounds from the bed indicated that Christopher was disrobing as well.

Dafydd turned, his muscled body gleaming in the glow from the hearth. His cock rose with the desire that filled him. He reached for the surcoat, and moaned again at the pleasurable feel of fur on bare skin.

"Ah... cariad." Christopher groaned as his own body flushed with desire. "It suits you, as I knew it would." He reached up to pull Dafydd down atop him again, skin slid against skin, caressed by soft fur.

"It has been too long," Dafydd growled, his hand tangled through Christopher's golden tresses. "My hunger is great."

"As is mine," Christopher replied. "Tomorrow you will come back to the castle with me and I will feast on you slowly for as long as you can stand, but tonight... I need you."

"I can stand a long time," Dafydd said. "Once you burst this bubble of greed inside me."

"Up," Christopher commanded, arched up against Dafydd's larger frame. And once Dafydd had rolled aside, Christopher rose, his voice husky. "On your knees."

The bedsprings squeaked, yet held firm as Dafydd moved to position himself in front of the king. Christopher reached down and flipped the edge of the coat up, exposed his taut buttocks. He smoothed his hand over, and roughly plunged two fingers down the crack of his ass, pushing insistently against his hole.

"Take me, Christopher," Dafydd growled against the furs.

Christopher spat into his palm, stroked against his shaft. Dafydd gripped the top of the bed frame tightly, and rocked backward. He arched up when Christopher pushed just the tip of his cock inside.

"I love you, Dafydd," Christopher ground out, and he pushed the rest of the way in with one hard thrust.

Dafydd's fingers cut into the wood of the bed frame. His face pulled back in a

snarl, a mixture of pain and incredible pleasure. Once Christopher rested firmly inside him he cried out, "And I love you, Christopher."

With his hands braced firmly against Dafydd's hips, Christopher pulled out and slammed in again, set a hard pace. Their grunts and cries filled the small cottage, edged them ever closer to the release they both craved. Overpowering in its intensity, they erupted as one.

Slowly, they eased down to the bed, twisted in the cocoon of furs until their foreheads rested together.

"Beunydd," Dafydd whispered, finding Christopher's hand and pulling it up to rest against his beating heart.

"Aye," Christopher said. "Always."

They twined together, took warmth and comfort from each other while outside the storm gained momentum. "I have no victuals beyond the crust in my saddlebags," Dafydd whispered.

"Then we will not dally in bed on the morrow, but arise with first light and head back to the castle." Christopher pressed his lips against the pulse in Dafydd's neck. "Sir Robert must be dealt with; his betrayal cannot be tolerated. You should have told me ere this."

"Nay, my king," Dafydd said softly. "'Twould have given credence to his claims were I to have acknowledged them by running to hide behind you."

"Art a wise man, Dafydd," Christopher said. "Tis not as if I did not know already, yet each time I see it I am pleased all the more. Still, 'twas wicked cowardice to treat you as he did and none brave enough to confide it to me."

"Tis your decision to make, yet many did support me against his tirades. John, Alain, and, among the nobles, Sir Walter, Sir Henry."

"Sir Walter has been in my service these many years," Christopher said softly. "Mayhaps he will serve best as seneschal. Henry, as you know, has been by my side since first I won my spurs. He is always close by when we find ourselves in battle." He yawned and settled closer. "I have one desire this night: to sleep safe in your arms, leave the weighty decisions for the morrow."

"Aye, but one promise, Christopher," Dafydd replied. "Do not have Sir Robert drawn and quartered. Send him from your kingdom."

"To spread his evil elsewhere?" Christopher said sleepily.

"He will have learned his lesson after a week in your dungeon, and I'd not have his blood on my conscience."

"It shall be as you wish."

As the snow piled up outside the small cottage, the king and the woodsman slept, warm in each other's arms.



WHEN morning came the snow had stopped, but it was bitter cold within the cottage. Christopher and Dafydd dressed hurriedly and made their way back to the castle. Once there Christopher gave instructions for a meal to be sent to Dafydd's chamber, and asked that the councilors join him in the council chamber.

Dafydd turned to head up the stairs, and Christopher reached out to take hold of his arm. "Nay, Dafydd, you will join me in council today."

"Majesty?" Dafydd turned back, a puzzled look on his face.

"This is my command," Christopher said. Gone were the soft looks he usually saved for Dafydd alone; his face wore the mask of king. Together they walked the length of the hall to the chamber set aside for the king's council.

The room was small; it contained only a table and a large hearth. The council was already assembled. Father Geoffrey stood near the hearth, a dour look on his face. Sir Henry and Sir Walter stood beside him. Sir Cuthbert stood away from the others. He was not usually part of these meetings, but dire circumstances dictated he be included.

Conversation ceased when Christopher entered with Dafydd on his heels.

"Your majesty," Father Geoffrey began slowly, ""tis not the place—"

"Silence," Christopher said firmly. "I have left the matters of the castle in your hands, and the outcome has been far from desirable. From this point on there will be a change, and I will decide the place."

There was an uneasy silence. Christopher indicated they should take their seats, and he moved the empty chair up beside his own. When all were seated he rested his forearms on the table, his hands together, fingers meshed. Dafydd sat uneasily on the chair by his side.

"Give your report," Christopher said quietly.

Sir Walter cleared his throat. "Sir Robert along with the two squires Simon and

Hugh have been housed in the dungeon since last eve. I have spoken with Gaunt the blacksmith about constructing a gallows should you desire."

"Nay, no gallows," Christopher said. "I thank you, Walter, for your diligence in this matter. It is my desire that you shall assume the position of seneschal hereafter."

There was a murmur as the rest of the council nodded their agreement.

"Sir Robert and the squires will remain in the dungeon for the space of one week. They will be denied visitors, but note will be taken of all that crave to see them; mayhaps a few will join them in imprisonment ere the week ends. At the end of the week, they will be brought before me in the yard, with all the castlefolk in attendance. There they shall hear their punishment."

"What is your desire on their punishment if they are not to be hanged?" Father Geoffrey asked.

"They shall be sent from Lysnowydh with naught but the clothing on their backs. It was my intention to make an example of Sir Robert, but Dafydd has requested otherwise, and I see the wisdom in his request."

Eyes shifted toward Dafydd, but the council held their tongues on brooking the king's wrath by questioning him further.

"And now there is the matter of how this treachery came to manifest itself undetected within our midst." The hint of steel entered the king's voice again. He lowered his hands flat against the table, his cold blue eyes piercing each member of the council in turn. "How is it that such rampant insubordination amongst the squires was fostered by my seneschal and it was not detected by any of my council? Either way you are damned. If you claim innocence of knowledge then you are not fit to serve me. If you had knowledge and determined to hold it from me to stave off my anger then art cowards." He removed his hands from the table and reclined back in his chair. "Explain to me how it is on the very eve I announce my intentions to make Dafydd my handfasted mate not one of you thought to mention to me that my seneschal was plotting behind my very back?"

The council shifted in their seats and Father Geoffrey said softly, "Your majesty, Sir Dafydd knew of Sir Robert's betrayals and yet he said naught to you."

Christopher smirked. "Which just cemented my trust in him. Were he to have complained, it would have made me think he was incapable of watching his own back, or perhaps that he did seek above his station by criticizing an officer of my court that I held in trust." His features hardened into a frown again. "Twas not Dafydd's place to enlighten me in these matters; 'twas yours."

An uneasy silence followed while the council digested Christopher's words. At last he continued.

"I ask you all to search within yourselves, understand that I require full loyalty from every one of you. Before the end of the week I shall meet with each one of you

in private to hear what thoughts you have. If it is your wish to be displaced from the council, I will honor your desires and send you forth with good recommendation. In future, Dafydd will join this council when I require, and have full say in what is decided. He will stand proxy for me when I am called away."

He gave them a moment to digest this information before he went on.

"Tonight there will be a feast of celebration in the hall, during which I shall make my intentions known to the castlefolk at large. See that the cook spares nothing in its preparation." He pushed back from the table and stood. "Until such time I shall be above in my chamber." He turned and reached for Dafydd's hand and added softly, "Not to be disturbed."

Dafydd flushed slightly, put his hand in the king's, and stood.

UPSTAIRS the immediate necessities were taken care of first. A fire blazed in the bathing chamber, and they bathed one at a time, meeting for a hearty meal in Dafydd's chamber. The day remained cold and gray outside, but inside the candles burned brightly. Christopher and Dafydd, wrapped warmly in furred bedrobes, finished their meal and sprawled back in their chairs to finish their tankards of ale.

"Christopher," Dafydd said softly, a frown of concentration furrowing his brow.

"Ah," Christopher said, and a smile played about the corner of his lips. "I have been waiting to hear the weighty thoughts that trouble your mind, and cause your brow to pucker thus."

"You know the thoughts," Dafydd said softly.

"But I would hear them from your lips, Dafydd," Christopher replied gently.

Dafydd took another swallow of ale, then set the tankard down on the table before him. He gazed into the fire as he seemed to gather his thoughts. "Mayhaps," he began at last, "your council is correct and I should have shared my concerns with you ere now about Sir Robert." He turned his head and met Christopher's gaze. "Mayhaps by keeping them to myself I put myself in stead with them, hiding things from you to prevent your anger."

"Nay, Dafydd," Christopher said. "In the main I meant what I said to the men earlier, save that I would not have thought you incapable if you had told me. I know you far better than they do, and I know that you can withstand much. If it had gotten to the point where you felt compelled to share your concern with me, and I think it had so this will be a lesson learned, then 'twould have been a clear sign that his intention was to harm." He paused and drew a deep breath. "A king has many worries, yet treachery amongst his own trusted advisors is not one oft looked for."

"A lesson learned," Dafydd said softly. "In this instance it is your belief I

should have said something."

"Aye," Christopher said. "In the future, you will."

Dafydd nodded and fingered the arm of the chair, his brow still creased with a frown. "You mean to set me upon your council, and yet I know naught of diplomacy, or sitting in judgment. Mayhaps I shall be a burden on those who serve you best."

"You have a place in my kingdom, Dafydd," Christopher said firmly. "Your place is not merely to warm my bed. Were that all I required I would not have troubled to gain leave to take you in handfast. If I thought you simple, I would have arranged to keep you in your cottage for my pleasure, merely to dally with. And yet it was my observation that you were capable of far more. Each new task set before you has been tackled with grace, logic, and no small amount of intelligence. I am not so vain that I set you on the council to feed my own glory; I set you on the council because I trust you above all men in my kingdom."

Dafydd chewed his lower lip between his teeth. "'Tis a hard task you give me."

"Are you not up for the challenge?" Christopher leaned closer in his chair. "Have I erred in my judgment?" His eyes were piercing, icy blue.

In that instant Dafydd saw the depth of the king's intent, and he shuddered as if a chill passed through him. His gentle brown eyes locked with the king's, and he said softly, "Nay, you have not erred, and I will meet the challenge."

Christopher stood, rounded the table, and held his hand down. "Come; you are chilled. I would warm you."

Dafydd reached up, put his larger hand in Christopher's, stood and followed him back through the bathing chamber and into his own sleeping chamber.

"I said," Christopher murmured when he stopped before the hearth, "that I would feast upon you slowly this day." As he spoke he deftly untied the loose belt at his own waist and then the one at Dafydd's. The robes parted open, and Christopher moved closer to press his warm skin against Dafydd's. He raised his head and pressed his lips against Dafydd's neck. "Allow me the pleasure."

"Aye," Dafydd replied, breathing the word rather than saying it. He wormed his arms inside the king's robe and wound them around his back. Usually he was content to allow Christopher to be the aggressor in their amorous encounters. This time he bent his head and found Christopher's lips as he slid his hands down to tease and cup his ass. He deepened the kiss and was rewarded by a moan deep inside the king's chest.

Slowly, Dafydd eased his hands up Christopher's back and pushed the shoulders of the robe until it slid down and pooled on the floor. His voice husky with passion, he murmured, "You would feast, and I would drink my fill of your beauty."

Christopher disentangled himself from Dafydd's embrace and backed away. He backed slowly toward the large bed, all the while keeping his eyes locked upon Dafydd's. He climbed up and lay back amongst the furs, his legs spread. His cock

stirred within the nest of golden curls. "Come and drink, cariad."

With a shift of his shoulders, Dafydd let the robe drop. He closed the space between them in just a few steps, climbed up on the bed, and ran his hands up Christopher's legs. He pulled to spread them wider, dipped down and ran his tongue along the length of his erection.

"Oh," Christopher moaned as he reached down and threaded his fingers through Dafydd's hair. His knees framed Dafydd's larger body. "Your mouth... is like fire, and I want to burn," he whispered softly.

Dafydd swallowed, and teased his fingers over the downy fuzz that covered Christopher's thighs. It was a slow build with Christopher tightening his fingers in Dafydd's hair each time he brought him close to climax, and then holding him back. When he finally fell over the edge, he roared loudly with his release, filled Dafydd's mouth to overflowing.

He tugged again, pulled Dafydd up against him and kissed him deeply. "You must wait," he panted when he broke the kiss. "I want to fill you."

"Aye, my king," Dafydd murmured. He rolled onto his back and pulled Christopher into the curve of his body.

Christopher tangled his legs between Dafydd's and rose up so that he partially straddled his body. The sun was beginning to sink outside but their eyes still met in the flickering candlelight. "Display that power in all things you do," he said softly. "With that certainty of purpose, you will not be denied." He lowered down and nuzzled against Dafydd's chest, finding a nipple and teasing it to a stiff peak.

"Tis a power I keep for you," Dafydd murmured, and gasped as he felt Christopher close his teeth over the stiffened nipple. "Mayhaps 'tis better I take your advice."

"Aye, cariad," Christopher whispered against Dafydd's chest. "Obey me in all things."

Warm and gentle, Christopher tasted Dafydd's flesh-peppered nips with his teeth over caresses with lips and tongue. By the time he rose up and plunged within his passage, Dafydd was pulled as taut as a bowstring with need. He pulled his legs up, allowed Christopher to sink in deeply, and within a few thrusts exploded beneath him with a loud groan of release.

Cocooned together among the warm furs, they drowsed until a soft voice roused them.

"Your majesty?"

Dafydd's eyes opened with a start. He found their bedrobes draped across the foot of the bed, and Alain busy by the fire, his back turned toward them. Christopher nudged him gently, and spoke in a whisper.

"Go, and let John help you dress this night."

"Tis another order you give me," Dafydd murmured in response. He pulled the robe about his shoulders and slid from the bed.

"Aye."

Dafydd walked through the room, noting that Alain never raised his eyes from his task. As he passed through the connecting chamber and back into his own room, he mused that he was accepting this life now. There was little that still made him uncomfortable.

John efficiently helped him don soft leather chausses, a pale green shirt of the lightest silk, the jeweled surcoat, and new leather boots that were designed for inside wear only. When he was dressed, he met Christopher in the antechamber, and together they descended into the hall below.

THE hall was as crowded as it had been on the previous night. The castlefolk had spent the day gossiping amongst themselves. All knew that a feast had been prepared; a rarity in the depths of winter, yet none knew the reason for it. The topic of Sir Robert's treachery had been dissected, with his detractors crowing loudly, and those who had thought to support him re-evaluating their positions.

When the king appeared, with Dafydd walking just behind him, the buzz died down. People parted to allow the king to pass and take his position in front of the table on the dais. Dafydd stood beside him.

Christopher surveyed the now-quiet crowd with a smile of happiness on his face. He turned to look at Dafydd once, then turned back to address the crowd.

"What was to have been an announcement of joy this eve past was tainted by treachery." His face was hard momentarily. "That treachery has been dealt with, and will not be mentioned again. One week from now you will hear my final thoughts on the matter. If you have questions, or information to add, you may share them with Sir Walter. He will serve as seneschal in the interim. I will speak no further on the matter now, as there are more pressing issues at hand."

Dafydd found his hand clasped tightly with the king's and held aloft for the crowd to see.

"On Beltane next I will handfast with Dafydd."

The crowd gasped in surprise, and then broke into spontaneous cheers and applause. Christopher smiled; he gripped Dafydd's hand tightly and waited for the noise to die down.

"It is my desire that you all will spend the months between now and then getting to know Dafydd, and accepting him more fully into your hearts. He serves well in his duties as marshal to my troops, and will henceforth assist my council in my absence."

As they rounded the table to take their places for the meal, the crowd moved to fill in the trestles. The feast was served; the cook had outdone herself in preparing many tasty dishes, from fish caught that morning to salted meats. There was even a small cake for Christopher to share with Dafydd, flavored with dried apples.

That night the ale flowed, and few voiced any discontent.

Over the week that followed, Christopher met with his council many times. Usually he included Dafydd so he could become familiar with the inner workings. After the initial resistance, the council seemed more than accommodating. They received a report from the guards in the dungeon that the prisoners received no visitors, and that they had yet to repent. Plans moved forward to banish them from the kingdom.

On the appointed morning, the castlefolk congregated in the practice yard before the scaffold that had been erected. Christopher was seated in his ornate chair that had been brought from the hall. Dafydd, Father Geoffrey, and Sir Walter flanked him.

The ragtag group was hauled up from the dungeons and herded before the king. Simon and Hugh knelt, but Sir Robert remained resolutely on his feet.

"Kneel before your king, dog," a guard commanded roughly. He shoved, and Sir Robert stumbled but refused to kneel.

"I will not kneel before the faggot," he ground out.

As one, the three guards took hold of his arms, and dragged him down against the icy ground. One placed his boot against Sir Robert's neck thus holding his cheek against the mud.

Sir Walter leapt from the scaffold and bent closer to growl at Sir Robert. He pulled his sword from its sheath and touched the tip against the fallen man's ear. "Caution, Sir Robert. 'Tis not just Sir Dafydd you insult with that taunt; 'tis the king himself."

"Silence," Christopher roared. "Pull him up that he might see me," he said, his face a mask of barely controlled rage.

The guards struggled to bend Sir Robert back, keeping him on his knees, his arms wrenched to the sides. Christopher stood and moved to the edge of the platform. He gazed down on him in contempt.

"From this day hence, you are not welcome within my kingdom. Were it only my choice to make, you would be struck down this day, as you deserve, fit only for the gates of hell. The faggot," his voice mirrored the sneer on his face as he said the word, "has granted you leniency that you might go forth to repent the error of your ways. Look upon him," he waited while one of the guards squeezed Sir Robert's face and turned his head cruelly so he might look at Dafydd where he stood just behind the king's right shoulder, "and know that the one you tormented forgives but does not forget."

Simon and Hugh bowed their heads, their shoulders shaking with suppressed sobs. Sir Robert scowled darkly.

"You will be escorted beyond the boundary of my lands taking naught but the clothing on your backs, and left there. You are not welcome here hence." Christopher stepped back and sank down into his chair.

Dafydd clenched his hands into fists as he watched the men hauled roughly to their feet and dragged across the open courtyard. When they were gone through the open gate, he moved back to take his place behind the king, unclenched his hand, and laid it gently on the king's shoulder.

"They will trouble us no longer," Christopher said.

Dafydd felt an odd sense of foreboding.



DURING the months that followed, the castle settled into the normal winter routine. Most outdoor activities were curtailed. Christopher stayed at home more often. He rode patrols with the men whenever the weather permitted. Dafydd drilled the troops within the castle walls if the snow did not fall, and sat in conference with the captains when it did. The troops accepted Dafydd in everything, and admired and respected him as marshal and comrade.

The council grudgingly accepted Dafydd into their meetings when Christopher was present, but were loath to let either of them know how it chafed. While they would be hard-pressed to admit that Dafydd hindered their progress, neither would they admit that he helped. When spring came and the king began his travels again, Dafydd would become a full-fledged member of the council, both by the king's desire and by the fact that he would at that time become the king's handfasted mate.

The indoor servants were the ones who displayed the most outward pleasure at the prospect of their king declaring Dafydd as mate. For the most part they were peasants from the surrounding countryside, and while it was unusual for men of the nobility to live together openly, it happened with far greater frequency amongst their masses, thus few were troubled by the prospect. Dafydd had an easy manner with them; many times he pitched his weight to help with their tasks, and thus gained their lasting approval.

Matilda, the castle's loan seamstress since the days when Christopher was a small lad, demanded a few extra girls be relieved of their kitchen duties and be freed to work with her. Dafydd happened upon the heated dispute between the venerable seamstress and the usually affable cook. He listened with seeming placid indifference as the two raged at each other.

"You beggar me," Agnes wailed. She was a large woman with cheeks that were always flushed from the heat of the kitchens. "Tis bad enough that I am saddled with the lackwit Baldwin. Yestereve he spilt the potage before 'twas served. Ursula and Bridget are the only two can keep a thought in their heads longer than the space of a sneeze."

"Precisely why they would serve best with the sewing," Matilda said firmly. "You have no idea the mountains and mountains of work that must needs be done, and in three short months." She held up her hands, her fingers red and swollen. "Already I work my fingers to the bone, and 'tis not enough."

"Tis always been enough before," Agnes shot back. "Tis not as though we have dainty ladies who need a mountain of garments; 'tis only the men, and they would go to war in naught but their breeks if 'twas all they had."

Matilda puffed up, clearly scandalized at the thought.

Dafydd stepped closer and spoke softly. "Matilda, is there a reason why you need more help? Has the call for garments increased as much as 'tis too much for you alone?"

Both women turned, breath drawn in, surprised for a moment.

"And Agnes," he continued, "are you so uncharitable you cannot allow the women to be distributed where there is the greatest need?"

Matilda recovered first. "Begging your pardon, my lord," she said with a slight bow. "Tis garments for you and the king, and all the necessities for the ceremony that will join you."

"And 'tis just the same reason why I cannot let the girls go!" Agnes was quick to chime in. "'Tis not too soon to begin training them for the feasting that will follow."

Dafydd smiled. He longed to inform them both that there need be no fuss on his account, but he realized that the handfasting of the king was a great event for the castle servants. Although he would stand before the king in nothing but homespun, and be happy with a meal of bread and simple stew, he acknowledged that Matilda intended to make them both look like kings and Agnes meant to feast them thus as well.

"Let the girls express their desire. One may be better suited for feasts, the other for sewing. On the morrow we can send to Sir Richard. Mayhaps he can spare a few girls, one to work with Matilda, the other with Agnes," he said softly.

Sir Walter approached just as Matilda and Agnes were fawning over Dafydd with their thanks, and even spared a smile for each other. He chuckled as the women hurried off, each to her respective domain.

"Crisis averted?" he asked. He carried a parchment in his hand.

"Aye," Dafydd said. "Mayhaps I should have called for you; it was not my purpose to overstep your boundaries."

"Nay!" Sir Walter said, holding his hand up. "In matters such as those, you have my leave to arrange them however you see fit. I have not seen those two smile at one another thus in many years." He winked. "You seem to have the touch with the women."

It was Dafydd's turn to chuckle. "No special touch; just a desire for peace."

"Peace, and an end to the day," Sir Walter said. He raised the parchment in mock salute. "And now I must needs go and finish counting the casks of wine. By now Reginald has finished unloading his cart."

Dafydd fell into step with him. "I'll come, in case Reginald needs the help."

"Nay," Sir Walter said as they descended the stairs from the castle into the bailey. "Reginald and his boy take enough in the way of payment. I'll not make their task lighter by allowing you to help them."

Reginald stood beside the cart, his arms crossed over his chest. He shifted his gaze from Sir Walter to Dafydd and back. "'Tis all accounted for. Naught left but the payment now."

Sir Walter looked at the parchment, and handed it absently to Dafydd. As he looked at the stack of wine casks, he opened the purse that hung at his waist. "All are accounted for?"

"Aye," Reginald said. "Tis all on the parchment."

"Hold, Sir Walter," Dafydd said. He frowned as he looked at the parchment, then turned and counted the casks. "He has cheated you. He means to charge you for twenty casks of wine and twenty-four of ale." He turned with a frown on his face. "Yet he has given you only eighteen of wine, and twenty of ale."

Reginald rose from his lack stance and uncrossed his arms. "Tis not true; you lie," he said threateningly.

Dafydd walked closer and held the parchment where all could see it. "I merely tell you what it says on the parchment, compared to what you have unloaded. Either adjust the payment so that we pay for only what you have delivered, or have your boy take more casks from the cart."

Sir Walter took the parchment back and frowned as he looked at it.

Reginald snarled to his helper, "Two casks of wine, and four of ale. Make it quick."

Dafydd stayed in the yard until the transaction was completed, then turned and made his way back into the castle. There would be time to go upstairs and wash his face and hands before the evening meal. Christopher would return from patrol soon, and there was the promise of a minstrel that evening.

THE minstrel pleased the king greatly, and he had been asked to stay on. With a winter storm upon them, he accepted the promise of shelter eagerly. Each day in the hour before the evening meal, Christopher and Dafydd sat beside the hearth. Most days they talked, recounted the activities of their respective days, or discussed issues

that had been raised in council or amongst the soldiers. Some days, such as this one, they engaged in a game of chess. The wind howled outside, and the minstrel played louder to cover the sound.

"We shall become buried in snow if this continues," Dafydd said absently as he studied the chessboard.

"Would that we were," Christopher said with a glint in his eye. He bent closer to whisper in Dafydd's ear. "Were we buried in snow I would have an excuse to keep you abed with me on the morrow."

Dafydd's cheeks flushed, and he moved his rook on the board. "Do you fill me with false promise?" he countered softly.

"Art wicked, cariad," Christopher said with a chuckle. "Distract me so you can place my knight in danger."

"Ah, my king, 'tis you who have distracted; 'tis merely happenstance that the move did any good at all." He shifted in his seat, causing Christopher to look down to see the cause of his discomfort.

"Art more than wicked," Christopher breathed.

Before he could continue, Sir Walter and Father Geoffrey approached the hearth. They stood their distance and waited to be summoned. After another moment, Christopher turned, and beckoned them closer.

"Your majesty," Sir Walter said as he bowed low. "Might we have a word with you?"

"Of course," Christopher said as he sprawled back in his chair. "Speak."

Sir Walter shifted his eyes over to Dafydd.

"Whatever you have to say to me you may say before Dafydd," Christopher said firmly.

"Tis about Sir Dafydd," Father Geoffrey said.

Dafydd stirred, and made to stand up. Without moving his gaze from the men, Christopher straightened in his chair and made a motion toward Dafydd to keep him seated. "If 'tis about Dafydd, then you must needs say it in his presence that he might hear your thoughts."

Sir Walter shifted uncomfortably and then straightened up. "Your majesty," he said, then paused to take a deep breath. "It is my desire that Sir Dafydd not be made a member of council only when you are not in the castle."

Christopher quirked a brow, his voice hard as he responded. "And what is your desire then?"

"That he become a full member of council, at all times. We have need of his voice of reason, and he has proven to us all that he would be a value to us."

Dafydd drew in his breath and Christopher turned to look at him, a smile on his face. "What have you done, Dafydd, to gain their trust this way?"

"Tis not just one thing, majesty, nor do we wish you to think that we have been keeping a tally. 'Tis just that," Father Geoffrey paused, folded his hands together, and continued softly, "mayhaps we judged too harshly."

"Of critical importance," Sir Walter interjected, "was his dealings with Reginald Tuesday past, and I offer my humblest apology that I did not catch the error myself."

Christopher turned back. "What error?"

"He did not tell you himself?" Sir Walter asked, clearly surprised.

"The wine merchant thought to swindle us," Dafydd said softly. "I know that Sir Walter would have caught the error himself had I not insisted in accompanying him to the yard."

"Nay," Sir Walter said, his head bowed. "I have not the skill with written words, or numbers, that you possess. I had looked at the paper already, and trusted that the numbers matched."

Christopher sat back in his chair, observing Sir Walter's discomfort, and the natural ease with which Dafydd smoothed the matter over. He steepled his fingers together and said, "If it is your wish that Dafydd become a member of council, then I will not stand in the way as it has been my desire from the beginning." He looked from Sir Walter to Father Geoffrey. "The council will next meet on the day after tomorrow, and we will make the arrangements then." He turned to look at Dafydd. "Does this suit you?"

"Aye," Dafydd said softly.

"Might the council meet on the morrow?" Father Geoffrey asked. "The weather will not break; there will be time for a meeting when it will not interfere with patrols."

"Nay," Christopher said firmly. "I have already made a promise for the morrow, and that promise cannot be broken."

"Very well, sire," Sir Walter said. Both men bowed, then turned and strode away.

Christopher sprawled back in his chair again, a small smile touching his lips. "Yet another mystery, Dafydd," he said softly. "I did not know you could read."

"Aye," Dafydd said. "Read and figure numbers."

"This changes things somewhat," Christopher said softly.

Dafydd stiffened. "In what manner?"

The smile still on his lips, Christopher turned. "Ah, you must wait until tomorrow when I reward you to find out."

"I need no reward, my king," Dafydd said softly.

"Mayhaps you don't," Christopher replied, "but mayhaps I do."

THE castle was still wrapped in the howling storm the next day. Outside the walls the serfs hunkered within their homes. Inside the servants and stable hands congregated in the main hall. The hearth blazed with warmth, and people huddled together, content to spend the day in inactivity.

Upstairs, Christopher and Dafydd sat before the fire in the king's chamber. Alain had served them bread and cheese to break their fast, and then at the king's bidding he built the fire up and left a stack of wood beside the hearth.

"We will have no further need of you or John until evening," Christopher said.

"Aye, your majesty." Alain bowed himself out of the room.

Christopher stretched his toes toward the fire, and looked mischievously over at Dafydd. "Beltane approaches in just three months."

"Aye," Dafydd said.

"Early on that morning we will arise to hear mass with the people, pray for a good harvest, and feast as we may to bid farewell to the winter months." Christopher turned to look at Dafydd. "And then, you and I shall be bound together on the steps of the church with all present."

Dafydd nodded.

"I am sometimes selfish," Christopher said softly. "There are times when the crown weighs heavy upon my head, as I have told you before. This is one of those times. If I had my choice I would not listen to the drone of Father Geoffrey, and have a private moment between us trumpeted from the battlements. I would bond with you in a more private manner where 'twas just you and I before God our father."

Dafydd turned to watch Christopher's profile as he spoke, as always fascinated when Christopher became the private man, and not the king.

Christopher turned, his blue eyes brimming with emotion. "I will give you three months, Dafydd, to write your own set of vows in which you promise yourself to me in good and bad. And on the day before Beltane you and I will recite our own vows to one another upon the beach, with naught but the seagulls as witness."

"Christopher," Dafydd said softly. "I... am touched."

"Art loved," Christopher said. He reached over to take Dafydd's fingers in his. "Before I take you to my bed to show you the true depth and power of the love I hold for you within my heart, know that there is more to it than that. My love for you encompasses all; 'tis a full package."

"'Rwy'n dy garu," Dafydd whispered.

"What... does it mean?" Christopher asked as he squeezed his fingers tighter against Dafydd's.

"I love you."

Christopher slid from his chair, knelt before Dafydd and laid his hands on his knees. The fire lit his hair, turned it to a golden halo around his head. "I know 'tis true, have heard the words before, yet when you speak them thus, Dafydd... you wrap my heart in tight bonds that cannot be broken."

Dafydd bent down and caught Christopher's parted lips within his own, a soft kiss to seal the moment between them. Christopher rose up, settled Dafydd back against the chair, and parted the front of his bedrobe to expose his warm flesh. He trailed his hands down Dafydd's chest, closed one around his member and opened his own robe with the other. Intent upon his task, he stroked from base to tip, squeezed tightly as he pushed down again. He settled down on his knees, took the reddened head within the warmth of his mouth. Dafydd moaned and his hands tightened on the arms of the chair.

Slowly, but with firm pressure, Christopher drew upon Dafydd's length. He teased with tongue, nipped with teeth, and trailed his fingers down to tease against his entrance. Soft, wet kisses to the tip, circled the ridge with strong tongue and back down to the base while one finger pressed deeper and deeper inside. When he pulled up he whispered, "I would take you, cariad, here before the fire."

Dafydd slid from his chair, down against the furs before the hearth. He raised his knees and spread himself wide. Christopher stood, shrugged from his bedrobe, and retrieved the pot of cream from beside the bed.

"Art magnificent this way," he said as he dropped to his knees between Dafydd's outstretched legs. "Art all legs and cock, and so ready for me." He slicked his fingers and pushed inside as he bent to take Dafydd inside his mouth again.

"Ahh," Dafydd moaned. He arched up against the pressure of the king's fingers inside him. "My fierce lion," he murmured as he reached up to close his arms around Christopher's back. "Come to devour me yet again."

Christopher moaned his response, withdrew his fingers and pushed inside again. He pulled his mouth up, teased at the head while he stretched his fingers wide, and then rested back on his heels.

"Not devour, cariad," he said. "Claim as my own for always."

"Beunydd," Dafydd groaned as he raised his legs up and pulled them back against his chest.

"Aye," Christopher said. "Always." He bent down over Dafydd and teased his lips over Dafydd's face while he slicked himself with cream. "You must teach me the words to your heart."

"All the words you utter find their way to my heart," Dafydd panted. He gripped his legs closer to his chest to allow Christopher to bend closer.

Christopher braced his knees against the furs and drove deep within Dafydd's passage, pushing in as deeply as he might with one steady thrust. He gazed down on Dafydd through half-closed eyes. "Say the words again."

"'Rwy'n dy garu," Dafydd groaned. "Fy llew."

With a wordless moan, Christopher closed his eyes and began to move, slow gentle thrusts. He reached between them to cup Dafydd's length against him with each push.

Dafydd raised his arms around Christopher's neck and pulled up to kiss his cheek. The slow, gentle manner in which the king moved enflamed him.

"Let go, cariad," Christopher murmured. "Let go and let me feel your release."

Instead of letting go, Dafydd gripped tighter. He tightened around Christopher each time he thrust within, holding him with each pass. When the tide crested, their groans of release intertwined, and then Dafydd did fall back upon the furs, eyes open to watch the emotions that crossed Christopher's face.

When the moment had passed, Christopher lay slack against Dafydd and guided his legs down so that he might stretch out atop him. He nuzzled at his ear. "I would keep you here all this day, yet even with the fire 'tis cold."

"Let me build the fire," Dafydd murmured, "and warm your bones in yon bed."

"Mmm," Christopher moaned. With an effort he rolled aside, and stood to move back to the bed.

Dafydd added wood to the fire, and lit a branch of candles with a brand. He set the candles and the cream pot beside the bed and crawled in beside the king. Christopher smiled and twined their bodies close together.

"You are not sated," he said softly.

"I think," Dafydd replied, "I never will be."

## €[12]& Chafing Against Responsibility

DESPITE fierce storms that overtook the kingdom without warning, in the main the winter remained mild. The castle was enmeshed in the frenzy to prepare for the ceremony that would herald the arrival of spring. The troops relished the chance to be outside during the fairer weather as when they were cooped indoors they were frequently underfoot.

Dafydd settled into his role with the council with equal aplomb as he had with the troops. For the most part he was content to allow the others to handle the day-today needs of the people; he interjected observations where he could. It helped to have his view, as it more closely aligned with those of the people.

One afternoon when the weather was fair, Christopher and Dafydd rode to visit Sir Richard in his stronghold. It was half a day's journey, and with the shorter days it would require them to pass the night there and return the following day. It was the first time they had undertaken a journey such as this together, and Christopher promised it would not be the last.

Along the way, Dafydd queried the king about the upcoming celebration of Beltane. The previous year Christopher had been gone from the castle on Beltane, and Dafydd had retreated back to his cottage to spend the day in his own private rituals. Although the Cornish and the Welsh meshed in many of their beliefs, Dafydd still felt the urge to protect his heritage when he could.

"Tis a grand celebration," Christopher said as they rode along the rocky path. Sir Richard's stronghold was perched along the coast, just as Christopher's was; yet it was nearer to Wales. "The revelry begins the day before. During the daylight hours the young unmarried lads and lasses will venture out to break hawthorn branches from the trees, and collect what flowers they might find within the woods. Others collect wood." He paused to look over at Dafydd. "Surely you remember that from years past."

"Aye," Dafydd said with a smile. "And I remember the activities that accompany it."

Christopher chuckled. "Tis the reawakening after a long winter's sleep, the chance to sew wild oats where they may. After the wood is gathered, the homes are decorated with the hawthorn branches, and flowers, and all is made ready for the bonfire. Tis said it is good luck to leap a Beltane fire, and with the ale flowing many attempt; luckily few fail."

The path rose gently, and gulls flew overhead. The men who accompanied them on the journey kept a distance, riding before and after the king and his consort.

"The men find willing women, and spirit them off to the woods as the night grows long. The fire is kept burning through the night, and all reappear early the next day to watch the dawn together. The herds are driven out, past the embers of the bonfire, and mass is spoken to bless the coming growing season."

"In Wales 'tis said it is the passing from the dark to the light," Dafydd said softly.

"'Tis much the same here. Handfasting generally occurs at Beltane, to ensure a fruitful union."

Dafydd was silent, thinking about the ill-concealed conversations he had overheard. While the people were pleased that their king had found love, they worried that the kingdom had become vulnerable with no hope for an heir.

As if he read his thoughts, Christopher edged his horse closer and reached over to lay a hand upon Dafydd's on the reins. "I know in my heart that this is my kismet, cariad," he said softly. "On that day a year and more ago, when you asked me for a love story, some barrier was crossed, and I do not rue my decision."

"Aye, Christopher," Dafydd replied softly. "I know your heart." He turned his hand over and touched Christopher's softly before he drew it away to give his attention to the horse again. "You have told me the lore of your people's celebration. Now tell me how it shall be different this year."

Christopher returned his hands to his reins. "On the day before Beltane, you and I will arise early, and ride away from the castle, leave them to their preparations. We will ride to the beach, and there pledge to one another with only ourselves as witness. We will return as the bonfire is lit, and drink with the people before we retire to our own chambers." He gave Dafydd a rueful smile. "I am oft old-fashioned. We will sleep apart for the space of a week before we are joined."

"Discipline, and honing desire," Dafydd said.

"Aye," Christopher said with a smile. "A soldier is disciplined, and I desire you greatly."

The path narrowed, and Dafydd slowed to fall behind until they came to a wide space again.

"We will arise early to see the sunrise, and then after the herds are driven forth all will walk to the chapel. Upon the steps, Father Geoffrey will perform the handfasting ceremony, and our hands will be bound together. Then we will enter the chapel to hear mass. Afterwards there will be feasting and revelry for the rest of the day." Christopher turned to give Dafydd a smile. "And I believe you know what will come when we withdraw to leave the people to dance through the night."

"Aye," Dafydd said softly. "The edge you honed will be worn away to nothing."

"Not nothing," Christopher said. "Likely it will never wear away that far; you always manage to set the edge yet again."

"As do you."

Sir Richard's stronghold loomed before them in the clouds, and the horses picked up their steps as though they could sense that they were close to shelter and food. Christopher and Dafydd quickened their pace to catch up to the guard in front as the guard in the rear closed in behind.

The portcullis was lifted, and the horses clattered across the wooden bridge and into the yard. Sir Richard stood with his wife to greet them and lead them within the keep. After the greetings had been set aside, Sir Richard led them to chairs set before the hearth. The lady Mary, Sir Richard's wife, withdrew to ensure that a room was readied, and that the meal would be sufficient.

"To what do we owe this honor, your majesty?" Sir Richard asked as they sank into chairs.

"Richard," Christopher said as he accepted a tankard of ale, "let there be no cause for formality betwixt us. You have known me these many years, and when we are private thus you must address me simply as Christopher."

Sir Richard took his own tankard and smiled. "You are never simple, Christopher," he said. "Yet I will abide by your wishes."

Dafydd sipped at the much-appreciated ale and watched the two who were so alike and yet so different. The fire warmed him through, and he was content to be an observer. He knew, even if Christopher professed otherwise, that there was genuine care between the two men, and that in many cases Christopher looked to Sir Richard for the advice he would have wished from his father.

"We came to escape the turmoil that brews within Lysnowydh as Beltane approaches," Christopher said with a sigh as he sprawled back in his chair. "Tis madness as the people stumble over themselves to set all to rights."

"They wish to honor you," Sir Richard said. He turned to give Dafydd a warm smile. "And Dafydd as well."

"Aye," Christopher said. "Yet I will be glad when 'tis passed and the people settle again into their placid routines."

Sir Richard nodded and settled back against his chair. He spared a glance at Dafydd, and then turned back to Christopher. "I am glad you made the trip over today; saved me making the journey myself. These old bones complain to high

heaven when the cold lays low on the ground." He took a swallow of his ale. "There was a matter I wished to discuss with you ere Beltane."

"You will make the journey, then, I trust," Christopher said.

"Aye, of course," Sir Richard responded. "You are as a son to me, your majesty—Christopher." His wizened face broke into a smile. "I would be there to honor your match."

Christopher smiled, clearly pleased. "Then what is on your mind that cannot wait until then?"

"'Tis a matter I'd as soon discuss with you privately, yet I know your response, and so I will broach it now before Dafydd." He paused for yet another swallow of ale then set his tankard aside. "Your kingdom needs an heir. You marry for love, and yet you take away the promise of a child sprung from your loins to rule after you."

Dafydd shifted uncomfortably in his chair, knowing the truth of the words. In Sir Richard's face he saw only concern, not a drive to say it in a vicious manner.

Christopher's face darkened in a frown. "You have the right of it, Richard," he said tightly. "Any discussion you have regarding Dafydd, or me, or my future is not secret from him. I am glad you have chosen to broach this subject in this manner, yet this burden of producing an heir for my people is one that does not sit well upon my shoulders."

"A king has many responsibilities," Sir Richard said softly. "Some looked for, others not. Each day you make decisions, and hand down proclamations, some are favored and with others you gain enemies. 'Tis not your duty to serve your own desires above the needs of your kingdom."

As always, when faced with truths such as these, Christopher turned petulant, assumed the aura of a child playing at being king instead of being a king in fact. "Are you saying I should throw all over into the fire and take some misbegotten woman into my bed, make her my queen, yet despise her every day she draws breath?"

Dafydd shivered, as though a chill ran down his spine.

"Christopher, listen to me," Sir Richard said as he sat forward in his chair. "I but counsel you on your duties, not seek to anger you." He reached over and laid a hand upon Dafydd's, where it rested on the arm of his chair. "No one seeks to drive you and Dafydd apart, but you must consider the future of your kingdom."

"And how, pray tell, do you suggest I do that?" Christopher asked, the petulant edge still in his voice.

"Handfast with Dafydd as planned," Sir Richard said. "Take him about with you to show your subjects the tangible love that there is betwixt you. Take him as far as London if you desire. When you return take a woman into your household, one who is of high birth, yet not of the nobility, and get a child upon her. Acknowledge that child as your heir, as is your right to claim any bastard you father as heir."

Christopher scowled and gazed into the fire while Dafydd and Sir Richard sat in uncomfortable silence. At length Christopher stood and held out a hand to Dafydd. "I will consider your words," he said to Sir Richard. "I must be private with Dafydd. We will walk upon your battlements. Come and find us when the meal is served."

"Aye, your majesty," Sir Richard said quietly. He rose, and watched as Christopher swept across the hall with Dafydd in his wake.

The air was chill outside; the clouds seemed to have dropped lower. Christopher wrapped his cloak about himself tightly. They made their way up the outer stairway beside the main gate. Even though it was times of peace, guards still patrolled the battlements. They allowed the king to pass, and kept their distance. Once they reached the section of the wall that faced the ocean far below, Christopher stopped and leaned against the crenellation. Dafydd stood behind him.

After a bit, Christopher turned and drew Dafydd into his arms. He reached up to tangle his fingers through Dafydd's hair and pulled him down none too gently. Their mouths crushed together in a forceful kiss. Dafydd braced his arms against the crenellation and gave in to the hard kiss.

"Tis too much to ask," Christopher said breathlessly when he broke the kiss. "I should throw the crown down into the ocean below, steal off with you and spend the rest of our days in your small cottage collecting wood, away from the many eyes that watch my every move."

"Nay," Dafydd said. "You should not, and you will not." He paused, shaky from the storm of emotion that raged between them. "Sir Richard has the right of it. You must needs provide your kingdom with an heir. His is a sound plan, and yet I want you to know that I will yield to your desires, if need be."

"Yield what?" Christopher asked, his voice ragged, his arms tightening around Dafydd.

"Yield my place beside you; allow you to do right by your subjects."

With a cry that was like that of a wounded animal, Christopher pushed Dafydd back against the wall behind them, crushed him against the hard stone. His hair whipped wildly about his face in the wind that blew up from the ocean. "It is not now, nor will it ever be my desire to have you fly from me." He lowered one hand down to Dafydd's hip, squeezed hard as he continued. "Were you to fly from me, I would hunt you down, to the ends of the earth, and make you mine again. Art mine, now and in all things. The kingdom be damned."

Dafydd gasped at the sudden pain of being pressed against the wall. "Llew ffyrnig," he whispered. "Do not damn your kingdom, not for me." He reached up to clamp his hand in Christopher's hair and pulled him down close. "I love you, my king, now and for always. Beunydd." He pulled Christopher closer and whispered against his mouth, "I want what is best for you, and the kingdom, and Sir Richard's plan has merit."

Christopher claimed another fiery kiss and squeezed Dafydd's hip closer

against him. "What is between us is sacred, cariad. Again you enflame me with little effort." He struggled back a step. "If I did not care about the men who watch us now even though they pretend they do not I would claim you right here against this wall, become the fierce lion you think that I am." He released Dafydd's hip, and raised his hand to cup his face gently. "Art right, of course. Richard gives the solution that serves the best...."

"Yet it angers you to be told what you have already determined in your own heart." Dafydd leaned into the caressing hand.

"See how well you know my thoughts, the words within my heart?" Christopher leaned forward to place a soft kiss upon Dafydd's lips.

"Tis only because I reside within your heart," Dafydd replied.

"Aye," Christopher said. "So be it known between us now, the next time you offer to depart from my side so that I may accomplish my duties, I will have you tied to the post in the courtyard and whipped for disobedience. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Dafydd said. His shiver was not from the biting cold, but from the knowledge that Christopher had every intention of keeping that promise.

"I believe," Christopher said as he stood back, "that you do understand." He smiled. "And the day when we have to put his plan into effect is still in the future. In the present there is only the love that is between us, and the promise of Beltane."

"Aye," Dafydd said. He stepped away from the wall just as the guard approached to let them know that the meal would be served shortly.

When they made their way back downstairs, Christopher found Sir Richard.

"It is my charge to you," he said quietly as they made their way to the head table, "to find a suitable woman. Make sure she is Welsh. I would have any child I produce resemble Dafydd."

Sir Richard winked. "It will be as you say."

IT was Christopher's right as king to claim the solar bedroom that belonged to Sir Richard and Lady Mary for the night, and though they pressed it upon him, he declined.

"I am used to conditions far worse than you wall chamber can provide when I travel," he said with a kindly smile. "I cannot deprive Lady Mary the comfort of her own bed."

"Tis no trouble," Lady Mary said with a becoming blush. "I would find comfort with my ladies."

"But not the same comfort Sir Richard can provide," Christopher said with a

naughty wink. He bent forward to whisper into her ear. "Trust me when I say that I shall be snug as a bug in a rug with yon giant to warm me."

Lady Mary's blush deepened, and she dipped her head. "Very well, your majesty. The fire already burns in the hearth within the wall chamber. I shall see to the bed myself."

"Art crafty, Christopher," Sir Richard said with a chuckle. "Like as not with those simple words you have ensured me warmth within my own bed this eve."

Christopher laughed, and reached for Dafydd's hand. "All deserve warmth on a cold winter's night."

In a short while the room was prepared to Lady Mary's exacting standards, and Christopher and Dafydd bid their hosts good night. The chamber was small, but contained a large bed and blazing fire. Christopher and Dafydd disrobed quickly and climbed inside the bed and underneath the mound of furs. Christopher found Dafydd and pulled him close as he rolled atop him.

"Tell me again," he demanded, as he settled himself within the valley between Dafydd's thighs. Already he stiffened with desire, and felt that Dafydd did also.

"That I burn for you?" Dafydd asked. He widened his legs, and shifted so that Christopher settled more comfortably.

"Nay," Christopher said as he bent down to nuzzle against Dafydd's lips. "That I am your fierce lion. I know that mayhaps 'tis silly for me to need to hear the love words on your lips, but I have never heard the words from any other, and I find I long to. Very much."

"Llew... ffyrnig... llwglyd... eiddof...." Dafydd skimmed his hands over Christopher's back, cupped his ass, and moved up against him.

"Mmm." Christopher swelled against Dafydd's flesh, and slid down to nuzzle at his chest. "I know not what all the words mean, yet it fills me with pride to hear them from your lips."

"Eiddof," Dafydd said again. "Art mine."

Christopher's breath hitched in, and he reached behind to find Dafydd's hand and twined their fingers together. He lowered down to run the flat of his tongue over Dafydd's nipple, felt it pebble beneath him. "And you," he whispered against the damp flesh, "are mine."

Dafydd raised his legs and hooked them around Christopher's back. The friction between them raised their passion higher. Careful to be quiet, they rocked together beneath the warm furs. Christopher dug his knees into the bed and increased the rocking of his body; his cock slid alongside Dafydd's as he continued to tease at his nipple with his tongue.

"Would I could bury myself within your warmth," Christopher murmured. "And yet I near release simply from your touch."

Dafydd tightened his hand within Christopher's, and with a stifled moan he rocked up hard against him, bathing him with the warmth of his release. "Ahhh," he moaned softly, moving as he felt Christopher's own release overtake him.

"Sleep warm, cariad," Christopher whispered. "Sleep safe in my arms."



WINTER passed slowly into the budding spring, and preparations within the castle of Lysnowydh reached a fever pitch. Christopher more often than not flew into a rage as Beltane approached. He was eager for the ceremony, but with each passing day grew more wroth with the elaborate preparations. Dafydd accepted it all with an even grace. While he wished for simplicity even more than Christopher did, it was not in his manner to lose his patience. He tried to soothe matters as best he could, and usually by morning Christopher was smiling again.

True to his word, in the final week that led up to Beltane, Christopher did not seek Dafydd's bed. During this week they met in daylight hours to accomplish their tasks, but separated after the evening meal. Christopher kept the council up long into the night discussing matters they had already discussed in minute detail time and time again.

Dafydd excused himself from these meetings and spent the time in his own small still room, amongst the dried herbs, pouring over the parchment that Christopher had given him three months before. The words he longed to say resounded in his heart, yet he found it difficult pouring them onto the parchment. He meditated upon them, and finally was satisfied with what he had written.

Both Dafydd and Christopher suffered the ministrations of Matilda as she completed their clothing for the ceremony. Agnes rarely emerged from the kitchens as she struggled to place the finishing touches upon her grand feast. The great hall was freshened, the main yard was swept, and the walls covered with a fresh coat of whitewash.

Finally, on the evening before the final day, Christopher roared for silence at the end of the meal. The buzz died down and the startled people turned to gaze upon him.

"On the day after tomorrow," he said, "we celebrate Beltane as one, and Dafydd will become well and truly a part of this kingdom." He paused to smile down at Dafydd. "Tomorrow you will end your preparations, and all will be ready, like or

not. Dafydd and I will not be within the castle walls, and will not return until dusk when the bonfire is lit. If there is aught you need from either of us, tonight is your last chance."

Once he returned to his seat, the murmuring began again. He turned to Dafydd and said softly, "Art ready for our sojourn tomorrow?"

"Aye, my king," Dafydd responded.

"Tis well. I am fit to burst."

THE weather had warmed as winter passed into spring, and yet in the early hours of the morning, it was still cold. Dafydd finished saddling his horse and pulled his furlined cloak tighter about him as he swung up into the saddle. Christopher was already upon the back of his dancing destrier, eager to put the castle behind them for the day.

One lone guard drowsed within the tower. He cranked the portcullis up and watched as the two men galloped from the courtyard, off across the foggy moor.

It was half a day's journey to the beach, and they passed it mostly in silence, each preparing for the unusual ceremony that lay ahead of them. It was not typical for bride and groom to recite vows of their own devising, but as they both acknowledged, they were not typical bride and groom. Their union would never be recognized beyond the confines of Lysnowydh, yet would be completely binding within each of their hearts.

Dafydd was filled with a sense of déjà vu as they descended the path to the beach. It was on this beach a full year before where he had realized that what he felt for Christopher was indeed love. He had kept the revelation hidden until they returned to the castle that night. He still recalled the light in Christopher's eyes when he had said the words. He knew that what he felt now was even more encompassing than what he had felt then.

Gulls screeched overhead as they walked their horses out onto the wild beach. They took a few moments alone to gather their thoughts and gaze upon the waves, and then slid from their horses.

Christopher reached for Dafydd's hand and twined their fingers together as the horses wandered off. Still without speaking they walked down to the verge of waves and sand. Christopher moved closer, tightened his grip, and spoke into Dafydd's ear.

"We have come full circle. In your small cottage my love for you was born, and in that cottage I declared my intention to make you mine forever." He turned to look up into Dafydd's face. "Upon this beach your love was crystallized, and upon this beach we declare our vows for one another."

Dafydd smiled, and inclined his head in agreement. Christopher turned, and with their hands still joined, led him to an outcropping of rocks. The sun had burned

away the morning gloom, and shone brightly upon the spot. They turned to face each other, keeping their hands joined.

"Tomorrow the words will be brief," Christopher said. "Though permission is given for our union, it cannot be performed in holy church, and will not include all the words a priest would normally say. 'Tis just a ceremony to bind us each to the other. I would repeat the words to you now as you might know that to me you are mine in the eyes of Christ our father; as well I add the words that are meant for your ears alone. Though they be writ on parchment, I speak them from my memory."

The sun shone upon them. The sound of the sea was a gentle punctuation as Christopher began to speak again.

"I take thee, Dafydd, to be my wedded mate, in sickness and health, for richer or poorer, through all the days of my life 'til death depart us. I promise to honor and respect you, to listen as you speak. I promise to hold you, and cherish you, forsaking all others. I give you this pledge, and with this token claim you for mine." Christopher loosed his hands from Dafydd's, and reached inside the front of his tunic. "Kneel before me, cariad."

Dafydd lowered to his knees and gasped as Christopher withdrew a golden circlet studded with rough jewels. He lowered the circlet over Dafydd's head, left his warm hands upon Dafydd's temple. "When you rise, you will be the ruler of my heart, my king as I am yours. I love you Dafydd, this day and always."

Overcome with an emotion that was hard to name, Dafydd felt tears sting at his eyes. He swayed upon his knees for a moment and then slowly arose. He reached for Christopher's hands again, cleared his throat, and spoke softly yet clearly.

"Yr wyf i Dafydd, yn dy gymeryd di Christopher, wr i mi, yn glaf ac yn iach, er cyfoethocach er tlotach, o'r dydd hwn ymlaen tra byddwn ni'n dau byw." He loosed his hand from Christopher's and reached into the purse that hung at his waist. "Derbyn y fodrwy hon." He placed a simple silver ring adorned with heart knots upon Christopher's left hand. "Yn arwydd o'm cariad a'm ffyddlondeb." He slid the ring all the way to the knuckle. "Anrhydeddaf di a'm corff, a rhannaf fy holl eiddo a thi... art truly the king of my heart, and soul, and all of my world." He raised Christopher's hand and pressed his lips against the simple sliver band. "I love you, Christopher, beunydd."

Christopher appeared as overcome as Dafydd. He pulled Dafydd into his arms, keeping their hands joined and sandwiched between them. They stood for several moments in the embrace. Dafydd bent his head as Christopher raised his, and they sealed the union with a kiss.

When they broke apart they stepped down from the rocks to find shelter from the rising wind. Christopher withdrew a parchment from his purse and handed it to Dafydd. Dafydd tucked it away, and withdrew his own.

"I wrote the words in English for you, but I spoke them in Welsh so you would know they came from deep inside me."

Christopher scanned the words written on the parchment: I Dafydd take you Christopher, as my husband, in sickness and health, for richer or poorer, as long as we both shall live. Receive this ring, as a token of my love and faithfulness. I worship you with my body and share all my goods with you. He folded the parchment and tucked it away.

"I feel at peace, and fully loved," Christopher said.

"Aye," Dafydd said. "I would stay here with you a while before we must return."

"We have time before we must needs leave to return ere sundown." Christopher ran his thumb over the simple ring that Dafydd had slid onto his finger. "How came you by this wonderful ring?"

"I asked Gaunt to make it for me in the castle forge," Dafydd said. "He had silver in plenty. I drew the knots upon a scrap of the parchment you gave me."

"Ah, Gaunt," Christopher said with a soft chuckle. "He did not mention it when I commissioned your crown. Mayhaps he is good with keeping secrets."

"There was naught but a twinkle in his eye to betray that he had spoken to you when he agreed to fashion the ring." Dafydd reached up to touch the golden circlet. "In truth I did not expect to be honored in this manner."

"Yet you sought to honor me with a token of your own," Christopher said. He raised his hand to his mouth and pressed his own lips against where Dafydd's fingers had touched the ring. "Yet again our thoughts ran in league with one another."

"This ring is a token you can keep with you always, whether you wear it upon your finger, or tuck it within your purse." Dafydd's voice became harsh with emotion for a moment. "Would that you would keep a part of me with you always."

"Ah, cariad," Christopher murmured. "Were I to have whispered in your ear I would have told you firmly that I did not want the cloth, or the bible that are long the traditional gifts of handfasting. This makes it special, makes it for just you and I."

Dafydd tucked Christopher close beside his body and wrapped them both within his own cloak. "Fy llew, and I would not want the wheat or the dagger. I know you provide for our home, and together we protect it."

Christopher yawned and settled closer, his cheek resting on Dafydd's chest.

"Sleep, my king," Dafydd said softly. "In an hour I will wake you that we might begin our journey homeward."

"I do not sleep well when parted from you, cariad," Christopher said.

"Aye, I know. I will watch over you as you sleep, and seal this day upon my memory for all time."

"As will I," Christopher said. "I will sleep and catch the memory in a dream."

True to his word, Dafydd held Christopher as he slept, kept track of the movement of the sun, and woke him in time that they might return to the castle just as the bonfire was ready to light.

THEY rode into the castle courtyard just as the sun sank behind them. True to what Christopher had said, the castle and all the homes that surrounded it were decked in hawthorn branches and lilac.

The bonfire was laid just outside the castle walls. Raucous cheers and the breaching of ale casks accompanied its lighting. Christopher and Dafydd drank a toast with the people, and then went inside for a light meal. They bid each other a good sleep, and sought their separate beds.

Within each there was a longing for the morrow.

IT was still full dark as John nudged Dafydd's shoulder to wake him. Dafydd rolled from the bed, finally used to receiving John's assistance. He knew that today he would don the clothing that had been made special for the day. In the pit of his belly there was a knot of nerves and a measure of excitement.

"Tis an honor, Sir Dafydd," John said solemnly, "to assist you this morn."

"An honor you deserve," Dafydd responded. In truth, he would have wanted the time to settle his thoughts, yet he was soothed by John's deft assistance.

First came a shirt of snowy white cotton adorned at the neck and sleeves with seed pearls. It tucked into chausses of tawny velvet, which were tucked into new boots of rich brown leather that clung to his legs. Next came a tunic of rich crimson brocade. Around his hips was a belt that was hung with a leather purse, and his ceremonial sword. Over all he wore the furred surcoat.

John drew in his breath in wonder when Dafydd produced the circlet crown. "Tis a wondrous thing," he breathed as he lowered it reverently onto Dafydd's head.

"Aye," Dafydd said. "From a wondrous king."

Before they departed, Dafydd walked over to the hearth. He took a moment to stand in quiet contemplation and gaze into the flames. Happy with what he saw, he smiled, and reached up to take the shell that Christopher had given him the first time they went to the beach. He dropped it into his purse, his own talisman to protect him through the coming day.

"I am ready," he said as he turned.

"You look magnificent," John said.

They met Alain standing with Christopher at the bottom of the stairs. Christopher was dressed in a similar fashion as Dafydd, yet his brocaded tunic was blue. He wore a large silver cross around his neck, and his own ceremonial crown. When he reached for Dafydd's hand, the ring gleamed upon his finger. They communicated with their eyes, and then together they walked through the hall and out into the yard.

It was clear that many had spent the night in revelry, yet the assembled mass managed a cheer as the king and his consort appeared. The bonfire had burned down, and soon would be embers only as they walked past it. They walked up the gentle incline toward where the sky was lighting with the dawn.

Gone was the boisterousness of the previous night. All stood in hushed silence to watch the sun rise. It was a sunrise like any other, yet it touched them all in a different way.

Once the sun was up and began to warm the air, the people turned and made their way back toward the castle. The cattle were herded from their winter pens, past the embers of the fire to bring them protection in the coming summer season, and out to pastures. A few of the younger shepherds followed them.

The castle servants had brought forth ale and bread. All ate together, nobility and peasant alike in hushed silence. Dafydd found he could not eat much; the ball of nerves in his stomach had grown as the time neared for the handfasting.

"We must needs make our way to the chapel," Father Geoffrey said loudly. Smiles broke out amongst the gathering, and all turned to walk back inside the castle courtyard.

When they reached the chapel, Father Geoffrey walked up onto the porch. Leaning against the door was a broom made of birch. He laid the broom across the steps then rose to await Christopher and Dafydd.

Dafydd paused, and gasped softly when he saw the broom barring their way. Christopher moved closer to whisper in his ear.

"Tis right?"

Dafydd swallowed, his voice husky when he spoke. "Tis right." He was overcome that Christopher had included this Welsh custom as part of the ritual.

Christopher crossed over the broom first, and then Dafydd. The broom did not move, thus indicating a long and prosperous marriage.

Father Geoffrey nodded to his novice Andrew, and a silken cord was produced. A prayer was said over the cord, and then Christopher and Dafydd both presented their left hands. Father Geoffrey knotted the cord tightly around their wrists, binding them together.

"With this binding I tie thee, heart to heart, together as one. With this knot thou are joined in sacred union. May God smile upon thee, and bless thee with health and prosperity." He placed his hand over their bound wrists. "By the knot on this cord, thy

love is united."

There was a small cheer from the gathered people, and Christopher and Dafydd turned to face them with smiles wreathing their faces. Christopher turned and kissed each of Dafydd's cheeks, and the crowd clapped with joy. With a gentle tug, the knot was released, and the cord and broom were set aside that they might be saved as a lasting memory of the day.

Only the nobility fit inside the chapel; the peasants stood outside the door to hear Father Geoffrey make the Beltane blessing and say the mass. Christopher and Dafydd sat on the king's bench alone, their hands clasped together.

When the service was over the nobility departed the chapel back out into the yard again. The rest of the morning was spent in revelry again as youths danced around the maypole. Many came to offer their words of congratulations to Christopher and Dafydd.

Sir Richard and Lady Mary accompanied them to the tables that were set out and covered with cloths and flowers. Before the feast would commence, Sir Richard stood and called for silence.

"My friends," he said as the people settled into their seats. "I have been a part of Lysnowydh for so long 'tis like a second home to me. It is with great joy that I bear witness to the joining of your king with the love of his heart." He turned, raised his goblet of wine high, and smiled down at the two who sat beside him. "May your years be many. May you prosper as does your kingdom."

All cheered heartily and downed the first of many goblets of wine. Sir Richard continued.

"Accept this gift from my lady and I. May it grace your hall, yet pale in comparison to the love you share."

Servants from Sir Richard's household walked in, between them holding a large tapestry that depicted a golden lion stalking across the board moor, with a peregrine falcon swooping above. It was clear that the lion represented Christopher and the falcon represented Dafydd.

"Sir Richard, 'tis beautiful," Christopher said as he reached out to run his fingers over the beautifully wrought stitches. "Tis my guess that Lady Mary had much to do with this beautiful work. Our thanks for this glowing testament to our love."

Lady Mary blushed, and dipped her head in acknowledgment. The tapestry was carried back inside the hall to be mounted on the wall behind the dais.

Before the meal started, pages arrived with bowls of water that the nobility might wash their hands. Patrick, as always, brought the bowl to Christopher and Dafydd. His face shone with merriment and excitement. As Christopher dipped his hands into the warm, scented water, Patrick burst forth.

"Your majesty, you shall never guess!"

Long used to the natural cheekiness his page displayed, Christopher took the towel and let Dafydd dip his hands within the bowl. "Speak, young Patrick."

"Sir Cuthbert says I'm to be a squire! 'Tis my last day to serve you in the meal. Tomorrow I begin to learn the ways of battle!" He turned to allow Dafydd to take the other towel.

"Ah, 'tis well," Christopher said. He leaned back in his chair. "Yet you should not be so eager to learn battles. 'Tis an honor to serve with my troops, yet battle is not all they must know."

"Oh I know, but 'tis so long I have waited." He turned to pass the bowl and towels to a passing servant. "I have a gift for you, and for Sir Dafydd," he said. "For your handfasting."

Dafydd arched a brow, used to Patrick's antics and expecting to find a toad deposited in their laps. He watched as Patrick turned, and put his fingers in his mouth to whistle.

A small puppy came skittering across the hall from the pack of dogs that lounged beside the fire. He scampered happily around Patrick's feet. "He's the pick of the litter. Sir Cuthbert says he'll make a find hunting hound one day."

"Ah, young Patrick," Christopher said as he watched Dafydd pet the dog. "Tis a fine gift; you have captured Dafydd's heart. How did you know he longed for a dog?"

Patrick's eyes grew round. "In truth I did not know."

Dafydd smiled, and Christopher said, "You must needs bring the bowl so that Dafydd might wash his hands again."

Patrick ran off to bring a fresh bowl of water, and the puppy scampered off behind him. Christopher leaned over, his forehead resting against Dafydd's.

"I know this feast is necessary, yet I long to be free of this garb, and tucked away with you alone." His lips touched Dafydd's nose. "I long to celebrate this union just the two of us."

"Aye," Dafydd said softly, "'tis my wish as well, yet your people deserve this feast, and deserve to celebrate it with you."

"Our people," Christopher said, "celebrate with us."

The feast was as grand as the preparations had suggested. There were fish, and meats, and vegetables, all accompanied with good wine. Each course lasted almost an hour, and it was nearly sunset by the time the sweets were brought. Many of the crowd had fallen asleep upon the tables after the rich feast hard on the heels of the festivities of the previous night.

Between them, Christopher and Dafydd had eaten and drunk sparingly. Christopher called Agnes from the kitchen and praised her greatly for the meal. Then

he called upon Matilda and praised her as well. Finally he called Gaunt, and as the burly blacksmith blushed under his ruddy tan he was also praised.

Finally, Christopher rose, Dafydd beside him. "I bid you all a good night," he said. "This day nears an end for most of you, and yet the best part just begins for me."

There was a roar from the crowd, and together Christopher and Dafydd departed the hall. Alain and John stood waiting at the foot of the stairs that led to the king's tower. Christopher rewarded them both with coins, and told them they would not be needed that evening.

CANDLES blazed in the king's chamber and a fire roared in the hearth. Gone were the rough coverings and furs on the bed. It was dressed with fine linen sheets, and a crimson velvet covering stitched with the lion rampant and his protector falcon.

Christopher and Dafydd shed their finery and stood together before the hearth. Christopher skimmed a hand up Dafydd's back and pulled him full against his body.

"Art pleased, cariad?"

"Aye, my king. Pleased, loved, and blessed," Dafydd murmured. "And you?"

"Aye, all those things and more." Both his arms encircled Dafydd now, and his cheek rested above Dafydd's beating heart. "Dafydd...."

"Aye, my king."

Christopher stepped back. "As was your promise to me yesterday upon the beach, tonight I want you to worship me with your body." He turned and walked to the bed. He climbed up and rested upon his back, waiting.

Dafydd stood for a moment gazing upon the king's body, aware of the honor bestowed upon him. It was a true sealing of the union they had forged that the king allowed Dafydd this treasure. He walked across to join him within the bed, fit his body between his outstretched legs.

"My heart beats with yours, fy llew," he murmured as his lips descended to touch Christopher's lips. "My body worships yours always."

As the kiss deepened, Dafydd explored with his hand. Warm flesh, soft curls, rounded buttocks, at last finding his stiffened cock. He shifted to the side and stroked firmly while tasting lips, neck, and chest.

Christopher stirred restlessly upon the soft sheets, rocked up into Dafydd's strong grip. "Love me, Dafydd."

Dafydd shifted again and pushed Christopher's legs open wide, his hands upon his knees. He looked down and met his gaze. "I love you, Christopher, with both body and soul." His voice was fierce. "Naught may put asunder what is between us." He continued to hold the king's body with one hand while he dipped his fingers in the scented cream pot, and then slid them within his willing body.

Christopher moaned, and writhed again, angling up against the pillows behind him. He reached down, cupped his cock against his body that he might watch Dafydd's fingers inside him.

Sensing and sharing the need, Dafydd wasted little time in preparation. He reached for the cream again and closed his mouth over Christopher's as he spread the cream over his own length. With a hard thrust he seated himself within his passage and held them tightly together.

Too overcome for words, they moaned their pleasure and desire. After the first moment of joining, Dafydd began to move, pushing deeper and harder with each thrust. He heard Christopher's moans rise in pitch, and knew he neared release. He arched forward as far as he could that their lips might touch, and then felt the warmth of Christopher's tribute upon his belly.

In just a few more thrusts, he flooded Christopher with his own release, touched their lips together once again. When Christopher relaxed back against the bed, Dafydd slowed, rolled to the side, and pulled their bodies close together. Legs and arms tangled as one and they lay panting.

"I will not sleep for several hours yet," Christopher murmured at last. "That edge on my desire that was honed to a sharpness during the past week has redoubled with this small taste."

Dafydd shivered, and stirred against Christopher's body. "Never enough."

"And at the start of the journey."



THEY drowsed abed late the next morning. When Dafydd woke, he pulled Christopher tightly against the curve of his body and murmured into his ear. Christopher mewled his response and settled close before drifting off to sleep again. Dafydd dozed off until finally Alain's voice startled them full awake.

"Your majesty, would you wake now?"

"Aye," Christopher said, his voice hoarse with sleep. "Prepare the bath; we will break our fast downstairs."

"Very good, your majesty," Alain said, and he disappeared into the bathing chamber.

"Were it my choice," Christopher said softly against Dafydd's chest, "I'd linger abed with you for many more hours. Alas, we must be seen about today as many will want to offer their words of congratulation."

"Aye," Dafydd murmured as he slid his hand down to cup Christopher's ass. "I would rather taste you again myself, and yet you speak the truth."

Christopher rose up on an elbow, and gazed down into Dafydd's eyes. "We'll give them the week, and then before we must needs make the sojourn into the countryside, I'll spirit you away for a tryst in my hunting lodge." He traced a finger down Dafydd's chest. "Just you and me." His hair was tousled around his face, his eyes narrowed as he looked up to meet Dafydd's gaze. "Would you like that?

"I would," Dafydd said. "Any time with you alone is a special treasure."

"For me too," Christopher said as he dipped his head and pressed his lips against Dafydd's chest.

"Your bath awaits, your majesty," Alain called and broke them apart.

"Wait abed," Christopher whispered. "When I am done I will send John for you that you might also bathe."

"Aye." Dafydd watched as Christopher got up and disappeared into the bathing chamber. It was comfortable in the bed, and he rolled on his side to watch the clouds floating past the small paned window while he reflected on the day past. In the passages of his mind, he remembered the thrill of being joined with Christopher before the eyes of the people, and in his heart he still felt the tingles of the physical joining.

"Here is your robe, my lord," John said, and disrupted Dafydd's daydream.

Dafydd stirred, sat up, and took the robe from John. He donned it as he watched John begin to gather his clothing.

"Your bath is ready, and I will leave you to dress alone as is your wont, my lord," John said as he collected the last of the clothing.

"John," Dafydd said as he belted the robe around his waist. "As I have told you before, 'tis not necessary for you to call me 'my lord'."

"Aye," John said. "Yet now you are the king's consort in fact, and 'tis your right to have that title."

"Mayhaps," Dafydd said. He walked closer and laid his hand upon John's arm. "But between us when we are private, I am still Dafydd. I rarely give you commands, but in this I demand. Save your titles for when we are public."

John smiled softly. "Aye, Dafydd. Art kind."

"Kindness is as kindness does," Dafydd said. He lowered his hand and followed John from the king's chamber through to the bathing chamber. John continued on through to Dafydd's chamber while Dafydd removed his robe and climbed up into the tub. He wasted little time in washing, and when he had dried his body he went through to his own room where he expected to find a set of clothing laid out on the bed and the room empty. Instead, he found Christopher waiting in the chair by the hearth.

"I am here to maid you this morn," he said softly. He stood from the chair and came to stand behind Dafydd; he tucked his hands into the towel that Dafydd had looped loosely around his waist. "I did not know I had much to be jealous of John for, but if this is the view you present to him mayhaps I must protest."

Dafydd chuckled and laid his hands atop Christopher's. "No need for jealousy, my king. 'Tis a rare occasion when I allow him to help me dress." He turned to face Christopher. "If 'twas you awaiting me after bath I think I might relish it more."

Christopher flicked his wrist and removed the towel. "Art wicked, cariad, to greet me thus." He brushed his hand down over Dafydd's stiffening length. "Were they not waiting below stairs, I would take advantage of you." He turned away and went to pick up Dafydd's chausses.

"Nay, my king," Dafydd said as he took the chausses from Christopher. "You are the wicked one to arouse me thus."

Now Christopher chuckled as he picked up each item of clothing in turn to hand to Dafydd. Both were dressed simply this day in chausses, cotton shirts covered with leather jerkins, and old worn boots. Christopher picked up Dafydd's belt and opened the purse before he handed it over. He gasped softly as he unearthed the shell.

"You still have this?" he asked.

"Aye," Dafydd replied. After he fastened the belt, he took the shell from Christopher, caressed it reverently with his thumb, and returned it to its place upon the hearth. "I carried it with me yesterday. For luck that I did not need."

Christopher caught Dafydd in an embrace when he turned back. "Another mystery, Dafydd," he said as he laid his cheek against Dafydd's chest. "A trinket I gift to you on a whim, and you make it into so much more."

"There is little I take lightly, Christopher," Dafydd said. "Especially where you are concerned."

"Ah, cariad, how I love you." Christopher tipped his head back for a kiss.

Alain and John waited at the bottom of the stairs. Most had already broken their fast for the day, but the choicest selections had been put aside for the king and his consort. Sir Walter approached as they made their way to the dais.

"Your majesty, Sir Dafydd," he said and bowed. "Gaunt in the smithy craves five minutes of your time after you have broken your fast."

Christopher nodded as he stepped up to round the table. He stopped and turned toward Dafydd. "Looks as though someone is waiting for you." He winked, and stepped aside to let Dafydd see that Patrick's puppy lay curled on the floor beside Dafydd's chair. It stirred and looked up, tail thumping against the floor when Dafydd knelt beside him.

"Ci bach ffol," he murmured as he scratched behind the pup's ears. "I shall call you Dewi, art that naughty."

Dewi's tail wagged harder and as he jumped up his tongue lolled out of his mouth. Dafydd smacked him on the rump and then took his chair next to Christopher's. He wiped his hands upon the cloth the servant gave him as the food was set before them. Dewi subsided beneath Dafydd's chair.

Christopher broke off a hunk of bread and took a bit of cold beef. "Who is Dewi, besides a naughty pup?"

Dafydd took cheese with his bread. "He was my brother. Younger." He took a bite and said softly, "He passed the year before I left, yet what I remember about him is his mischievous smile."

"I am sorry," Christopher said. He laid a hand on Dafydd's arm.

"Nay, don't be," Dafydd said. "He brought joy to us while he lived, and has a special place within my heart now he is gone. There was naught for me; would have been less for him." He smiled softly. "I but honor his memory and hold it all the more

brighter by bestowing his name on the dog."

"Then I was right," Christopher said as he returned to his meal. "You did long for a dog."

"I did," Dafydd said.

When they were finished with their meal, a portion of which disappeared from Dafydd's half of the dish and ended up on the floor where Dewi made short work of it, they left the hall and meandered across the yard. It was Christopher's plan to spend the week in leisure. He expected his people to carry on, as always, yet he and Dafydd would spend most of their time enjoying themselves together while overseeing the running of the domain.

Sir Cuthbert stood in the practice yard with the squires. It was easy to pick out the ones recently elevated from the status of page. Their clothing was a bit too clean, their posture a bit too rigid; the smiles just barely kept from their faces. Christopher stopped to watch as Sir Cuthbert regaled them with what was expected of them. At length he turned and saw Christopher watching. He swung back and barked an order at his charges.

"Bow low before King Christopher, your liege lord, you scoundrels," he bellowed. The older squires had already bowed, and the newer ones hastened to repair their error. "You must listen to me at all times whilst upon the yard, and the only other who has say above me is your king. Attend him at all times when he is present."

"Arise," Christopher said as he stepped up beside Sir Cuthbert. He stood with his feet apart and his fists upon his hips, the easy demeanor replaced by the stern king once again. He surveyed the ranks, and made mental notes of those who gave their full attention, those who were disheveled, and those who displayed the proper attitude of a knight.

"Many of you are nearing the time when your masters will deem you are ready to join their ranks as knight. Know you this: their desires come through me. If you do not show me that you are ready, then no matter what they say you will remain a squire, or mayhaps be driven from Lysnowydh to find a new master. I will brook no disobedience, or slovenly appearances either in clothing or cleanliness."

The miscreants shifted uncomfortably, but maintained their positions.

"Those of you who are new," Christopher continued, and purposely walked over to stand in front of Patrick, "must needs pay attention to Sir Cuthbert in all things, and learn from those among your ranks who have worked long and hard. Work hard in all your training, not just the parts you think the most interesting."

Dafydd noted that Patrick maintained a rigid posture. Gone was the mischievous boy who had gifted him with a puppy. In his place were the makings of a fierce warrior.

"Study well in all areas, and learn the bulk from the knight who is assigned to you as master. Before the summer campaigns start, all of you will be assigned."

"Answer your king when he speaks," Sir Cuthbert barked.

"Yes, sire," the squires responded loudly.

"Tis well," Christopher said. "Carry on, and at week's end I will receive a report from Sir Cuthbert." He reached out and placed a hand on Patrick's shoulder. "Allow me a moment with this one," he said as he turned to meet Sir Cuthbert's eye.

"As you wish, your majesty."

Christopher tightened his hand on Patrick's shoulder, and pulled him over to where Dafydd stood. "Young Patrick," Christopher said. "I am pleased with what I see thus far. You must continue thus, and one day I will be glad to call you knight of my army."

"Yes, your majesty," Patrick said breathlessly.

"Sir Dafydd has aught he would say to you," Christopher said as he released his grip from Patrick's shoulder.

"Thank you, Patrick," Dafydd said softly. "Dewi is a fine pup, and well mannered. I am greatly pleased with your gift."

"In truth?" Patrick's face shone, and for the briefest moment he reverted back to the naughty page that had served them.

"Aye," Dafydd said. "Now go, return to your drills, and heed your king well."

"Aye, my lord," Patrick said as he stiffened up again. He turned and hurried back to his place within the ranks.

"Ah, cariad," Christopher said as they continued across the yard. "Mayhaps I should give you a squire. You have much to offer."

"Nay, my king," Dafydd said. "I would not wish a squire of my own; they deserve the landed gentry, not a humble woodsman."

Christopher stopped and reached out to stop Dafydd with a hand on his arm. "Art a simple woodsman no longer, Dafydd."

"Aye, but not ready for the responsibility of a squire either," Dafydd replied.

"I will indulge you in this," Christopher said as he loosened his hand. "This time." He winked and began to walk again. "Only because you please me greatly."

"Ah, my king," Dafydd said as he fell into step beside him. "Mayhaps the day will come when I no longer please you."

"Somehow I doubt that," Christopher murmured.

When they reached the smithy, they found Gaunt hard at work with his apprentices. It was clear he had not slept that night. He wore the same clothes he had worn at the Beltane festivities, and looked a bit the worse for wear. When he spied the king and Dafydd standing at the gate, he hurried forward and bowed low.

"A good morrow, your majesty," he said in a hushed voice.

"Good morrow to you, Gaunt," Christopher said. "You have not slept."

"Nay." Gaunt's eyes were bloodshot. He shifted his gaze from Christopher to Dafydd and back. "Might I have a word, your majesty? A private word?"

Christopher inclined his head and followed Gaunt over to stand before the great fire in the forge. Dafydd remained by the gate, intent upon watching the apprentices form horseshoes.

"I saved the design, your majesty, the one that Sir Dafydd gave me, and I made this for you, in the chance that you would want to gift him with it." His fingers were grimy with his work, but he pulled the silver ring from within a purse that hung from his belt. He handled it gently as he gave it to the king.

"Blessed Mary!" Christopher exclaimed as he took the ring. His eyes glowed with pleasure as he looked up at the smith. "Art a mind-reader, Gaunt. You must have seen my thoughts yestereve as we feasted."

Gaunt dipped his head and glowed red over the grime that covered his face. "Nay, your majesty. Art good to me and mine, both of you. Mayhaps 'tis not the normal way of love, and yet betwixt you and he... it does a heart good to see how 'tis with you both." He dipped his head again, tongue-tied.

Christopher reached out and clapped a hand on Gaunt's shoulder. "Your plain speaking has earned you the right to meet my eyes. I am proud to have such loyalty amongst those who serve me." He waited until Gaunt looked up to meet his eyes. "Would that my knights spoke their minds as truthfully as you did."

"I am a simple man, your majesty," Gaunt said.

"Art a great man," Christopher responded. He moved to close his hand over Dafydd's arm and pulled him close. There before the roaring forge he lifted Dafydd's hand, and placed the ring over his finger. "Receive this ring as a token of my love and faithfulness." He pressed the ring all the way down, not surprised in the least that it was a perfect fit. Keeping his hand upon Dafydd's, he whispered into his ear, "I worship you with my body and share all my goods with you."

Dafydd sucked in his breath and raised his eyes from Christopher's hand on his to meet his eyes. As though it was the most natural thing in the world, he bent down and touched his lips to Christopher's in a light kiss.

Behind them Gaunt and the apprentices broke into an impromptu cheer. Christopher turned and beamed upon them.

"Gaunt, you and your men are granted a day's holiday. Go home to your women and toil no more this day. The smithy will keep 'til the morrow."

"Nay, your majesty," Gaunt protested. "We shall work the day. What was given up last night was but a trifle."

"I command it," Christopher said firmly.

With smiles upon their faces, the men went about closing down the smithy for the day.

Christopher and Dafydd moved away and continued their rounds about the castle. Wherever they went the people came forward to gift them with fruits, flowers, and trinkets along with words of congratulation. At day's end, and the end of the meal, they bid the throng a good night and climbed the tower to their chambers.

Without speaking, each knew what the other wanted that night: a return from the ceremony of the previous days to the simplicity of Dafydd's bed. They undressed slowly, languidly, and tumbled among the furs. Dafydd rolled on his back, and Christopher settled above him.

"Tis a beginning, cariad," he murmured as he nuzzled along Dafydd's neck. "When all the ceremony, and duties of the day are passed, I long for the haven of your body, and your bed." He nuzzled up, ran his tongue over Dafydd's ear. "And now 'tis my turn."

Instinctively Dafydd knew what the king referred to. "I welcome you, my king, now and always. Each day you worship me as I worship you; 'tis not a taking of turns." He shifted to allow Christopher access to all of his body. "All this day I have felt the build; 'twill not take much to bring me release."

"Aye, I have felt it too," Christopher said as he stroked gently. "By week's end all shall have departed back to their own homes to prepare for our visit over the course of the summer. Before we leave I shall have my fill of you in the lodge. Shall feel the release as never before." He stroked lower, probed gently at Dafydd's entrance. "Shall make you well and truly mine for all time."

Dafydd opened his mouth; a low moan filled his throat as Christopher pushed inside. He thrust up and held, and then whispered, "For all time."

As they both had prophesied, it did not take long for release to overtake them. Dafydd felt worshiped, and more than that he felt loved. He whispered the words into Christopher's ear as they fitted their bodies together to sleep.



AS the week continued they bid farewell to the nobles who had visited for the nuptials. The last to leave were Sir Richard and Lady Mary. Christopher promised that within a few weeks he and Dafydd would depart upon their rounds to visit with each lord that owed fealty to Lysnowydh, and that Sir Richard's stronghold would be their final stop. Sir Richard promised that all would be ready ere they came.

At long last, the keep was shrunk down to the normal retinue, and Christopher sighed with relief that finally they could depart for their tryst in the hunting lodge. The day before they prepared to leave, Agnes approached them in the hall.

"Your majesty," she said, "would you desire that I send Bridget along to fix your meal? I do not wish to just send you forth with cold pasties and a crust of bread."

"Nay," Christopher said. "Send whatever Dafydd requests; he shall fix the meal for us." He smiled lazily over his shoulder at Dafydd where he idled in small talk with Sir Walter. "He fed me richly once; he can do so again."

"Sir Dafydd?" Agnes drew up, clearly scandalized.

"Aye," Christopher said sharply. He turned and called Dafydd to his side. "Tell Agnes what you require she send for our meal tomorrow eve. I know naught of such things."

Dafydd chuckled softly and took Christopher's hand in his. "We'll need a loaf of bread," he said. "Meats, and vegetables, whatever you might spare for a stew, oats for the morning, ale and wine. We shall eat simply."

"Very well," Agnes replied. She turned stiffly and retreated to the kitchen, the set of her shoulders clearly indicating her disapproval.

"Bread?" Christopher asked, his hand still within Dafydd's as they walked from the hall. "I seem to recall a delicious cottage loaf you fed me one night."

"Aye," Dafydd replied. "But your impatience ruined the bread the next morning when I sought to make a new loaf."

"Ah," Christopher said with a small chuckle. "I believe it was your large hands that ruined the loaf."

"Large hands fed by your impatience," Dafydd responded with a mischievous wink.

Christopher's father had built the lodge during his reign to serve as a shelter when he joined the men hunting and they tracked their prey too far from the castle walls. Over time Christopher had purloined the lodge to use when he entertained bed partners. Although his father had understood his proclivities, he chose not to suffer them inside the walls of his castle, and had grudgingly allowed his son to use the lodge for that purpose.

Although both Christopher and Dafydd were adept with falcons for hunting, and both relished the thrill of driving a boar to earth, on this trip there would be no hunting. They ventured forth the next day with just a few men to ride guard. Once Christopher and Dafydd settled in the lodge, the men would ride off to hunt on their own, find shelter among the trees, and watch for intruders. Although Lysnowydh was at peace, the lodge was close to the border with Strasnedh, so guard needed to be kept.

When they were ready to leave, Christopher came into the stables to find Dafydd knelt down with his hand on Dewi's head.

"Nay ci bach," he crooned gently. "Art too young to go with us this time. I promise that when the king and I go next to hunt, you shall go along."

As if the puppy understood, he dipped his head and his tail thumped desultorily against the hard-packed earth.

"Ah, Dewi," Christopher said as he knelt down and joined his hand with Dafydd's. "Sleep warm in the keep with your fellows; you will come with us next time."

Dafydd leaned closer to kiss Christopher's cheek, and then they stood and mounted their horses. The group rode forth and shared an easy camaraderie.

Once the lodge was in sight, Christopher bid farewell to the men and agreed upon the signal for meeting when they were ready to return. He and Dafydd dismounted.

"It might be we decide to stay through tomorrow and ride back on the following day," Christopher said as Dafydd took his horse's reins.

"Aye, your majesty," Rupert replied. "The men and I shall enjoy the escape from routine, and hope that you and Sir Dafydd extend your stay." He saluted, and he and the other three men rode off toward the deeper woods.

Christopher turned with a smile. "There is a lean-to behind the lodge for the horses." He ran his hand over the flanks of his palfrey. "They too shall be glad of the break from routine."

"I shall see to the horses," Dafydd said. He pulled the saddlebags from both their mounts. "Mayhaps you can set the lodge to rights."

"Aye," Christopher said. "I shall make all ready." He took the bags and disappeared into the lodge.

When Dafydd had tethered the horses within the lean-to and fed them, he made his way into the lodge where he found candles lit, and a fire in the hearth. The interior was larger than his old cottage, with a large bed, four chairs at the table, and a screened-off privy in the corner. Christopher was unpacking the bag that Agnes had sent along.

"Methinks my cook does not believe you will not poison me with your attempts," he said with a chuckle. He laid a section of boar wrapped in an oiled cloth, carrots, turnips, and potatoes on the table. Next came a pair of round cottage loaves, a small crock of butter and one of honey. Left in the bag was the oats for the morning meal. "I do believe she read my intention though, as there is enough food for two days."

Dafydd secured the door and moved toward the table. Christopher was dressed in simple garb this day. He wore old worn chausses that clung to his hips and thighs, a loose cotton shirt open at the neck, and an old jerkin belted loosely about his waist. His hair was tousled from the ride, strands skimmed down across his brow.

"Am I to be your prisoner?" Dafydd asked softly as he moved to stand behind the king.

"Nay," Christopher said as he set the bag aside. "You are to be a willing participant, but I mean to have you so worn out tomorrow that you will not be able to ride until the next day." He winked and turned to take goblets from the shelf. He poured them each some wine and then went to lounge in one of the chairs.

Dafydd chuckled and set about starting the stew. He swung the iron pot over the fire to heat and then cut up half the meat and vegetables. The meat sizzled when it was added to the hot pot, and the vegetables browned nicely in the fat. Dafydd poured in some wine, and set the pot so that it simmered slowly. He took up his goblet and went to sit beside Christopher.

"It will cook for a while," he said.

"Then," Christopher said as he stood, "there is enough time to begin tiring you out." He sauntered toward the bed and began to strip out of his clothing. He looked over his shoulder with a sultry smile, and the firelight danced over his body. "Come to bed, cariad."

Shadows eased into the lodge as the sun sank lower. Unlike the castle with its thick stone walls, the lodge was warm inside, even as the sun sank below the horizon. Dafydd undressed beside the bed as Christopher rose up and put his arms around him from behind.

"Mayhaps," Christopher whispered into Dafydd's ear, "I shall keep you naked

until we must needs return." He skimmed his hands down over Dafydd's hard-muscled abdomen, and closed one around his burgeoning cock. While he stroked gently he nibbled greedily at Dafydd's shoulder.

Dafydd reached behind to hold Christopher tight against his back. "You shall not have to keep me," he moaned. "I gladly bare all before you."

"Aye," Christopher said and he transferred his nibbling up to Dafydd's ear. "Tis why I relish the times when 'tis just you and I." He moved back and pulled Dafydd into the bed with him. "On your back, Dafydd, that I might see you."

With little effort they moved so that Dafydd sprawled back against the mound of furs at the head of the bed. Christopher arranged him so that his widespread legs rested up and over his thighs; his hands rested on his knees. He tipped his head to the side as he studied him. "Tell me, Dafydd," he said. "When you were in your cottage alone, did you touch yourself?"

Color blossomed across Dafydd's cheeks. "'Tis a personal question," he said huskily.

"Aye," Christopher said. "But one you will answer. There are no secrets here."

Dafydd rested one hand across his belly, the other tucked up underneath his head. "When I bathed," he whispered at last. "In fact, one day I delivered wood to the castle and spotted you drinking water from the well. The sun glowed upon your hair the way the firelight glows upon it now. When I returned home, though it was midweek, and there was much to be done, I dragged out my tub."

Christopher slid his hands down to rest in the folds of Dafydd's crotch. "Ah, so when I came upon you that first night, you knew me better than you let on." He pressed his thumbs along Dafydd's soft flesh. "You had already made love to me in your head."

"Aye," Dafydd said. He spread his legs wider, and the color faded from his cheeks.

"Show me," Christopher said. He drew his hands back up to Dafydd's knees.

After only a moment's hesitation, Dafydd skimmed his hand down and closed it around the base of his erection. "Tis not something I would share betimes," he said. "And yet I hold nothing back if you request it." He tightened his hand and pulled up with a small moan.

Christopher kept his eyes locked on Dafydd's hand as he leaned over to dip into the pot of cream. "I will not ever request things that you are uncomfortable with," he said as he lowered his hand down between Dafydd's legs. "Yet you must tell me if I do, and not hesitate to refuse." He thrust his finger inside and watched as Dafydd tightened his hand in response.

"There is not much I would refuse you in bed, Christopher...." Dafydd's words trailed off into a moan.

"Nor I you," Christopher said. He continued to rock his finger deep inside Dafydd's body, watched as he stretched, watched as he hardened more. He bent forward to collect some more of the cream, and then joined his hand with Dafydd's for a moment on his cock. He bent closer and touched his lips to Dafydd's, then whispered, "Art beautiful, cariad."

"Prydferth," Dafydd breathed. "Watch...."

Christopher sat back, released his hand from Dafydd's, and watched as he continued to stroke.

Dafydd increased the pressure of his hand, his eyes narrowed to slits. The sound of his hand slick with cream on his own hard flesh was a counterpoint to his moans. His eyes slipped closed when Christopher angled to nudge against the hidden spot deep inside. In a few more strokes he rolled up off the bed, mouth open in a long groan of release.

Christopher rose up, withdrew his fingers, and pushed inside with one hard thrust. While Dafydd quivered below him he thrust against him until he exploded with a loud wail of his own. Dafydd slipped his hand free and pulled Christopher down hard against him, held him tight against him with his legs.

A few moments passed as they came back to earth and eventually broke apart and lay facing each other upon the furs. Dafydd reached over to caress the side of Christopher's face, and whispered, "Would you show me, someday?"

Christopher looked thoughtful, and then said, "I do not believe it is something I have done before, not quite like that. When desires fill me 'tis not hard to find someone to fill my bed to ease them."

"Even now?" Dafydd asked then bit his lip. He knew that what Christopher did while they were parted was none of his business, yet the words had slipped out anyway.

"Ah," Christopher said with a smile. "I suppose 'tis true that now 'twill be different. Mayhaps then." He paused, then moved forward to press his lips against the tip of Dafydd's nose. "You may have to instruct me how 'tis done ere we return to the castle."

"Fy llew," Dafydd whispered softly. "'Rwy'n dy garu."

"And I love you, cariad," Christopher responded. He turned to press his lips against Dafydd's palm. "And now you must needs get up and serve me dinner." He turned back, an impish light in his eyes.

"Art demanding," Dafydd said as he sat up. "Mayhaps I shall have to take you over my knee if this continues."

"Do not make promises you do not intend to keep," Christopher said. He repositioned himself on the bed to watch as Dafydd walked toward the fire and pulled on a bedrobe.

As Dafydd stirred the stew, he looked back over at Christopher. "And what do you mean by that?" He turned and picked up a bowl and began ladling out the stew.

"Just what I have said. If you threaten to take me over your knee, then you must needs do it, else you might find yourself over my knee." He lounged lazily against the furs, and reached for his goblet.

Dafydd filled two bowls with the stew and put them, a loaf of bread, and the flagon of wine on a tray. He brought them back to lie across the foot of the bed, and then shrugged out of his robe. As he refilled both of their goblets, he studied Christopher out of the corner of his eye. At last he sat upon the bed again. He gave Christopher a bowl and took one for himself.

"Might I ask you a question?" he said between bites.

"Aye," Christopher said. "Here in the lodge you are free to speak your mind. Here we are equals."

"Once you told me you would keep me sheltered from the uglier ways of the world, when you told me of King Warin. I am not worldly wise, but is that what you meant? That one person would strike another, to cause pain for pleasure?"

"It can be pleasurable," Christopher said, "to feel the sting of another's hand upon your ass. The sensation can add to the release." He took another swallow from his goblet. "But, only when you desire it. I sought to keep you from the knowledge that with Warin 'tis different. He does not strike with his hand; he prefers a whip, and he prefers if his partner is unwilling." He set his bowl back upon the tray.

Dafydd broke off a piece of the bread and ate it with a small frown creasing his brow.

"I see you have questions, and yet you do not ask," Christopher said. He refilled his goblet again, and leaned back against the furs. "When I was younger I wanted to experience it all, to taste of both men and women to see what I liked most. I was curious about Warin, and he was eager to show me. Mayhaps I answer more than you wonder, but yes, at times I enjoyed his rough ways quite a bit, but not forever. I prefer it as a spice, not as a steady diet."

"I am not sure," Dafydd said. Then he sighed and set his bowl aside. "Pain is not alien to me, Christopher. I am not afraid of it. In truth, many of the things that pass between us bring me great pleasure. Even things that make me feel shame."

"Shame?" He slid closer and took Dafydd's hand in his own.

Color bloomed across Dafydd's cheeks again, and he dipped his head down. "In the stables." He drew in a deep breath. "I was ashamed to have angered you, ashamed to have you take me thus where any might see. Most though, I was ashamed that I enjoyed the roughness of the encounter." He raised his eyes. "And that the pain increased the pleasure."

Christopher met his gaze, then raised his hand and pressed his lips against the back before releasing it. "Remove the dishes." There was a steely glint in his eyes.

Dafydd sucked in his breath, picked up the tray, and carried it across the room. From the hearth he turned to look back. "Have I angered you, my king?"

"Leave them," Christopher said harshly. "Return to bed. Now."

With shaking hands Dafydd laid the tray beside the hearth and returned to the bed. Tentatively he sat down on the edge of the bed. "Your majesty," he said softly, and before he could continue Christopher rose up and took hold of him. He pressed him down against the bed, smacked an open palm against his hip.

"Get up," he said. "On your knees."

Dafydd scrambled to comply as another slap was administered against his hip. He buried his face in the furs as Christopher roughly positioned him, smeared a scant amount of cream against his entrance, and drove in with one searing thrust.

"Oh," Dafydd wailed as he arched up.

Christopher grunted behind him, shoved him back down against the furs again with a sharp smack. His fingernails dug into Dafydd's hip as he tightened his hands. He did not wait for Dafydd to adjust, just plunged deeply inside him. Their moans twined together, and with little effort they both found release. Christopher pressed Dafydd flat against the bed, and then rolled aside, held him against his chest.

"I love you, cariad," he said breathlessly. "Beunydd. You do not anger me; you please me beyond measure." He kissed along Dafydd's shoulder and said softly, "Never be shamed by what is between us again. You must promise me."

"Tis you who must teach me, my king," Dafydd whispered. "I promise."

"We learn together." Christopher shifted so that he faced Dafydd, and joined their mouths in a deep kiss. "Sleep now; I shall wake you ere dawn."

THE day that followed found them in bed for most of the day. They shared quiet conversations, and joined their bodies many times. Dafydd prepared the meals, and Christopher served him in bed. When night fell they were both content to curl up together and sleep.

At midday the next day, they saddled their horses and prepared to return to the castle. Christopher gave the agreed upon signal, and they set off on the path to meet up with the men, finding them about a quarter of a mile away.

"Were you successful," Christopher asked as he reined in, "with the hunting?"

"Nay, my liege," Rupert responded. He moved closer to speak to Christopher, his voice lowered. "King Warin was about. Mayhaps he sought to spy upon you and Sir Dafydd within the lodge."

Dafydd drew in his breath and turned instinctively to look over his shoulder.

The hilltops were empty, adorned with nothing but blue skies and clouds.

"Christ's blood," Christopher said angrily.

"He never came close," Rupert replied quickly. "He knew we watched him, and he was alone. I only tell you because...."

"I know," Christopher said in a softer voice. "You have done the right thing." He turned and rode on ahead of the men and Dafydd followed him.

"Have no fear, cariad," Christopher said as Dafydd rode abreast. "The lodge is impenetrable. He did not come close enough to see inside, or even to hear our conversation. Rupert kept him at bay."

"Aye," Dafydd said. He glanced over at Christopher, found his face set in hard lines, a muscle tensed in his jaw. He wisely kept silent, and knew that King Warin was a troublesome topic.

By the time they returned to the castle, Christopher's mood had lightened. The honeymoon was now over; now they were faced with the task of journeying about the kingdom on summer progress.



OVER the next week the castle prepared for the departure of Christopher and Dafydd. While the kingdom was accustomed to functioning without the king in residence, usually the marshal was at hand to keep the troops active. With both of them going this time, it became necessary to ensure that the status quo would be maintained.

Christopher spent time with the council, and away from Dafydd he expressed his concern that King Warin had an unhealthy appetite for spying upon them. While he knew that the cloak of the King of England's protection would surround them as they traveled, he still drafted a missive to send to London. Sir Walter was drilled endlessly on the issues that would affect the day-to-day running of life within the castle keep. It was agreed that all disputes would be held until such time as the king returned, and measures were put in place to ensure that the disputing parties would remain civil.

Dafydd met with Sir Cuthbert, and together they identified the likely candidates that could be elevated to a role of command. A retinue was also earmarked to accompany the king's procession, and Dafydd spent a portion of his time working directly with them, training them in skills to circumvent a sneak attack. While he felt certain that King Warin would not be so bold as to confront them on the roads within their own kingdom, it was his desire that they all be prepared.

Each day when evening fell, the king and his consort appeared in the great hall to mingle with the people and eat the evening meal. The minstrel that had joined them the previous winter had made Lysnowydh his home, and he provided entertainment as they dined, and afterward.

"We must needs stay below each night until late," Christopher murmured to Dafydd as the remains of the meal were cleared and their goblets were refilled. "Although the people are hearty and capable of life without me," he turned to smile slightly, "they do miss me when I am from home."

"As they should," Dafydd said softly in return. As the goblet hid his lips from any that might have turned toward them, he continued, "And I shall have you in my

bed each night in any case."

"Aye," Christopher said. He dipped his head closer, his lips barely moving as he replied, "You shall have to take your fill ere we leave the castle. Once we are on the road 'twill prove difficult."

"In what way?" Dafydd shifted closer, and in the midst of the boisterous hall they held an intimate conversation.

Christopher took a long swallow of wine. "The people have accepted the unlikely union between us, they see that what we have is a bond, a deep bond. Even so, it is not my intention to make them accept things they are uncomfortable with. Mayhaps 'tis like the notion that what they do not see does not occur. They know what passes between us, and yet they would not know."

"Aye," Dafydd said. "And so you wish to honor them by keeping the love that blossoms between us something of a mystery."

"Does it trouble you, Dafydd?" Christopher asked in an even voice that contained no hint of accusation. "Do you feel I force this upon you? The love between us is all too obvious; 'tis not a mystery at all. 'Tis only the physical aspect of what we share I mean to hide."

"I defer to you, my king," Dafydd said in return. "Tis your place to know what is best fitting with your own subjects. I only seek to understand. Do you mean for us to sleep apart each night we are from home?"

"Nay," Christopher said. He sought for Dafydd's hand below the table. "I am not shamed to share my bed with you, nor would I hold you in such contempt that I would suggest that we masquerade before our subjects. 'Tis only that when you and I join our bodies it is not a time I feel inclined to keep the pleasure silent. 'Tis a private thing between us, and when we travel most often we will find that we either displace the lord and lady of the keep, or share a small bedspace within their main hall. 'Tis them I wish to honor, as well as you. I honor you by keeping you beside me in my bed, and I honor them by engaging in circumspect behavior within their homes."

Dafydd nodded. A muscle tensed in his jaw as he thought over the king's words. "I defer to you in these matters, my king," he said softly at last.

"Dafydd," Christopher said as he tightened his hand on Dafydd's. "Look at me."

His eyes shadowed in the uneven light in the hall, Dafydd turned to gaze into the king's eyes. He returned the gentle squeeze.

"I cherish you, Dafydd," Christopher said firmly, his eyes never wavering. "In truth, the fact that you question my edicts goes further than if you blindly put your trust within all I say. As you know, if I was inclined to take you here and now, upon this table before all assembled, it would be my right. Even if you were not willing, if I so desired it would be so." He smiled to soften the words and rubbed a small circular pattern upon the back of Dafydd's hand. "Upon our journey, there will be opportunity

to take the release we so desire. I sought to prepare you for the knowledge that 'twill not be quite as often as we enjoy while we are at home."

"Aye, Christopher," Dafydd said. "I understand. I did not seek to question your judgment, only to clarify your intent."

Christopher smiled. "'Tis well." He turned to signal the minstrel to stop for the night, and then stood. "'Tis late," he said to the assembled crowd. "I would seek my bed."

Dafydd followed him through the hall, and at the foot of the stairs Christopher dismissed Alain and John for the evening. They climbed the stairs in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Once inside the room, Christopher turned and caught Dafydd to him in a strong embrace. As they made their way across the room toward the fire his hands roamed freely over Dafydd's body. They stopped before the glowing hearth, entwined in a deep kiss.

"I would have my fill, my king," Dafydd murmured, as the kiss was broken. He drew in his breath and moaned as Christopher worked on freeing the laces of his chausses and took his length into his hand.

"Twill be difficult to take my fill," Christopher said as he began to stroke under the layers of clothing. "Each touch makes me want more, each heated stare sets my pulse racing." He nibbled along Dafydd's chin and lips. "Difficult, but I must needs try."

Dafydd gripped Christopher's shoulder tightly and swayed within his embrace, teased as he was by lips and fingers. Desire burned inside him, but it was these nights when the build was slow that he treasured the most. Many hours passed before they slept.

SEVERAL days later a full retinue departed from the castle. The king's standard of lion and falcon was carried by outriders at the head of the procession. Christopher rode next with a contingent of soldiers. Dafydd followed toward the middle of the column where he oversaw the riders ahead and behind. They rode lightly and swiftly.

All told, they would be gone from the castle for a little more than a month. Each lord they visited would renew their vows of fealty, and include Sir Dafydd in their pledge. Several days would be spent at each keep, and each lord intended to outdo the last with the extent of his hospitality. A few of the outlying keeps were farflung from the rest. Arrangements had been made to stop at abbeys along the way.

There was a feeling of easiness amongst the ranks as they rode. Many of the men relished the time away from the routines of the castle, and an escape from their women. The first night from home, they made a camp along the edges of the forest. In truth, they were near to their first stop, yet they made the most of the festive atmosphere of camaraderie and sat up late into the night sharing stories and ale. A

watch was set when the camp finally settled down to sleep.

Christopher and Dafydd rolled into their cloaks, facing each other beside the largest of the fires.

"Sleep well, cariad," Christopher murmured as around them the men settled for sleep.

"And you, fy llew," Dafydd responded.

"Were we alone I might satisfy a curiosity of mine," Christopher continued as he curled an arm up under his cheek.

"What is that?"

"To take you beneath the stars to see if moonlight does turn you into a falcon," Christopher said.

Dafydd shivered within the warm cocoon of his cloak. "Then 'tis my fervent desire that one day your curiosity might be slaked," Dafydd said softly.

"Ah, 'tis my belief that you know the answer to that question," Christopher teased. "And yet you keep me in the dark."

"I must have some mysteries, my king, lest you grow tired of me."

Christopher laughed aloud, then lowered his voice to speak. "Art wicked to tease me thus."

"Aye," Dafydd said as he tucked his head down and closed his eyes.

THE first several stops on their journey were uneventful. They were welcomed with open arms, and each lord eagerly re-pledged his fealty while the women fawned over them. They were afforded the richest meals and most comfortable amenities. Dafydd saw firsthand the truth of Christopher's prophecy, that privacy was limited. On the nights that they were granted the lord's solar they found that they shared the space with others, separated only by a thin screen. On the nights they slept in the great hall, they shared with their men. While they slept curled together and shared their warmth with each other, it was not quite the same as when they shared Dafydd's bed in their own home.

At most of the keeps they were treated to hunts and grand feasts. Dafydd had become skilled with his falcon, and enjoyed the hunt very much. It was as they ventured through the dense forests that Christopher and Dafydd had time for private conversations.

"I miss you, Dafydd," Christopher whispered as they stopped in a clearing. All round them they heard the sounds of the men searching for the boar they were chasing. "While I'm glad to take comfort from you in bed, I sorely miss the privacy of home."

"'Tis good we sleep in the same warm bed betimes," Dafydd said. He cast a glance over his shoulder. "And yet I agree that there are things I miss."

"Tis good, aye," Christopher said, "but makes the longing worse. Having you there and not able to touch beyond a soft caress...."

"Ho, king Christopher," came the voice of Sir Mortimer. "Yon boar is run to ground."

Christopher wheeled his horse around and galloped off toward the sound of shouting voices, and Dafydd followed.

That night there was a feast in the grand hall, and they stayed late gorging on roast boar and Sir Mortimer's good ale. All drank more than usual. The next morning they set out on the road and marked the halfway point in their journey. Their next stop was the furthest point in Christopher's kingdom, and it was necessary to stop at an abbey that night before reaching the destination.

Christopher bade a curt farewell to Sir Mortimer and his wife, and once upon the road he was surly to all that chanced to come near him as they rode. They stopped for a light meal near midday. Patrick was along on the journey, and the newness of his first sojourn from home had worn off. He swaggered amongst his counterparts, bragging of his familiarity with the king. As Christopher sat alone on an outcropping of rock, Patrick approached with a skin of ale. He tripped and jostled against the king and narrowly missed spilling the ale upon him.

"Fool!" Christopher bellowed as he stood. Without warning he reached across and smacked the back of his hand across Patrick's cheek. "Art careless. Is it your wish that I arrive at the Abbey of Saint Michael smelling like a tavern?"

Patrick cowered at his feet, scrabbled to retrieve the skin, and murmured his apologies.

"Speak up," Christopher barked, "that I might hear your paltry excuses."

Dafydd stepped closer and reached down to help Patrick stand. He stood before Christopher with arms crossed over his chest. "Twas an accident, your majesty," he said in an even voice.

"It does not concern you," Christopher said. He made to lunge around Dafydd, but found himself caught.

"It does," Dafydd growled softly. "Patrick is yours to discipline no longer. Let him be."

Christopher tore himself away and returned to his seat on the rocks. Dafydd stalked after him and knelt at his feet while the men turned away uncomfortably. Most acknowledged that when the king flew into a rage it was best to leave him alone.

"What troubles you?" Dafydd said softly.

"Young pups who are too inept to be raised to the rank of squire," Christopher snarled.

"Tis not that," Dafydd said. "You know as I know that Patrick is a fine squire. What is it beyond fatigue that troubles you?"

Christopher heaved a great sigh, and the anger seemed to drain out of him. "This night we sleep at Saint Michael's. In hard beds. Alone." He turned to stare out across the moor. "Tis long since...." His voice trailed off.

Dafydd grunted and stood. "Aye, 'tis long. But 'tis not a reason to be wroth with those who only aim to serve you." He turned on his heel and walked away, seeking among the men for Patrick's master.

AS Christopher had said, that night they slept at Saint Michael's, and found that the rank and file among their troops were bedded in the stable, while the nobles, including the king and his consort, were afforded beds within the dormitory, each in their own cell. Dafydd lay awake for many hours, straining his ears through the dark for a sound from the cell next to his, but only heard a sigh as Christopher rolled over in his sleep.

The next morning they set out for Sir Godfrey's rugged keep. It was perched upon a cliff overlooking the wild sea below. It sat upon the outer boundary of Christopher's lands, and boasted a small village several miles from the castle. The village bustled with activity as it was near a small natural harbor, and there was a steady stream of small ships putting in, with both legal trade and smugglers.

The men were weary as they dismounted in Sir Godfrey's courtyard. He bowed low before them and welcomed them into his home.

"Come, your majesty," Sir Godfrey boomed. "A bath and a fine meal awaits."

Christopher smiled tiredly and clapped Sir Godfrey on the back. "Ah, you always know my thoughts before I know them myself."

"Aye," Sir Godfrey said with a wink. "My wife Alinor will attend to your bath personally." He turned and raised a hand to Dafydd. "A bath awaits you as well, Sir Dafydd. My daughter Anna will attend to you."

Dafydd stiffened. Christopher had prepared him for this eventuality, and he knew it would be in bad form to refuse, yet he was uncomfortable with the prospect.

"Tis not necessary," Christopher said easily as they walked. "Dafydd is stubborn and prefers to bathe alone." He winked. "He does not even allow his own servant to attend him most times."

"Nonsense," Sir Godfrey said. "Alinor has trained Anna to attend. 'Twill be her first opportunity to put her training to practice."

Once inside the castle Christopher was escorted to Sir Godfrey's solar where the lady Alinor awaited with the bath. Dafydd was sent to a lesser chamber where he encountered a young fresh-faced girl and a steaming tub. He drew in his breath and steeled himself for the task at hand.

"You may undress, my lord," Anna said demurely, her eyes lowered. "Unless you require my assistance."

"Nay," Dafydd murmured. He turned his back and stripped out of his clothing, and when he turned around again he noted that Anna still showed him her back. She appeared to be as discomfited as he was, and that fact gave him the resolve to proceed. He stepped into the tub and hunched forward. "If you would wash my back, I believe I might finish the rest on my own."

Anna turned toward him nervously, a cloth clutched in her hand. "Mama says I must needs wash... all of you." She blushed crimson.

"Aye," Dafydd said. "And if she asks I shall tell her that you did." With that he winked at her.

She smiled timidly, and moved toward the tub. In truth it did feel nice to have the warm cloth dragged over his back, and the fragrant soap dripped over his body. When she was done with his back, she handed him the cloth and moved toward the fire, where she brushed out his clothing and rearranged the warming towel. Dafydd finished his bath quickly then rose from the tub. She turned to hand him the towel, and then turned away quickly.

"My thanks," he said as he dried, then reached for his chausses. "Your assistance is appreciated."

That night they feasted. Christopher was more relaxed than he had been in days, yet there was still a fine edge that only Dafydd could detect. They slept in Lady Alinor's solar, with Alain and John on pallets near the hearth. By morning Christopher's petulant mood had returned.

After breaking their fast Christopher sat in conversation with Sir Godfrey, and Dafydd talked with Alain and John. John listened to Dafydd's request, bowed, and then hastened from the hall. Dafydd gave the two men another few minutes to talk, and then he approached and stood behind Christopher's chair. When there was a break in their talk, he spoke.

"Sir Godfrey, might you indulge me this morning?"

Christopher turned to gaze up at Dafydd, and Sir Godfrey nodded.

"Would you allow me to spirit the king from your castle for the day? 'Tis my first visit to this wild region, and I would enjoy the scenery, and the village you have so close beside you," Dafydd said. He laid a hand on Christopher's shoulder.

"Why certainly," Sir Godfrey said good-naturedly. "In truth you have arrived a day earlier than I had anticipated. The ceremonies are scheduled for the morrow and Lady Alinor would likely appreciate the extra time to ensure that all is to your liking."

He rose from his chair. "I shall accompany you."

"Nay," Christopher said as he felt Dafydd's hand tighten on his shoulder. "Tis kind of you to offer, Godfrey, yet Dafydd and I are still newly wed." He winked. "Allow me this time to enjoy him alone."

Sir Godfrey smiled broadly. "Aye, I had forgotten as much. I shall send some men along with you, and expect your return in the evening."

"Tis not necessary," Dafydd said as Christopher stood to join him. "Alain will come with us; we shall be safe enough this close to your keep."

Together they all walked to the courtyard where they found Alain already mounted and both of their horses saddled and ready. Bidding their host a farewell, they turned and galloped from the courtyard, left the castle behind in a cloud of dust.

"Art wise, cariad," Christopher said when they slowed to pick their way down the path to the village, "and yet there is naught of interest to see in the village. 'Tis naught but a tavern, the harbor master, and a few small houses. Mayhaps you would like to ride along the beach instead."

"Art wrong, my king," Dafydd said and suppressed a smile at the look of outrage on Christopher's face. "There is something of great interest in the village. There is an inn."

The look of outrage gave way to a look of surprise, and then a boisterous laugh. "Sir Dafydd!" Christopher cried. "Art beyond wicked; art corrupt."

"Aye," Dafydd said with a wink.

When they arrived at the inn, they dismounted and left the horses with Alain. John met them inside and bowed. "All is ready, Sir Dafydd," he said softly. "The room is at the top of the stairs, and the innkeeper knows he is not to disturb you."

"My thanks," Dafydd said. "Find your father and enjoy the afternoon in leisure. Return here as the sun sets to ride back to the castle with us."

"Aye," John said. He bowed again and backed from the small antechamber.

Christopher followed Dafydd up the stairs to the small private room offered by the inn. John had freshened the room and laid one of their own blankets over the bed, and a fire burned in the hearth. Once the door closed behind them, Christopher turned and pulled Dafydd into his arms.

"Christ's blood," he groaned. "You have either read my mind or have used some of your black arts to divine the root of my problem."

Dafydd crushed Christopher against him and laid his cheek against the top of his head. "'Twas not black arts, and 'twas my own mind I read, fy llew," he whispered. "If I do not feel your weight atop me soon, I fear I will explode in a fiery conflagration." There was a catch in his voice as he continued. "I do not need much, my king. I need a bed to rest in each evening, food and water, and I need you. I need you as much as the air that I breathe."

"Art becoming soft in the head, cariad," Christopher said indulgently. "You sound like a poet."

"Then you must needs fuck me," Dafydd said as he released his hold and stood back. "Take the softness from my head and let me attempt to get my fill of you." With hasty hands he began to tear at his clothing, tossing each item aside into an untidy heap.

Christopher wasted no time in following suit. A wan sun streamed in through the one window in the corner. Dafydd sprawled back on the bed, his desire evident, his legs spread wide. Even in his haste, Christopher stopped to gaze upon him for a moment before he joined him.

"You fill the entire bed. You make me shiver with impatient desire." He bent forward and touched Dafydd's knee. "Spread yourself for me, Dafydd. I do not mean to hurt you, yet the edge on my desire is razor sharp."

Dafydd reached down, caught his legs, and drew them up and raised his ass high. "Time for gentleness will come anon," he said hoarsely. "Fill me now, my king. Your razor-sharp desire will ease the ache inside me."

"Ah," Christopher groaned. He spotted the pot of cream that John had left beside the bed and dipped his fingers into it. "I shall ease the ache, yet I hope this poet in your soul does not depart. I rather like him." He fitted his body along Dafydd's, pressed against him, and pushed in with one hard thrust.

With a wordless cry Dafydd rolled up and pulled himself as close to Christopher as he could. Christopher cried out and held himself tight for a moment, and then pulled back and thrust in again, harder this time. The bed shook with the intensity, and Dafydd's moans grew louder in the small room. The sound of flesh slapping on flesh was a counterpoint to the sound of their voices until at last Dafydd arched up again.

"Ah, Christopher...." In that instant he felt Christopher explode within him. As the furious rocking of their bodies slowed, he slid his legs down, reached up to pull the king down against him as close as he might, and rose up for a kiss. "Stay," he murmured. Though his body was bent at an unnatural angle, he gripped tightly.

"I shall not leave," Christopher panted, and sought for his lips again. "You feel good."

The simple words were his undoing; Dafydd rose up again to press his cheek against the king's own. "I love you." His voice caught with emotion.

"Hush," Christopher crooned. Slowly he slipped away, fitted their bodies tight together, and kissed him again, deep and long. "I must have you again," he whispered at last.

Many more times they joined, each time sweeter than the last, until at last they lay face to face, foreheads touching, fingers intertwined. "Tis late," Christopher whispered. "Soon we must needs return."

"Not yet a moment," Dafydd said. "I would show you something first." He struggled to sit up, and moved to prop himself back against the wall behind the bed, his legs spread wide. He urged Christopher up, guided him so that he sat with his back to Dafydd's chest between his outspread legs. "You asked me once to show you how to bring pleasure to yourself. I would show you now that you might avoid getting to this state again. I know that were I not with you there would be a willing bedmate at each castle keep."

"Mayhaps," Christopher said lazily, feeling the warmth of Dafydd's body behind him. "None to match you. You have soured me on all others."

Dafydd reached beside him for a fingerful of the cream, and bent forward to nuzzle against Christopher's ear. "'Twas my plan, my king, that you would cleave only unto me, and no other." He spread the cream down the length of Christopher's cock. "Give me your hand," he said softly.

Christopher willingly closed his hand around his own length, allowed Dafydd to guide it gently. "'Twill not be this grand, when I am in bed alone," he murmured huskily.

"Aye, it will," Dafydd replied. He slowly drew his hand away from Christopher's, allowed him to stroke alone. "You will carry the memory of this tryst with you. You need only to close your eyes, and I will be nigh."

With a groan Christopher increased the rhythm of his stroking. Dafydd lowered back to the bed and watched as Christopher closed his eyes and arched up with each stroke.

"Art beautiful, fy llew," Dafydd murmured. "'Tis beautiful to see you thus."

Even with all the times they had joined their bodies in that afternoon, the release was powerful; Christopher writhed between Dafydd's legs, his body taut with the orgasm. When he settled back, Dafydd reached down to collect the beads of cum that dappled Christopher's chest. Gently he rolled him to the side, and began to stroke himself, until he too exploded in orgasm.

It was nearly full dark as they rose from the bed and dressed. John and Alain waited at the foot of the stairs. John disappeared up the stairs to set the room to rights again. The innkeeper had returned and smiled upon them with a fat purse hung around his waist. Alain brought forth their horses, and they mounted and rode hard for the castle.

Though many noted the change in the king, none speculated as to what had wrought it. All found as the procession started again a few days later that things seemed to be more peaceful, and the journey became a joy again.



AFTER they left Sir Godfrey's keep, the travelers wended their way inland again. It was a two-day journey to the next keep, this time with no convenient abbey in which to bed down for the night. The weather held warm so most did not mind the prospect of sleeping out-of-doors again.

Dafydd noted that Christopher called Patrick to his side as they rode. He watched as Christopher talked to Patrick. He appeared to take him into confidence as their heads bent close together, and when they broke apart Patrick grinned from ear to ear. After a while Patrick bowed his head, broke rank, and galloped back to his position. Dafydd edged his horse closer and fell in beside the king.

"'Twas well done," he said softly.

"Think you to lecture me on what should be done?" Christopher asked sternly.

Dafydd's head whipped around. "Nay," he said. "I sought to commend you that you put the smile back on Patrick's face."

"He was not the cause of my foul mood," Christopher said. "I sought only to ease the hurt of my stupidity." They rode in silence for a moment, and then he edged closer to Dafydd. "You were not the cause of it either, and yet you were the reason it disappeared. In truth 'tis you who deserve the honor of riding beside me, yet even in the farthest reaches of my kingdom we are still in danger of surprise by Warin, or men who seek to earn his pleasure and reward."

"Aye," Dafydd said. "Mayhaps I but relax my vigilance for the same reason you bring the smile back to Patrick's face." He looked over his shoulder then turned back to murmur, "In truth, I have missed our bedsport as much as you have."

"Ah, cariad," Christopher said as he loosed one hand from his horse's reins and reached over to lay it over Dafydd's for a brief moment. "Tis what we both miss, and where there is a will, there is a way." He squeezed Dafydd's hand for a moment and then released him. "You must needs return to your position that I might ponder on a means to give us the way."

Dafydd smiled and slowed to resume his place at the middle of the procession.

Over the next week they visited two lesser keeps. Neither provided the lavishness they had experienced in Sir Godfrey's keep. While things had not changed with their sleeping arrangements, most mornings Dafydd arose before Christopher. As Dafydd paced the battlements alone, he mused ruefully that none thought twice about the rustling and stifled noises that came from the king's bed when he was alone. And yet the smiles and calmness were worth it. That and the whispered admission that it wasn't the same made it bearable, although in his heart he ached.

At last only one week of their journey remained. Before they reached Sir Richard's keep, there was one last stop to be made. Sir Ranulf had inherited his keep the year before when the sweating sickness had swept through the countryside and claimed not only his mother and father, but his older brother as well. The yoke of leadership had not settled well upon Sir Ranulf's shoulders. When Christopher and his party arrived late in the afternoon, only one lone stable hand stepped forth to greet him.

"Where is Sir Ranulf?" Christopher demanded as he slid from the back of his horse.

"In hall, sire," the frightened lad said as he bowed low. "Tis the hour for dinner."

"Aye, I know that," Christopher snapped. "Go and bring him forth at once."

The lad looked up, confused as to whether he should stable the king's horse or do his bidding and thus incur his wrath for loosing the horse. His mouth gaped open like a fish. Alain slid from his own horse and spoke.

"Go and stable the horse, boy," he said, "and find others to come and see to the horses of Sir Dafydd and the men. I shall go and roust Ranulf from his fireside." He turned and stalked across the yard as John slid from his own horse to assist the frightened lad.

Christopher paced to and fro, his hand on his sword hilt as they waited for Alain to return. As he walked he scowled at the filth that clogged the corners of the yard, the free-ranging pigs and chickens. The boys who crept from the stables to attend to the horses looked ill kempt and hungry. They cowered away from the men as they reached for the reins of their horses. Dafydd moved to stand beside Christopher as Ranulf and the men began to stream forth from the keep.

"Your majesty," Ranulf called as he came closer. He sank to his knees and bowed his head before the obvious disdain of the king. "I did not expect you until the morrow."

"Tis no excuse for the sorry state of your courtyard," Christopher bellowed. "Tis poor hospitality to expect your visitors to be attended by only one stable lad, and stand in such utter filth before you see fit to drag yourself away from your meal to greet them."

"My apologies, majesty," Ranulf said contritely. "I have only returned home myself this morn. 'Twas lax keeping while I was from the keep."

"You find excuses instead of acknowledging the error of your ways," Christopher said. "Rise and face me that I might judge your veracity."

Ranulf stood and displayed a wrinkled jerkin, chausses that were stained. His eyes were red as though he had already indulged too much with ale though the hour was still early. The motley assortment of men who clustered behind him looked equally ill kempt; one still clutched the haunch of a roasted rabbit in his hand. Christopher's lip curled in disdain as he studied the group.

"Methinks you did not expect me at all, that you thought I would catch word of the poor conditions here and bypass you all together. You were wrong. Just pray you have kept enough of your meal to feed me and my men lest you find yourself tied to yon post and whipped for disobedience."

Truly alarmed now, Ranulf turned and barked an order to his seneschal, then turned back to face the king's wrath. He sank to his knees again and offered up his sword hilt. "I pledge my fealty to you in all things, my lord king."

Christopher smirked. "You think to placate me with hollow avowals?" He put his hands on his hips. "You must needs pledge your fealty to Sir Dafydd as well."

"Aye," Ranulf said without hesitation. "Of course I pledge to Sir Dafydd, all of my loyalty. I would follow him to battle without blinking an eye." His eyes shifted from Christopher to Dafydd.

"Get up," Christopher said and wrenched the sword hilt from his hand. When Ranulf stood Christopher stepped closer and used the advantage of his height to look down into his vassal's eyes. "Speak clearly. Whom would you follow blindly into battle?"

"You, my lord, of course," Ranulf said without hesitation. "I only sought to let you know that I would also follow your consort, with no hesitation." He lowered his voice that only Christopher might hear. "I perceive no weakness in him, though he allows himself to be taken by a man."

Those watching scarce saw the transition from quiet conversation to Christopher's gauntleted fist making contact with Ranulf's chin, and the smaller man sent hurtling to the ground to sprawl in the dirt at the king's feet. Christopher tossed Ranulf's blade aside and drew his own. Still before any might react he raised the sword and brought it down swiftly, held short as the blade nicked at Ranulf's throat.

"My judgment is swift," Christopher roared. "You shall not live the day."

The men hung back in confusion, having not heard the verbal exchange. They supported Christopher in all things, yet could not understand what might have passed to bring about this chain of events. Dafydd stepped closer, his hand on his sword hilt as he watched Ranulf's eyes fill with terror.

"Nay, majesty, my liege," he said. "'Tis not... I...."

"Hold," Dafydd said, his hand on Christopher's. "What has happened?"

"Let me explain, majesty," Ranulf said, his voice breaking. "I meant no disrespect."

Christopher sheathed his sword and turned away. "Have him brought to the hall," he said. He gestured to Ranulf's men, who stood uncertain whether to go to the aid of their fallen lord or cower before the king. "Into the hall, dogs. Make ready."

Ready for what they were not sure, but they hastened into the hall ahead of the king. Dafydd reached down a hand to haul Ranulf to his feet. "Save your words," he said, cutting off whatever Ranulf had to say. "You must needs save them for the king. I know not what caused his wrath, but 'twill take all of your effort to keep him from his promise."

The hall was as dingy with filth and neglect as the courtyard had been. The servants had scurried to set an additional trestle table, but Christopher spared them no notice as he stormed up the hall to the head table. With one flick of his wrist, he sent the plates and tankards set upon the table, the remnants of Ranulf's meal, flying to the floor. He sprawled back in the lord's chair and watched as Dafydd led Ranulf across the hall.

"On your knees," he said disdainfully. "Convince me that your words were not treason or you shall spend the night within your own dungeon and listen to the construction of a gallows where you will hang upon the morrow."

Ranulf sank to his knees. With head bowed and a quaver in his voice, he said, "My liege, might you grant me the favor of relating my story in privacy that I bring no undue stress to your men, or your consort?"

"Tis too late for that," Christopher said. "And yet I will grant this much. You may tell the story for my ears alone, and yet by the very insult you offered, Sir Dafydd will stay that he might hear your treachery with his own ears." With that he stood and bellowed for the hall to be cleared.

With much bustle and commotion the hall was cleared until only Christopher, Dafydd, and Ranulf remained. Christopher stood and moved a chair close to his and gestured that Dafydd should sit beside him. "Explain yourself," he said curtly to Ranulf, indicating he should remain kneeling upon the stone floor.

"My liege," Ranulf began, "none will say the words to your face, so mayhaps it falls to me as the lesser of your knights. Behind your back there is talk, and what I said to you was my misguided attempt to let you know that such talk falls upon my deaf ears. 'Tis not you they question; all who have ridden with you know your heart is brave. Mayhaps they have not been on the receiving end as I was just now, yet all have witnessed how swift and brutal your justice can be. All strive to stay on the side of right that they might be protected by your hand, not become a victim of it." His eyes shifted to Dafydd, and then back. "My liege, I know the way it is between you and your consort. Mayhaps you have noticed, or mayhaps not, I have no lady wife, nor will I ever. 'Tis a cruel twist of fate that has placed me in leadership here, something I never sought, nor wanted." He drew a deep breath. "Were the choice

mine I would follow in your lead and find a willing man to share my hearth and my bed."

There was a silence where the only sound was the snapping of a log in the hearth.

"I said I would follow Sir Dafydd with as much loyalty as I follow you because I do not believe what other men say, that he is weaker because he submits. Mayhaps I will lie in my own dungeon tonight and hear the sounds of a gallows being built, and so I do not hesitate to speak my mind now." He raised his head and met Christopher's steady gaze. "I mean no disrespect to Sir Dafydd, my liege, yet given the chance I would gladly take his place in your bed."

"Christ's blood," Christopher roared. He stood from his chair and strode angrily across the room. He stood before the hearth, his back to both of them.

Dafydd had listened quietly, but drew in his breath at the last words Ranulf uttered. When Christopher walked away he leaned forward in his chair and gripped a hand tightly in Ranulf's jerkin.

"Listen well," he said in a low voice that carried clearly to Christopher. "I understand your intent, and I understand your words. 'Tis cowardly that men claim this behind my back, yet I see no such cowardice in you. But know you this." He tightened his grip and pulled Ranulf closer. "Whether you intended disrespect or not, 'twas given. I defer to our king in all things, but I will not share him. 'Tis one thing upon which I am firm. I fear no man. Were he to give himself to another he would earn my contempt, and then all would see that I have no weakness inside me."

"Aye, my lord," Ranulf whispered. "I would not seek to incur your wrath."

Dafydd released his hold and got up from his chair. He walked over to stand beside Christopher.

"Dafydd," Christopher whispered. He kept his hands firmly clasped before him. "Your words have aroused a vicious lust inside me. I must needs deal with this now. Go and find John and have him prepare whatever room passes for a solar in this keep. Order that the room be secured for just you and me. Settle Ranulf in his dungeons, and I will start the men working, and then we will adjourn to the solar that I might address your claim."

Dafydd nodded, turned, and strode from the hall. Christopher awaited the return of the men and gave the order that Ranulf be imprisoned in the dungeon. He went to speak to Ranulf's men in the courtyard, and gave orders that a meal be served.

"Alain!" he shouted. "To me."

"Aye, my lord." Alain hurried forth.

"See to John, that he has made the solar habitable. When Sir Dafydd returns send him there. Bring a tray of food and whatever passable wine you can find in this squalor. It may be an hour or more until we eat, but we shall not come forth from the solar until daybreak."

"Aye, my lord," Alain said. He bowed and turned to hurry away and complete the king's tasks. Christopher called to Sir Ranulf's seneschal and gave him terse orders, then stood with his back to the fire and surveyed the activity in the hall. When Dafydd returned from the yard and headed for the stairway, Christopher followed.

The one and only stairway led directly to the solar. John had done what he could to lessen the dankness of the room. A fire blazed in the hearth, and the reeds had been swept aside as they were none too fresh. The furs upon the bed had been replaced with the king's own, and the meager meal sat on a table beside the door. Dafydd stood before the hearth. Christopher nodded curtly to John and bade him remain beside the foot of the stairway until he was called.

Once the door was firmly shut, Christopher walked toward the bed. He yanked the furs from the bed and piled them upon the floor behind where Dafydd stood. He stood so that he was facing Dafydd. The sounds of a hammer pounding on wood wafted up from the courtyard below.

"Do you mean to hang him?" Dafydd asked quietly.

"Face me," Christopher said.

When Dafydd had turned toward him, Christopher went to work on unhooking his sword belt. He bent to lay it down on the floor behind him, then straightened up and yanked at Dafydd's clothing, removing first jerkin, and then shirt. These he tossed behind him haphazardly. He deftly loosened chausses and breeches, letting them fall to the floor. For a brief moment he allowed a gentle touch over Dafydd's flesh, and then commanded, "On your knees. Remove my boots."

As Dafydd worked on the lacings of his boots, Christopher removed his sword, jerkin, and shirt. He loosed the lacings of chausses and breeches, allowing them to fall over Dafydd's hands as he worked. "Prepare yourself," Christopher said as he kicked the boots aside. He turned and stalked to the bed to retrieve the pot of cream John had left there.

Dafydd stepped from the pool of chausses around his ankles, and knelt on hands and knees. The gentle touch was gone; Christopher's hands were rough on his skin now. He lowered down against the soft furs, eyes closed against the sudden intrusion of fingers. He closed his hands over the furs and braced as Christopher pulled his fingers free, lined up and drove inside with one hard thrust.

Heat and pain, overridden by lust and need. Dafydd's knees scrapped over furs and Christopher pushed against him from behind. Moans gathered low in his throat, intensified when Christopher bent over his back, reached beneath him, and closed his hand around his throbbing cock.

There was no need to hold back, and Christopher roared as he slammed his body hard against Dafydd's. He rocked against him long after the climax passed, at last bent down to press his lips against Dafydd's shoulder. Gentler now he pressed him down against the furs, and positioned himself so that their foreheads touched, and their legs tangled together.

"I do not mean to hang him," Christopher murmured. He laid his hand on Dafydd's hip in a gentle caress. "Tis but a sty for the pigs and a coop for the chickens the men build, yet I would have Sir Ranulf spend a sleepless night in terror for the insult he has tendered."

Dafydd grunted softly, and pursed his lips to touch the king's. "I feared mayhaps 'twas me you meant to hang."

"You?" Christopher said. "Because you but spoke what is in your heart?" He settled closer, pressed his body full length along Dafydd's. "Cariad, you are all I want. I have no need to seek from others." He rose up on an elbow and gazed down on Dafydd's face, bathed in firelight. "This night, in this wild place, I would have you claim me for your own."

Understanding dawned when Christopher rose, collected up what furs he could, and walked the short distance to the bed. He lay upon his back, head propped against the wall behind him. "Tis not weakness to submit."

Dafydd stood, collected the rest of the furs and the pot of cream, and walked over to join Christopher. He stood beside the bed and gazed upon his body. "Aye, I know. 'Tis not submission, 'tis love." He climbed upon the bed and fitted his larger body between Christopher's outstretched legs. "It cannot be weakness when 'tis fueled by love." He lowered down and claimed Christopher's lips in a deep kiss.

Although the pace was slower now, the edge had not left their lovemaking. The self-imposed abstinence coupled with the emotion of the afternoon combined to bring them achingly closer than they had yet been. Dafydd touched Christopher softly, explored thoroughly, until at last he arched up.

"Claim me, Dafydd," Christopher moaned, his voice breaking with tension. "Fill me full of yourself; join our bodies as our souls collide."

Dafydd rose up, pulled Christopher close, and melded their mouths as he pushed inside. They both trembled with need and desire as Dafydd moved slowly at first, then finally built to a climax that engulfed them both. Christopher wrapped both arms tightly about Dafydd's neck and moaned softly with his release. This gentle release was even more fulfilling than the shattering release earlier. Dafydd's eyes were wet with emotion as he rocked to a stop, buried deep inside.

"Sweet cariad," Christopher crooned gently, "let no tears fall on my behalf. Art well and truly mine. I love you with all of my heart."

"'Tis love that makes the tears flow, fy llew," Dafydd murmured against Christopher's neck. "'Tis an emotion I cannot explain." Slowly he pulled back, curled beside the king in the warm nest of furs.

The food remained untasted as they talked until sleep claimed them, and all through the night they touched and took comfort from each other's presence.

Before the sky lit with dawn, they arose and dressed. They broke their fast in the hall with their own men. Sir Ranulf's men huddled in groups in the courtyard, fearful of what the day might bring for both their master and themselves. Christopher made them wait until the sun rose above the castle wall before he strode into the yard. He was the picture of power, his hair a tawny mane around his face. Dafydd lent a quiet strength behind him.

Sir Ranulf was hauled up from the dungeon, and he blinked against the sudden brightness of the courtyard. As Christopher had prophesied, he did indeed look as though he had spent the night in terror for his life. To his credit, he did not cower or pull back. He did not look left or right for the gallows he so fully expected had been constructed in the night.

Christopher stood in the center of the courtyard, and when the party reached him, Ranulf sank to his knees, head bowed.

"Do what you will, your majesty," he said in a clear voice. "I am prepared to accept my fate."

Dafydd handed Ranulf's sword to the king, and reached down to raise him to his feet. It was as he stood that his eyes darted about the courtyard. Christopher held the sword hilt-first toward him. "Take it," he commanded, "that you might swear your fealty. Both to me and to Sir Dafydd."

Eyes wide, Ranulf repeated the vows to swear fealty, and when he had finished he blurted out, "Majesty, where are the gallows?"

"There are no gallows," Christopher said. "I but meant to ensure you realized your error. You were right to let me know about treason whispered amongst my men. But understand," Christopher stepped closer, his face an unreadable mask, but his eyes flashed with passion, "I cleave to no one other than Sir Dafydd. Such was my promise; such is my will."

"Aye, your majesty, I hear and understand." Ranulf bowed his head in supplication.

"'Tis well. We shall remain several days hence to oversee the mending of the neglect we have found in your keep."

"Twill be my honor to house you."

The tension in the courtyard eased and Christopher's men mingled freely with Ranulf's. Over the next several days progress was made in restoring the holding to its previous glory. Each night after the meal Christopher retired to the solar with Dafydd on his heels. By the time the party mounted to leave, peace had been restored all around.



THE unexpected delay at Sir Ranulf's keep lengthened their journey by several days. Once they were on the road again, the horses pricked up their ears and cantered easily as though they realized as well as their riders that home was nigh. All loved Sir Richard's keep; it was considered a second home to many.

There was a bustle of activity in the inner bailey when the king and his tired men rode in. Sir Richard descended as several stable boys ran out to take the horses. It felt like a feast day with the boisterous greetings all around. Sir Richard strode directly to Christopher and bowed.

"Welcome, your majesty," he said.

Christopher pulled Sir Richard into a bear hug and said in a low voice, "You are the only of all my subjects who may dispense with formalities in my presence, and yet you never do."

"Aye," Sir Richard responded. "Tis why you grant me the liberty." He squeezed Christopher tight and then stepped back. "You know I always honor you."

Lady Mary appeared, and walked at a slower pace to where her husband, the king, and Sir Dafydd stood clustered. She sank into a grand curtsey without a care for her fine gown.

"Welcome, your majesty, Sir Dafydd," she said softly.

Christopher reached down to raise her up, and pulled her into a gentle hug. "You are a sight for sore eyes, Lady Mary," he said as he held her close.

"Ah, your majesty," she said a trifle breathlessly, "you always manage to make me blush." She stepped back and smiled shyly at Dafydd.

"We have prepared a chamber for you, your majesty," Sir Richard said. "I thought that mayhaps after such a long time away from the comfort of your home you would appreciate a night of privacy. The solar is prepared, and a bath is being drawn even as we speak. Lady Mary will assist in your bathing, or if you prefer Alain can

assist. A meal will be served to you there, that you may have your leisure until the morrow."

Christopher smiled the first worry-free smile any had seen in two weeks. He took Lady Mary's hand in his own. "As much as I enjoy the feel of these soft hands upon my body, I shall have Dafydd attend me in my bath." He winked. "And I shall attend him. Allow Alain and John a chance to take their rest; they have certainly earned it over this trip."

"As you wish, your majesty," she said, her blush deepening.

Sir Richard led the way into the hall. The indoor servants smiled and bowed to the king as they made their way across to the stairway.

"You know I usually have no wish to displace you from your own bed," Christopher said, "and yet in this instance I shall. Too many nights rough on the road. I cannot live with my own smell any longer."

"Aye," Sir Richard said with a smirk and a wrinkling of his nose. "I noticed as much." He stopped by the foot of the stairs. "I shall have the meal sent up whilst you bathe. And I do not expect to see either of you ere morning."

"You shall not; have no fears," Christopher replied with a broad smile. He reached for Dafydd's hand and led him up the stairs.

The solar in Sir Richard's keep was not as opulent as Christopher's own, yet it was richer than any other during their journey. The sleeping chamber contained a large bed, and a small table drawn up before the hearth. The bathing chamber included a tub that was smaller than the one in Lysnowydh, and a smaller hearth, but all the amenities they were used to. Water steamed in the tub, and fresh towels hung on a rack before the fire along with rich bedrobes.

"Undress yourself," Christopher said as he removed his cloak. "Tis a pity the tub will not hold both of us at once."

"Aye, bathe first while the water is hot," Dafydd said as he sat to remove his boots.

"Twill be warm enough when 'tis your turn," Christopher said as he continued removing his clothing. "Feels as though it has been a year since I have had a decent bath." He stepped into the tub and sank into its warmth with a prolonged sigh of pleasure. "Tis good," he said simply.

Clothing removed, Dafydd moved to sit on the low stool by the side of the tub. He allowed Christopher to lie back in the water for a moment before he picked up the cloth and dipped it into the pot of soft soap. He began to lather Christopher's chest and elicited another deep moan of pleasure.

"Let me wash your hair," Dafydd murmured as Christopher sat forward and he dragged the cloth over his back. "I long to run my fingers through it again."

"Aye," Christopher said. He dipped his head below the water. When he sat up

again he said, "You miss your lion."

Dafydd's lips curved into a smile, and he bent forward to press his lips against Christopher's brow. "Fy llew," he whispered.

When Christopher's hair was washed, he rose from the tub and took a towel. Dafydd got into the tub and began to wash, finding that the water was indeed still warm. He laid back in the water and let Christopher take over, relished his wandering hands and the warmth of the small room. At last Christopher sat back, his nose twitching.

"I smell venison, and roasted potatoes," he said. "Hurry and dry; your lion is hungry."

They found a sumptuous feast awaited them before the hearth in the solar. Roast venison, salmon boiled with herbs, new potatoes glistening with butter, a soft loaf with a comb of honey, a bowl of tender cress, fresh green beans, and a tray of oysters, all accompanied by a flacon of Sir Richard's finest wine.

They ate in silence, savoring the food the likes of which they had not tasted since they had left their own castle. Following all the savory delights was a tart of apples covered with clotted cream, and some little crisp cookies that tasted of almonds and butter. Christopher sighed in contentment, took up his goblet, and lounged back in his chair.

Dafydd finished up a last bite of tart and wiped his fingers on a cloth. He took his own goblet and turned to gaze into the fire.

"Ah, cariad," Christopher said as he stretched his bare feet toward the hearth. "Weighty thoughts trouble your mind now we find ourselves in such comfort and luxury." He twirled the goblet and watched the firelight play on the ruby liquid. "Mayhaps you should share the thoughts with me so you might rest easy this night."

Dafydd raised his goblet and drank deeply, then turned to look at the king. "How is it you read me as though I were naught but an open book?"

"Because you are," Christopher said, and the corners of his mouth curled into a smile. He raised his goblet and took a sip. "As I have told you before, Dafydd, I am sure I can guess what it is that troubles you, but I would much rather have you tell me that I might soften the hurt in some way."

Dafydd pulled his robe tighter about himself and turned to gaze into the fire again. "How do they know, Christopher? If 'tis talked about widespread as Ranulf made it sound, how do they know, and why do they assume weakness?"

Christopher was silent for a moment and then he set his goblet on the table, slid from his chair, and knelt before Dafydd's chair. He reached up to place his hands upon Dafydd's knees, and gazed up into his eyes.

"Tis not known; 'tis assumed that you submit to me as they know me well, and know you not. While 'tis accepted that I have chosen a man and not a woman as my life mate, I do not think that all rest easy with my decision. Likely 'tis the core of

discontent that spreads these vile words." His hands were gentle on Dafydd's knees. "Men like Sir Richard, and all who have served with the garrison at Lysnowydh, know that you are not weak, much as the Lady Mary is not weak, my own mother was not weak, and from what you have said your own mother was not weak."

"Am I like as a woman then?" Dafydd asked in a strained voice.

"Nay, Dafydd, and you are listening with anger in your heart," Christopher said sternly. "Listen to my words." He waited until Dafydd turned his head and met his gaze. "When there is genuine caring on both sides, whether the lovers are man and woman, man and man, or woman and woman, there is never weakness. Those who view woman as the weaker sex because they receive their men lack intelligence, yet those who view a man who receives another man as weak are worse. They lack sensitivity, intelligence, and usually the courage to back their words." He tightened his hands upon Dafydd's knees. "What's worse, they would lack the stamina to receive as you do. There are few who can match you."

Dafydd's eyes widened in surprise.

"You had not thought of it that way, had you?" Christopher asked.

"Nay," Dafydd said softly.

Christopher rose up on his knees, pushed Dafydd's legs apart, and leaned in against him, skin against skin, snuggling as close as he might. "People always think to lay judgment to things they do not, or cannot, understand. 'Tis the way for the king, that there is talk about him behind his back. 'Tis not always easy, and yet I strive to hold myself above it. You may rest assured that I shall search out the root of this disrespect and it will be dealt with." He turned to press his lips against Dafydd's chest, above his heart. "And you must rise above such petty murmuring because you know the truth of the matter. Will you give me your promise?"

"Aye, my king," Dafydd said softly, his cheek pressed against the top of Christopher's head.

"'Tis well," Christopher murmured. "And now since I have declined to have Alain come to me tonight, you must brush my hair." He pulled back, a mischievous look on his face. "When you are done mayhaps I need some soothing lotion rubbed upon an area of my body that has been sorely underused this past month."

"An area you would not trust to Alain, I hope," Dafydd said with a crooked smile. He rose from the chair and went to retrieve the king's brush.

"Oh nay, I would not trust Alain with such a delicate operation," Christopher said as he settled on the furs before the fire. "Only you have that privilege."

"And I guard that privilege most selfishly," Dafydd said as he returned and settled behind Christopher.

"Aye, I had noticed," Christopher said. He nearly purred in pleasure as Dafydd began to brush his hair. "It makes me proud, cariad," he said, and as he moved to a more comfortable position against Dafydd's warmth his bedrobe fell open, revealing

his hardening cock, "that you show your claws when you perceive a threat. Art like the peregrine falcon, ready to attack your prey."

Dafydd laid the brush aside, and began to run his fingers through Christopher's hair. "You will always have my protection, fy llew," he said softly.

"Aye, I know."

Fatigue began to take over, and soon they moved to the bed. Privacy was a luxury they did not take for granted, and it afforded a gentleness to their lovemaking that had been missing while they stayed from home. When they fell into a sated sleep later, the worry had left Dafydd's face, and Christopher clamped an arm over him to hold him close while they slept.

THE next morning they rose and dressed, and went to join the others in the hall to break their fast. Plans were laid out for the day. John would be sent back to Lysnowydh to ensure that all would be ready for their arrival two days hence. Dafydd was to spend the day with Sir Arnald, Sir Richard's master of arms that he might observe Sir Richard's men in their drills. Christopher would spend the day with Sir Richard, as was their wont, sharing information and troubles. There was no need for Sir Richard to pledge fealty, as he had done so after the handfasting.

After the morning meal was cleared, Sir Richard led Christopher from the hall and up onto the battlements. Their talk was of general things, of tributes to be collected in the fall and plans to send ambassadors out to gather them, of the need for Christopher to make a journey to London near summer's end. They surveyed the peaceful lands that surrounded Sir Richard's keep and talked of cattle herds, and the coming harvest. Eventually they made their way down again to the keep, and into the room Sir Richard had set aside for matters of his estate. They settled in comfortable chairs before the fire and waited while a servant poured them ale, and set a plate of bread and cheese close at hand. When he had left, Sir Richard spoke.

"I have heard of the trouble at Ranulf's keep," he said.

"Though I know the answer, I shall ask anyway. Did you know of this trouble before it was brought to my attention? Does Ranulf have the right of it and all knew that Dafydd is perceived as weak?" Christopher tightened a hand on the arm of his chair.

"You do know the answer, Christopher," Sir Richard said. Now they were private he took the liberty Christopher had always given him. "I did not know, nor did any of my men know. Further, none share that view, least of all me."

Christopher relaxed and took a piece of bread. "They do not seem to realize that by casting Dafydd in that light, they cast it on me as well. If he is perceived as weak, then I must needs be perceived that way along with him. This is not a thing that is measured by halves."

"I will determine where the unrest lies that it may be dealt with. You knew this eventuality would be brought about when you flew in the face of your advisers and took Dafydd as mate," Sir Richard said firmly.

"Aye, old man, I knew," Christopher said. He took a bite of bread and chewed it thoughtfully. "If we deal with the malcontents severely, 'twill prevent others from taking up the cause, methinks."

"On that we agree," Sir Richard said with a smile, "and I shall be glad of dealing with them personally."

"Nay," Christopher said as he dusted the crumbs from his fingers, "Dafydd will deal with them. 'Twill prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that he is as fierce a warrior at heart as I am. It will also give him the chance to avenge the hurt done to his pride."

Sir Richard nodded. "Any who know Sir Dafydd well know that he is neither weak, nor a coward. Mayhaps 'tis best to let him prove that."

Christopher lounged in his chair, his feet propped up on the hearth, and said, "Since you have heard of Ranulf's downfall, I am quite sure you are also knowledgeable of Warin's treachery ere we left Lysnowydh."

"Nay," Sir Richard said as he took a piece of bread and laid a slice of cheese atop it. "Has he stolen more cattle?"

"Not cattle this time, although by now 'tis likely he has lightened me of a few head. In the week between the handfasting, and the start of the journey, Dafydd and I spent a few days in the hunting lodge. 'Twas told to me after that Warin sought to spy upon us, mayhaps even attack, but was thwarted by the men we brought along with us."

"Warin is not right in his head," Sir Richard said. "As time passes it becomes worse. 'Twould not surprise me in the least that he did mean to surprise you at your leisure, mayhaps to do harm."

"Tis true. He is becoming increasingly addled as time goes by. 'Tis like he lives in his own world of delusions," Christopher said. "I mean to tighten the ring of security around Lysnowydh, that his evil plans be thwarted."

"'Tis a sound plan," Sir Richard said hesitantly. "And yet you know there is more to it than that."

Christopher cocked his head to the side. "In what way?"

Sir Richard steepled his fingers together, touched the tips to his mouth, and was silent for a moment as he gathered his thoughts. "If you would allow me to speak freely?"

"You need no permission to speak what is in your mind, old man," Christopher said. "Tis granted by right of the length of time you have known me."

"Lysnowydh needs an heir," Sir Richard said. "Tis true that your own father was taken before his time. Had things gone the way they were intended, your mother

would not have fallen ill, and both would have seen you wed and dandled their first grandchild upon their knees ere either of them stepped off this mortal coil."

"I know Lysnowydh needs an heir," Christopher snapped. "Tis not new news; we have spoken on this before. My intention is to wait a year hence before we address that issue. I am young, and I have no inclination to undermine Dafydd's manhood any more than it already has been by taking a woman to my bed that I might satisfy old men like you by bringing forth a child." His expression became petulant, as it had the last time they talked of this matter. "I know 'twas your plan to present me with a Welsh girl when we arrived that I might bring her home with me and cast Dafydd aside whilst I labored to get a child upon her, but I have changed my mind. Whatever woman you have found will have to be sent home again until next year."

"Christopher, your majesty," Sir Richard said as he lowered his hands and sat forward in his chair, "you are not thinking clearly. Dafydd's manhood has not been undermined because a few men who could not distinguish their asshole from a hole in the ground murmur about him behind his back. I am quite sure you have set the matter right with him this past night. 'Twas why I gave up the comfort of my own bed to let you enjoy it."

"Mayhaps 'tis not just Warin I must fear seeks to spy upon me," Christopher snarled.

"Leave off," Sir Richard said harshly. "Warin sniffs around Lysnowydh because he knows you have no heir. Were Lysnowydh to suddenly lose their king, what do you think would happen to the kingdom? Like as not King Henry would allow Warin to absorb your lands into his. 'Tis for this reason you must pull your head from the clouds and set to the business of providing yourself, and your kingdom, with an heir. You do not have the luxury of time to wait. Honor Dafydd as you may, but you must needs take the girl I have chosen for you home with you when you leave two days hence."

Christopher got up and strode angrily away from where Sir Richard sat. He cursed under his breath, his face a mask of fury. Sir Richard remained in his chair and watched him silently. At last Christopher stopped, leaned a hand on the hearth, and gazed down into the flames.

"I love Dafydd," he said softly. "He is my heart and soul."

"Aye," Sir Richard said. "As it should be."

"Your words have merit," Christopher said at last. "I must produce an heir."

Sir Richard stood, and laid his hand on Christopher's shoulder. "I speak the truth you know in your heart, Christopher, out of the love I bear you and the love I have for your father's memory. You are the king first, and a lover second. All your subjects deserve your protection, not just the one you love the best."

"Love is painful betimes," Christopher said softly as he reached up and laid his hand over Sir Richard's.

"Aye," Sir Richard said. "Yet when duties are done, it does await. Tonight at the evening meal I shall introduce you both to Marged."

"Then you must allow me time with Dafydd before the meal, that I might prepare him."

"He knows already, Christopher. He has known since the time you came to visit in winter." Sir Richard squeezed Christopher's shoulder then turned to take his chair again.

"Aye, he knows," Christopher said softly. "Mayhaps I worry too much." He sighed. "Were it not for me, he would be living a peaceful life in his cottage in the woods, and would not be subject to the whims of my people."

"Mayhaps," Sir Richard said. "Likely he would be lonely and unfulfilled. You say you love him, Christopher. He loves you as well. As you have said, love can be painful, yet I know of few that choose to live without it. Go and find him on the practice yard; take him to ride along the coast. 'Tis fitting he hears from your lips about Marged."

CHRISTOPHER found Dafydd watching Sir Richard's squires training. He kept back in the shadows at first and watched. Dafydd watched the boys intently; often he stepped in with an unobtrusive manner to make corrections to their form. He mused again that any who had seen him work this way would know that he was not weak, and was in fact most the opposite. At last, he stepped forward, and strode across the yard.

"How do they fare?" he asked as he took a position beside Dafydd.

"They work as hard as our lads," Dafydd responded. "I have learned much this morn from talking with Sir Arnald."

"I am glad," Christopher said, "but I fear I must spirit you away. I need time alone with you."

"More than last night?" Dafydd asked as he quirked his lips into a smile. "I shall grow greedy with all this time we spend together, mayhaps become demanding when we return home."

Christopher smiled. "Nay, cariad, you will not. But you must indulge me. I am your king."

They mounted their horses, and rode from the yard out into the late summer afternoon. The sun warmed the land, and they rode without cloaks that they might feel the fresh salty air against their faces. Christopher led the way along the cliff tops that overlooked the ocean below. At last they came to a promontory, where he stopped and dismounted. They tied their horses to a fallen log, and sat facing the ocean to share an apple and a skin of water.

"Do you remember when we came to visit Sir Richard last winter?" Christopher asked.

Dafydd nodded, his mouth full of the juicy apple.

"Sir Richard has found a woman to bear my heir. She will ride home with us," Christopher said as he accepted the apple. "I sought to tell you ere it was sprung on you as a surprise."

Dafydd swallowed, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Forgive me, my king," he said. "I thought that was long the plan. That when we finished this journey here in Sir Richard's keep, he would provide a woman who would provide you with an heir."

"Aye," Christopher said. "He said you remembered, yet I had wanted to hold off this burden for another year. I had wanted to spend a full year with just us two, to honor our vows more fully."

"Christopher," Dafydd said, his arm propped on his bent knee. "No good will come of waiting. I said I would not share you, but not in this as 'tis different. Lysnowydh needs an heir else we will never be free of Warin and his treachery."

Christopher pitched the apple core over the cliff and turned to face Dafydd. "Art the most unselfish person I have ever met, Dafydd," he said. "I sought to soften a blow that you had already cushioned yourself."

"Thus proving that you do honor me, my king," Dafydd said. He shifted closer and pulled Christopher against him. "I wish I could be selfish and keep you all to myself, but I must needs share you, for the good of the kingdom."

"Mayhaps I can tell you one thing you do not know," Christopher said as he nuzzled against Dafydd's jerkin. "Once we are home and settled, I will send you forth with a contingent of men to seek for the miscreants who sought to sully your honor behind our backs. 'Twill be in your hands to stop their tongues from wagging."

"Twill be a task I relish," Dafydd said.

"Aye, 'tis why I told Sir Richard you would do it yourself," Christopher said.

Gulls circled overhead, their raucous cries filling the air. Far below the waves crashed against the rocky shore. They prolonged the afternoon until the sun began to slide down in the western sky, and then they remounted their horses and headed back to the keep.

The evening meal would be a formal one, and they found their clothing had been freshened during the day. They were silent as they dressed, knowing that before long their lives would shift in yet another direction.



SIR Richard and Lady Mary awaited Christopher and Dafydd when they descended from the solar for the evening meal.

"Your majesty," Sir Richard said, the mask of formality firmly back in place, "I would introduce you to Marged in private first, before we must needs announce to the assembled masses your intention."

"Aye," Christopher said and reached for Dafydd's hand. "Tis well."

Lady Mary turned to lead the way into the small family chamber off the main hall. Marged waited within, her hands folded in front of her, her head bowed demurely. She was garbed in simple yet elegant clothing. Small in stature with hair as black as a raven's wing, she was pleasing to the eye.

"This is Marged, your majesty," Lady Mary said softly. "Distant kin of mine from the Vale of Glamorgan."

Marged dipped into a low curtsey; she had yet to raise her eyes to meet those of the king. Christopher dropped Dafydd's hand and stepped forward, gazing down upon the petite woman as she remained motionless.

"Lady Marged," he said softly as he reached down to take her trembling hands in his own, "arise that I might look at you."

Cheeks suffused in a rosy glow, Marged stood, her soft brown eyes trailing up Christopher's body to rest on his face. "Please, your majesty," she said softly, "by virtue of my birth I am not granted right of the title Lady. I am simply Marged."

"Nay," Christopher said, his smile lighting his eyes. "By virtue of my command you will bear the title." He held her small hands within his larger ones turned slightly and said, "This is Sir Dafydd. He is marshal of my kingdom, and as you have been told he is my handfasted mate."

"Sir Dafydd," Marged said, and again she dipped into a curtsey.

Dafydd shifted uncomfortably, then stepped forward to take Marged's other

hand in his. He bowed and said, "Tis a pleasure to make your acquaintance, my lady. I too have kin in Glamorgan."

When Marged rose again the blush upon her cheeks had deepened in hue. She gently withdrew her hand from Dafydd's. "I am from Llanilltud Fawr."

Dafydd nodded. "My family resides in Tenby."

"Has Sir Richard told you the purpose for your journey to Lysnowydh?" Christopher asked softly.

"Aye," Marged said, and she dipped her head to hide her face again.

"And it is your wish to accompany us?"

"Aye, your majesty," Marged stammered. "I am willing and able to fulfill my role."

"'Tis not my intention to cause you pain," Christopher said. "Yet I must needs ensure you know the lay of the land. There are many who will say your only aim is to better yourself, or worse yet call you harlot. I will not always be there to cushion that blow."

"Aye, your majesty," she said softly. She drew in a shaky breath. "I am ready to take whatever comes."

"Tis well," Christopher said.

The small party made their way out into the hall. All eyes watched as they walked to the dais. Marged took the seat between Christopher and Sir Richard; Sir Dafydd remained on Christopher's left. To many who observed the message was clear. Although the king of Lysnowydh had acknowledged his need to get an heir, he still honored his consort above all others. During the meal he shared conversation with Marged, yet he shared his goblet with Dafydd.

It was an early evening, as the king's party would depart for home the next morning. Wordlessly Christopher and Dafydd climbed the stairs. Still in silence they undressed and climbed into the bed together, slept the night wound together under the warm furs.

IN the morning Sir Richard bade them farewell. Christopher's men mingled freely with Sir Richard's. As always, Patrick was in boisterous good spirits and had set many of the men to laughing. He turned toward the keep as the king's party emerged to shout out one of the ribald jests he had shared with the men, but was struck mute at the site of Marged by Christopher's side. He watched as they crossed the yard, barely finding his voice.

"Who is that, with the king?" he asked in a hushed voice.

"Tis the woman who is to bear the king's heir," replied Sir Henry. "You must needs watch yourself lest you offend her tender ears."

Patrick stood staring, his eyes upon Marged.

Christopher helped Marged settle on her horse and asked if she were warm enough. Though it was still midsummer, the morning air was chill. As the men mounted, Sir Richard laid a hand on Dafydd's arm.

"I shall send word when 'tis discovered wherein the unrest lies," he said.

"Aye, I shall be at the ready," Dafydd replied. When he went to pull away, he found himself still held tight.

"You are welcome here, Dafydd," Sir Richard murmured, "when ere you wish. This will not be easy times for you."

Dafydd stood silent, a muscle tensed in his jaw. He watched as Christopher swung up upon the back of his horse, and then his eyes shifted to Marged. At last he spoke softly. "Twill be what it is." He turned and for a moment his eyes were unguarded. "And we shall bide the times because we must."

"True enough," Sir Richard replied. "I thought but to offer haven should you need it."

"'Tis appreciated," Dafydd said as he withdrew his hand. "Your kindness will not be forgotten." He turned and mounted his horse, then fell into his accustomed spot toward the middle of the procession.

Although they were near to home, the vigilance was not relaxed, and the ranks rode in tight formation. Once away from Sir Richard's keep, the riders before and after the king spread slightly to allow him privacy in which to address Marged. Dafydd watched them as they rode, although he was not able to hear their words.

"Art comfortable?" Christopher asked.

"Aye," she replied, her hands tight on the reins.

"Tis not far," he said as he guided his horse closer to hers. "I would tell you of my home, and what you will expect to find therein."

"Tis not necessary," she said breathlessly.

"Lady Marged," Christopher said sternly yet gently, "art not a servant in my household; art not merely a guest. You are to be honored and respected by all. As such I do not expect you to view yourself as anything less. I have a great care for you, and you will become a treasured part of my immediate household."

Marged shifted her head that she might look at him, then turned to look over her shoulder. "As you wish, your majesty."

Christopher sighed, his mouth a thin line, as he knew she had turned to look at Dafydd. He would always favor Dafydd, yet he intended to make Marged feel comfortable and wanted during the time she was in service to him. He waited for her

to turn back before he continued.

"You will be granted a small room in the keep," he said. "Tis on the main floor near the hall, not upstairs in my own personal suite. I will seek in the village for a girl to serve you."

"I have no wish for a servant," Marged said. "Tis only 'til recently that I served in Lady Mary's retinue myself."

"'Tis all changed now," Christopher said. "By right of my command you will have a companion who will see to your needs. You were Lady Mary's ward, not her servant. The keep at Lysnowydh is large. You will have need of someone whether you wish it or not."

Marged bowed her head in acquiescence.

"I will allow you several days in which to settle and become accustomed to life within my castle. 'Tis my intention that you feel comfortable in our midst and get to know the many people that make the keep their home. I will outfit you with a new wardrobe." He chuckled. "Matilda will be in her element; 'tis long since she has had a woman to flutter over and style new gowns for. Methinks you shall be gowned finer than any queen in the land."

The path narrowed, and Christopher slowed to allow Marged to ride before him until it widened again. As he rode behind her he noted that she sat the horse well, and did not seem awkward. Although he knew little about her past, he could tell that she was not a peasant and had been gently reared. Once he moved up beside her again he edged closer that he might speak in a soft voice.

"Lady Marged," he said. "When you are settled you will be brought to my chamber to share my bed. 'Twill help me to know," he paused, "art yet a virgin?"

She sucked in her breath and turned her head away, her cheeks flaming.

He unclenched his hand from the reins and laid it gently over hers where they rested on the pommel. "There is not time for shyness between us, Marged," he said. "Answer my question."

When she turned back there were tears in her eyes, and she whispered so that he hardly heard her. "Nay, your majesty." She took a shaking breath. "I am virgin no longer."

Christopher tightened his hand on hers against the pain he saw in her eyes. "There is no cause for fear," he said softly. "I will not hurt you."

Hesitantly she nodded, but did not relax the stiff posture of her body until he withdrew his hand from hers.

"We are near to home," he said. "Do you have any questions?"

Without looking at him again, she shook her head and gripped the reins tighter.

"Then I shall ride ahead, as I am anxious to be home." He nudged his heels

into his horse's side and rode forward.

AS they neared the keep, the news of their arrival spread before them like wildfire. By the time they were within sight of the castle, the roads were lined with villagers all cheering the return of the king. Christopher slowed to allow Dafydd to catch up to ride abreast, and he was pleased that the people welcomed them both equally.

They clattered over the bridge and into the bailey where all the servants and members of the castle jostled together and waited to greet the return of their king. A spontaneous cheer arose as Christopher dismounted. He smiled and turned to give Marged a hand as she dismounted.

Dafydd dismounted on his own and before he had handed the reins to a waiting squire he was knocked off balance by the rollicking Dewi. He laughed and bent down to greet the small dog, none so small any longer.

"I have missed you, ci bach," he said softly as Dewi licked his face. "Patrick," he called as he gave the dog a smart rap on the haunches. "Come retrieve this beast before he soils my clothing."

Patrick slunk forward and took Dewi into the stables. Dafydd watched with a bemused expression as the young squire cast furtive glances toward where Christopher and Marged stood together.

"Thank you one and all for your greetings and welcome!" Christopher shouted. "Tis good to be home again. Tonight we shall feast!" He placed an arm gently around Marged's waist. "This is Lady Marged, come with us from Sir Richard's keep to make her home here in Lysnowydh. All welcome and give her the friendship she is due."

A cheer arose, and Christopher led Marged and Dafydd up the stairs and into the keep, where Sir Walter and Father Geoffrey met them.

"Welcome home, your majesty," Sir Walter said as he bowed his head. "Tis good to have you safe returned to us. All is in preparation for the evening feast. Business will be left for the morrow as I know you are anxious to seek your quarters for a brief time before the meal."

Christopher smiled and clapped Sir Walter on the back. "You know me well, Sir Walter. 'Tis a mystery to me why I did not elevate you to this rank sooner."

Sir Walter smiled, obviously pleased with the king's praise. Father Geoffrey stepped forward, a puzzled look on his face.

"This is Lady Marged," Christopher said, astutely deducing the cause for puzzlement. John had returned to the keep early to ensure all would be ready for the king's return, but he had not known that Marged would accompany them. "We will speak on this further tomorrow in council, but for this night a room must be prepared

for her, and either Bridget or Ursula must be pressed into service ere we find a suitable servant in the village."

"My lord," Alain said as he stepped forward, "if it pleases you mayhaps Alyce might serve the Lady Marged this eve. Our daughter Anne is young, but she could be trained to be a lady's maid."

"'Tis done," Christopher said. "I had forgotten about young Anne, and yet she is an excellent choice." He winked. "Mayhaps between your good wife Alyce, and you and John, Anne will be ready sooner than any girl we find in the village." He turned to Marged. "Alyce and Anne will see you are settled, and see to your room. While you wait you may rest by the hearth."

"Aye, your majesty," she said.

Dafydd reached out to lay a hand on her shoulder. "You will be welcomed here in Lysnowydh," he said softly. "When I first came I found a welcome as well."

"Aye, Sir Dafydd," she said, not raising her eyes to meet his. "I thank you."

Leaving the hustle below, Christopher and Dafydd mounted the steps to their room, finding it in readiness. Fires burned in the hearths, and the floors had been swept and laid with fresh rushes. A table held a pitcher of ale and a small loaf of bread in Dafydd's room.

"Your people love you well, my king," Dafydd said as he stood behind Christopher before the fire.

"Aye," Christopher said as he turned to pull Dafydd into an embrace. "As I love them." He rested his cheek against the rough of Dafydd's jerkin. "Marged will serve her purpose well, and she will fit in here as though she were always a part of our family."

Dafydd wrapped both arms around Christopher, reached up to tangle his fingers through his long hair, and pulled back gently until their eyes met. "Whom do you seek to convince, Christopher? Me or you??

"Do I," Christopher said, his gaze steady upon Dafydd's face, "need to convince you?"

"Nay," Dafydd replied. He tightened his arms around Christopher's torso. "Nay, 'tis not me you need to convince."

Christopher rose up on tiptoes and claimed Dafydd's mouth in a searing kiss. "I have missed the comfort of our own bed," he murmured. "And though my hunger has been satisfied these past several nights, I find I am ravenous yet again, cariad."

"As am I," Dafydd whispered back. "'Tis well the evening meal is yet a few hours away."

"Aye," Christopher said as he stepped back from the embrace and removed the sword belt that hung about his narrow hips. "Tis well."

THE next several days were a whirlwind of activity. Marged's room was made ready, and Anne settled easily into her role as companion. The two were of a similar age, and Marged was glad of an ally in the confusing world of the keep. Although in the main she was welcomed, there was still an underlying distrust of the Welsh even though most had come to accept Dafydd.

Christopher spent several days locked in with the council seeing to the problems that had arisen while he was gone. He heard reports on the doings in Strasnedh. Together with the council they drafted a missive that was sent forth to King Henry to outline the plan for providing Lysnowydh with an heir.

Dafydd worked hard with the troops and employed the new techniques he had learned and observed while on their journey. He found that the drilling that had happened while he was gone had been smooth, and the troops were every bit as disciplined as they had been before he left.

In the evenings Christopher spent much time conversing with Marged. Dafydd was not excluded from these conversations, yet most times he declined to join them as they sat before the great hearth in the main hall. He and Marged did not actively avoid each other; yet by the nature of their respective relationships with the king they did not seek each other out for companionship either. Each night when the time came for bed, Christopher bade Marged a good sleep, kissed her cheek, and then climbed the stairs to Dafydd's chamber.

After a week had gone by, Christopher led Dafydd upstairs directly after the evening meal. "I must needs have you, cariad," he murmured as they undressed.

There was a hint of desperation to their lovemaking, not unlike the way it had been on their journey when they had been forced to deny themselves. Afterward they lay together, skin pressed tight against skin under the furs, the light of a single candle and the glow from the hearth the only illumination.

Christopher pressed his cheek against Dafydd's chest and was comforted by his steady heartbeat. "Tomorrow night," he said simply.

"Aye," Dafydd replied. He bent to press his lips against the top of Christopher's head. "I knew the time would come soon."

"I love you, Dafydd," Christopher said. "I will love you always."

"Beunydd," Dafydd murmured. "Rwy'n dy garu."

AFTER the meal the next evening, Christopher bent close to Marged to whisper in her ear. "Anne will take you upstairs and I will join you anon."

"Aye, your majesty," she replied breathlessly.

Dafydd had not joined them that evening; he ate above in his still room. Christopher sat alone on the dais and watched as Marged walked across the room. The murmuring of voices that accompanied her departure indicated that the people knew what was to occur. Christopher sighed and signaled that his goblet should be refilled. "Tis as though I live in the open," he muttered, a scowl affixed to his features as he downed the goblet of wine. When he was done he stood and called, "Alain, to me."

His chamber was brightly lit with a branch of candles, and the fire blazed in the hearth. A quick glance told him that Marged awaited him in the bed, and that the curtains had been drawn close, leaving only the foot of the bed open to the warmth of the fire. Christopher stood before the flames as Alain undressed him and allowed ample time for Marged to study him if she wished.

"See that Anne remains outside in the antechamber," Christopher said as Alain removed the last of Christopher's clothing. "And you may retire for the night. I shall not have need of you again until morning."

"Aye, my lord, as you wish," Alain said as he bowed himself from the room.

Christopher stood gazing into the fire for a moment, then turned and walked toward the bed. He paused to close the curtains around the bed as he guessed that Marged would likely prefer the darkness. He listened as he climbed up into the bed, and was unsure if the gasp he detected was fear or anticipation. Carefully, he slid beneath the furs and positioned himself beside her. He reached out and laid a hand upon her, finding that she was lying on her back with her hands clasped before her, rigid with fear, and she gasped again.

"Shh," he soothed as he rose up on an elbow and gazed through the dark to see the outline of her face. He reached up and cupped her cheek gently, urged her to turn toward him. "I promised I would not hurt you, Marged," he said softly. "You must needs trust me when I tell you that."

"Aye, your majesty." Her voice cracked and she squeezed her eyes shut but did not move from her position.

Christopher slid closer and touched her hip with his. "In this bed you need not be formal," he whispered as he slid his fingers down her cheek, and pushed them under the back of her head that he might turn her toward him. "You may call me Christopher."

## "I... I cannot," she whispered.

He moved closer and brushed his lips across her brow. "Mayhaps not now," he said, "but in time." Slowly and gently, he swept his fingers over her body. He felt the tenseness through her arms and hands as they clasped together tightly. He knew that no matter what he said she would not relax. He had to show her that he meant her no pain.

The scent of roses clung to her hair and her body, and he knew that Agnes had directed Bridget to prepare the special soaps that had not been used since his mother's time. He kissed over fluttering eyelids and down the arch of her nose until he found her lips. All the while his hand skimmed over her breast, and he thumbed over her nipple until she moaned into his mouth.

Marged unclenched her hands as Christopher ventured lower, down to cup her hip and urge her again to turn toward him. She gripped tight to his upper arm and moved her legs apart ever so slightly.

"Hush, bechan," he whispered. "Open for me."

His lips found hers again and as she moved against the bed he trailed his hand over and gently inserted his fingers down over her mound, down between her legs. As he gently caressed her lips with his tongue, he slid his fingers lower until she gasped in surprise. He stroked gently with his fingertips and dipped lower to catch the moistness of her passage. He held her tightly against him as he felt her stiffen with a new emotion this time, and when her orgasm broke she clutched at him tightly, her smooth nails cut into the skin of his shoulder blades and her legs parted open farther. As she moaned he dipped his fingers inside, finding that she was indeed no longer a virgin.

The tenseness left her body as he held her gently against him. He realized in that moment that although her body was not virgin, her spirit had been. He kissed her brow gently while he gave her time to regain herself.

When she released her grip on his shoulder, he moved so that he settled atop her. She opened her legs to allow him to settle between them. He kissed her again, and this time she responded. He moved his body so that he slid inside her as he cupped a hand below her bottom, and held as he gasped at the softness that enveloped him.

She lifted her legs and allowed him to sink in deeper. "Tis good, your majesty," she murmured. "Feels so... good."

The innocence in her words was his undoing and he began to thrust inside her, slowly at first. Then he arched back with a cry as he exploded against her. At last he rolled to the side, pulled her into his arms, and held her close.

"Your majesty... Christopher," she said hesitantly as she settled close, her legs twined with his, her hand resting upon the small of his back. "I did not know that...." She paused, tongue-tied.

"Did not know what, bechan?" he asked softly.

"That 'twas possible without pain," she said at last.

His heart wrenched in his chest and he tipped her head back to kiss her lips. "Tis possible," he said. "And 'tis how 'twill always be between us, Marged. I give you my promise."

"My thanks," she said softly.

There was silence between them for a time and then Christopher spoke again.

"You may sleep here tonight. I shall call Anne to come and see to aught that you need."

"Aye," she said as she pulled back to allow him to get up from the bed.

Christopher rose and pulled his bedrobe tight around his body before he went to call Anne in from the antechamber.

"See to your mistress," he said. "She may wish to bathe in the morning ere she returns to her room."

Anne curtseyed and kept her eyes lowered. Christopher spared one last glance at the bed.

"Sleep well, Marged," he said softly.

He turned and walked through to the bathing chamber. He paused to wash, and then continued through into Dafydd's chamber where he found him curled on his side and sound asleep. On the low table beside him sat a mug half-full with wine, and likely valerian. With a heavy sigh, Christopher shed his robe and pulled the furs aside. He wormed into the small space in front of Dafydd and spooned their bodies together before replacing the furs.

Dafydd stirred and murmured, "Christopher?"

"Hold me, cariad," Christopher said as he settled. "Don't let go."

Dafydd closed a strong arm over the king and pulled him close. "I will not let go, fy llew."



DAFYDD woke early the next morning, before the sun had risen high enough to light the windows. He was not really surprised to find Christopher still curled in front of him, sleeping soundly. Dafydd eased back that he might glimpse Christopher's face, and found that even in sleep it was etched with lines of worry. He sighed softly and eased closer again that he might offer his warmth and support. He bent and placed a light kiss upon his brow.

Christopher stirred, uncurled himself, and put his arm up over Dafydd's back. "I am inclined to stay abed with you yet a while, cariad," he said, his voice hoarse. "All is settled outside these walls, and I am of a mind to indulge this morn."

"Aye," Dafydd murmured. "I have naught pressing this day."

They lapsed into silence, each turning over their own thoughts. Dafydd sensed that something weighed heavily on Christopher's soul, and yet he knew that it was a secret the king would keep to himself. It did not trouble him, as what had passed between Christopher and Marged was sacred to the two of them only. That the king had sought him out was balm enough.

Christopher trailed his fingers over Dafydd's torso, touched the many new scars that peppered across his body. He pressed his lips over a crescent-shaped one, made by the sharp point of an arrow, and whispered, "There are many things in the world that cause pain, sometimes things that are meant to be pleasurable."

"Aye," Dafydd said softly. "Mayhaps."

The sun had crept further up and eased many of the shadows in the room. Christopher raised his head, and caught Dafydd's eye. "With all the pain and hardship in the world, I feel safe inside you, Dafydd."

Dafydd shifted and moved Christopher as he raised his leg and let him settle against him. "Then come inside, fy llew. When our bodies join, I feel peace."

With a moan Christopher rose up and reached across Dafydd's body for the pot of cream that was set beside the bed. Speaking only with his eyes, he reached down to gently prepare him. Dafydd saw the clouds begin to clear as desire rose between them. Christopher caressed his cheek then dipped down to claim his lips in a deep kiss.

The joining was sweet, but only for a moment before the inner demons took over again. Dafydd adjusted his hands on his knees to hold himself open as Christopher began to thrust against him harder. Their eyes met and held until at last the wave broke over them. Christopher collapsed against Dafydd as the orgasm ebbed, heedless of the discomfort he caused by pressing against him.

"Love you," he whispered.

Dafydd looped strong arms around him in response, and held him tightly. He heard a soft rustling sound from the bathing chamber, and knew that Marged was at her bath. He bit his lower lip between his teeth and held Christopher tighter against him. These were troubled times, and he knew that he must soon depart on his quest. All three of them would suffer if he stayed while duty was performed.

THE routine settled into place over the next several weeks. Marged spent her days with Anne. They spun coarse wool into fine fabric. They worked with Matilda in stitching garments, and embroidering cloths for the chapel. Little by little Marged was accepted as a member of the household.

The real changes came with Christopher, and Dafydd. Most noticed that the king seemed to burn his candle from both ends. There were shadows under his eyes, and his energy seemed to wane. When any sought to ask after his health he snapped in anger, so all cut a wide berth around him.

Dafydd became silent and more withdrawn. He kept to the shadows and rarely passed the evening meal in the hall. The troops were worked harder than ever, and most dreaded what each new day would bring.

Every night Christopher climbed the stairs to his chamber soon after Marged had retired. Every morning he appeared down the stairs again with Dafydd close behind. Many suspected the truth: that the duty of producing an heir was a heavy weight upon all three.

One late summer afternoon, a messenger arrived in the bailey to say that Sir Richard was close behind, and that he had a message to deliver to the king and the marshal. Even before Christopher was roused from his council chamber and Dafydd rode in from the practice grounds outside the castle walls, Sir Richard rode into the courtyard.

"What news?" Christopher called as he hurried down the stairs.

"Ah, your majesty," Sir Richard said. "My news is for Sir Dafydd's ears alone." He bowed as Christopher came closer.

"What news you have for him can be shared with me," Christopher snapped.

Sir Richard straightened up, watched over Christopher's shoulder as Dafydd dismounted, then shifted his gaze back to the king. He saw where others did not the amount of strain that rested on his shoulders. He reached out a hand to grasp Christopher's forearm. He pulled him close, and spoke low into his ear. "This is Dafydd's fight, Christopher." He stepped back, and said in a louder voice as Dafydd approached, "I shall stay the night, and share the evening meal with you."

"You try my patience, old man," Christopher said, his face drawn and tight. "And yet I heed your words." He watched as Sir Richard turned and led Dafydd away across the courtyard and up the outer stairs that led to the battlements.

"Tis found," Sir Richard said as they walked.

"How many?" Dafydd asked, his brow creased in a furrow as he already planned the means of quelling the unrest.

"Tis only one, Sir Edward. His holding is large; large enough that he styles himself a lord unto himself. He does not see eye to eye with King Christopher, and though his lands are near to Strasnedh, he has no use for King Warin. Already he makes his case for breaking free from both kingdoms and forming his own. His supposed fuel to the fire is King Christopher's alignment with you." Sir Richard walked with both hands clasped behind his back. He turned to look at Dafydd. "If he is successful, he will break from Lysnowydh, and take several of the lesser vassals with him. Mayhaps his case is strengthened that Christopher bypassed him on his procession, but 'tis hard to tell which way King Henry will blow with the wind these days."

Dafydd paced along beside Sir Richard, listened as he spoke. When Sir Richard fell silent, he paused and turned to look out over the ocean with his forearms rested upon the low wall. "I have thought long and hard on this matter. My plans are nearly set. Sir Cuthbert and I have planned for every eventuality." He turned to look into Sir Richard's eyes. "I need only a day to finalize the plan now we know the location."

"Tis well," Sir Richard said. "I have left the plans in your hands, and I know they are sound."

"When Sir Edward awakes to find he is surrounded, with none but me at the head of the king's troops, he will change his tune. Mayhaps 'tis best he does break off, see for himself the difficulty involved in leadership." He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. "Tis more likely he will fall into line."

"Aye, 'tis likely," Sir Richard said. "You must needs begin your quest soon, ere he catches wind of your plans."

"We shall leave on the morrow," Dafydd said. He turned to gaze over the wall toward the ocean again, and added in a low voice, "And none too soon."

Sir Richard turned to look over his shoulder, and then said softly, "Tis not my

place to ask, and you need not answer, but has it been difficult?"

Dafydd sighed. "You need only to look at him to have your answer." He closed his eyes for a moment, and then turned away to meet Sir Richard's eyes. "His guilt requires he spend each night with his duty, and yet he seeks my bed when 'tis done." He chewed his lip for a moment before adding, "I have told him he need not worry on my behalf as I understand the duty as well as he does, and yet...."

"And yet he is stubborn and seeks the solace you provide." Sir Richard clapped a hand on Dafydd's shoulder. "You cannot change his mind once 'tis set. This quest will take a month or more, and whilst you are gone he will begin to ease, and see clear that 'tis one or the other, but cannot be both."

"He is a proud man," Dafydd said softly.

"Aye," Sir Richard said. "But were either of us to tell him of his folly, he would fly into a rage. He seeks to honor you, yet he must needs realize on his own that by striving to provide Lysnowydh an heir he bestows the highest honor upon you that he can. It is his bond that when the year of handfast is up he will not put you out, but will keep you bound tightly to him."

Dafydd's brow furrowed deeper in thought and then he said slowly, "Mayhaps you are right."

"Not mayhaps," Sir Richard said. "Tis truth. Once Marged proves fertile and is brought to bed with the child, your future, yours and his, will be set."

ONCE the evening meal was finished, Christopher left Marged to talk with Sir Richard, and he and Dafydd retired early. At the top of the stairs, Christopher turned for his own room.

"'Tis my desire that you join me in my own bed this night," he said formally to Dafydd.

"As you wish," Dafydd said.

"I wish," Christopher said as they continued into the room, "because art mine, Dafydd. Mine to share my bed, my hearth, my body."

He plucked at his clothing impatiently, and Dafydd watched as he shed surcoat, shirt, chausses, breeches, and boots. When he stood naked before the fire, Dafydd turned and gathered his bedrobe from the foot of the bed. Christopher took it and slumped into his chair.

"I would share my bed with you this night before you leave me." He reached up to rub a hand over tired eyes. "I grow weary of putting aside my desires to feed my needs."

Dafydd sighed softly, and began to remove his own clothing. His own bedrobe

was in his room; he did not venture forth to retrieve it. He sank to his knees before the king, buttocks resting upon the fur rug. He laid his head against Christopher's knee.

"My king," he said softly. "You share my bed with me, and that is enough. By fulfilling your needs, you honor your desires." He turned to press his lips against the king's bare knee. "This night, let us talk not of what troubles you. Too soon the light of dawn will come, and I will depart. Send me off with the warmth of you buried deeply inside me, that I might not shiver whilst we are parted."

Christopher shifted in the chair and dropped his hand to caress Dafydd's head. "Art a poet, cariad. Always and always you say the right words to ease the turmoil within my soul." He dropped his hand down to caress the back of Dafydd's neck. "What troubles me is that you will depart in the morning, into uncertainty. Whilst you are gone I shall worry for each hair upon your head."

Dafydd turned to look up at the king. "Think you that I cannot defend myself?"

"Nay, Dafydd, nay," Christopher said. His eyes were in shadows, but the truth came through in his voice. "I would not wish to be on the wrong side of your wrath. Edward will be bowed before your greater strength. My worry is that," he paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was strained, "I do not wish to lose you, Dafydd, to treachery or to any other misfortune that plagues mankind these days. I love you, cariad. 'Tis my right to worry for your safe return."

Growling softly in his throat, Dafydd turned and rose up on his knees. He placed one hand on each arm of the chair, his expression fierce as he met the king's gaze steadily. "Twill be my honor to carry your concern with me as my talisman. But hear me, Christopher: I will return victorious."

Christopher shifted forward in his chair. "You hold me captive, Dafydd, and I allow it. You are the master of my heart, and when you say you will be the victor, I know it to be truth." He moved closer, his mouth hovering near Dafydd's. "I love you, cariad, and I will count the days until you return to lay Edward's fealty at my feet."

Dafydd bent closer and caught Christopher's lips in his own. As the kiss deepened, he moved to push him back against the chair. He caressed down his torso, rested a hand on his knee. "I must needs taste you, fy llew," he murmured when he broke the kiss and slid his hands up under the edge of Christopher's robe.

"Aye," Christopher said breathlessly. "Yet only a taste, as I would bury my warmth inside you that you might carry it into battle."

Dafydd sank back on his heels and watched as Christopher spread open the halves of his robe and displayed the rampant evidence of his desire. The firelight shone on his skin and shadowed his own desire as it rose between his legs. He leaned forward onto his balled fists, tongue extended, and touched the tip of Christopher's erection.

"Oh," Christopher moaned as he lay back against the chair, his knees splayed wide. "I never tire of your sweet lips, the heat of your mouth. Devour me, my fierce

warrior."

"Tis all the invitation I need," Dafydd murmured. He closed his mouth over Christopher's length and slid down halfway, then scraped his teeth gently along the edge he rose up again. Deeper with each pass until his nose bumped against the base of Christopher's belly, this time he swirled his tongue over the sensitive ridges as he pulled up.

"Tis fire," Christopher hissed as Dafydd pressed his lips against the tip. He loosed one hand from the arm of the chair and threaded his fingers through Dafydd's short locks. "Again, Dafydd."

With a soft moan, Dafydd opened his mouth and slid down again and this time he closed his hand around the base as he drew up. He held Christopher as he whispered against his damp flesh, "The taste of you arouses me all the more."

Fingers tightened in Dafydd's hair, Christopher growled, "Then up, to bed."

Dafydd stood and closed the short distance to the bed. He sprawled against the velvet coverlet, his eyes closed to slits as he watched Christopher rise from the chair and shrug out of his robe. He spread his legs wider, bent his knees, and arched up at the first touch of fingertips.

"Art magnificent, cariad," Christopher murmured as he settled on his knees between Dafydd's legs. "And responsive." His fingers buried inside, he bent forward, his lips hovering over Dafydd's chest. "And mine." He closed his teeth over a nipple and pulled up.

"Ah." Dafydd arched up. "Now, my king. Take me now."

Christopher twisted his fingers as he pulled them free. He slathered just a scant amount of cream over his shaft as he rose up on his knees. "I want you to feel this, Dafydd," he said, "that you might remember you give to me willingly."

"Aye," Dafydd said, and the word rose to a keen wail as Christopher pushed inside. He shuddered with need as Christopher rested inside him.

"I love you," Christopher murmured, and then he pulled back and slammed in again and again before Dafydd could respond. He gripped Dafydd's hands tightly in his own, and before long he felt him explode beneath him. "Cariad," he moaned, and in one more thrust had joined him in release.

Dafydd raised his legs to loop them around Christopher thus holding him firm atop him. "And I love you, Christopher," he panted. "Beunydd."

A log settled in the fire, and reluctantly they drew apart to roll beneath the covers and settle among the furs. Dafydd roused himself to pull the curtain closed against the foot of the bed. Too soon the morning would come, but for tonight they slept, safe in each other's arms.

DAFYDD departed early the next morning in a cloud of dust. Christopher watched from the battlements as the army followed. Later in the afternoon he bid adieu to Sir Richard. By the evening he was resigned to the fact that the next month would be a waiting game, the first week of which would be lonelier than he had anticipated as Marged's link with the moon was broken.

"Nay, I am not angered," Christopher said gently as she haltingly confided in him at the evening meal. "Tis true the primary reason for your stay in Lysnowydh is to provide me with an heir, but I am not an evil monster who would have you thrown back to the wolves because you proved infertile after one month." He smiled. "When the week is up, we shall try again."

There was little to occupy the king with the vast majority of the troops gone. He rode with the patrols that remained, and urged them to greater diligence lest King Warin hear of the depleted guard. The lazy summer afternoons were peaceful, and no threat came.

A week after Dafydd had departed, a messenger arrived to say they were near to Sir Edward's keep, and that Dafydd had hidden the troops in a nearby vale to doubly ensure their arrival would be a surprise. The messenger pressed a rough bit of parchment into the king's hand before he turned to stable his horse. He would be provided with a meal and would leave in the morning to return to Dafydd.

Christopher held the parchment in his hand and called, "Report to me before you leave; I would send a return message to Sir Dafydd." He turned to enter the keep and find a quiet corner in which he might devour Dafydd's message and came face to face with a blushing Anne.

"Begging your pardon, your majesty," she said as she sank into a curtsey. "Lady Marged wishes to inform you that she is once again able to join your majesty in...." Her voice trailed off in an embarrassed gasp.

"Aye, young Anne," Christopher said with a wink. "I deduce your meaning. Tonight after you escort her upstairs you may seek your own bed."

"Aye, my lord," Anne replied, and she dropped another curtsey before she dashed off.

Christopher chuckled and continued into the keep. The note from Dafydd was short; said only that he missed the king but that he felt the warmth still buried in his heart. When the evening meal came, the king was in mellow spirits. After he signaled that the meal should begin, he turned to dip his hands into the bowl, and found it was Patrick who stood behind them.

"Have you been demoted to page again?" Christopher asked with a chuckle. As he washed his hands, he noted that Patrick held two bowls, and that the one he extended toward Marged was sprinkled with rose petals.

"Nay, your majesty," Patrick said. "I but asked to stay with the garrison at the

keep, and volunteered to serve you once again."

"Ah, but the quest Sir Dafydd finds himself leading would have made an excellent opportunity for you to win your spurs." Christopher reached for the towel and noted that Patrick gazed upon Marged as she dipped her hands into the rose-scented water.

"Aye," Patrick said absently, "and yet I am secure in the knowledge that I shall gain knighthood ere midwinter's night."

"Mayhaps," Christopher said as he draped the towel over Patrick's arm. "Yet it is never wise to presume where you dare not."

Patrick turned stricken eyes upon the king. "Aye, your majesty, I hear and obey."

Christopher and Marged passed the meal in companionable silence. When at last the sweets were cleared away, she asked permission to be excused. He turned and gave her a kindly smile.

"Aye, Marged, you may go upstairs with Anne, yet I ask you grant me a request."

She quirked an eyebrow up and dipped her head in acquiescence.

"Don a bedrobe once you have undressed, and wait for me beside the fire. I would speak with you ere we seek the bed." He reached for her hand and raised it that he might press his lips against it.

"Aye, your majesty," she replied breathlessly.

Christopher watched as she made her way across the room, and when she had disappeared up the stairway he rose to follow. Alain was waiting in Dafydd's chamber. He helped Christopher undress and into his robe, and then the king dismissed him for the night.

In Dafydd's note he had requested that the king enter his still room, and that something awaited him there. Christopher stood for a moment beside the fire, and felt a chill chase over his arms. There was still a mysterious other-worldliness about Dafydd at times, and while Christopher trusted him implicitly he still wondered at the depth of his skills. He turned, and walked across the room.

The still room was Dafydd's haven, and Christopher felt a connection to his departed lover immediately upon entering. It was fragrant with herbs, and warm even though no fire burned in the small hearth. In the center of the small table was a goblet, and inside was a folded parchment inscribed with Christopher's name. When he removed the parchment, he found the goblet was filled with dried herbs.

As he read the note, it was as if Dafydd stood behind him and he heard his voice reciting the words written. "Just a pinch in a goblet of wine, and focus your mind on the flames upon the hearth. When sleep overtakes you, retire to my bed, and you will be gifted with a dream that will allow you to see how I fare whilst parted

from you."

Another shiver traced down Christopher's spine, yet he smiled as he refolded the parchment and returned it to the goblet. He would wait until he suspected that the battle was joined. With the warmth of the promise in his heart, he left the still room and walked through into his own chamber.

Marged sat before the hearth, wrapped in a fur-lined bedrobe, and she rose to her feet when Christopher entered the room. He walked up to take her hands before she could drop into a curtsey. "Nay, bechan," he said softly. "Tis not necessary to honor tradition here."

"Aye, Christopher," she said softly. "And yet habits die hard."

"Tis true," he said. He stepped back that she might again take her seat, and then he sat in his own chair. "I thought, mayhaps, we could share a more intimate conversation. I think betimes that our relationship is an odd one. You have more worth to me than just as a vessel for my child, and there are things I would ask you."

"You have but to ask," she said as she settled in her chair.

"You have become more comfortable with me," he said, "and yet in the beginning I sensed your fear. I believed it was not fear of me, but fear of what was to pass between us. I would know what wrought such fear within you, and yet 'tis your place to refuse me an answer if you so wish."

She gasped softly. "Nay, 'tis not my place to refuse," she said as a soft blush crept over her face. "Tis difficult to speak of."

"Marged," he said softly as he slid forward in his chair to lay his hand over hers where she clasped them in her lap. "Take your time. Tell me which parts you feel able; 'tis only my care and concern for you that leads me to ask."

"When I was but fourteen," she said softly, her eyes downcast, "my father was killed in war. My mother and I were cast adrift, and sent to live with my father's brother. He was not pleased with the burden. The country was rife with disputes, and wars broke out among the lords more often than not. He did not hide his displeasure from us, or from his own family. His eldest son was but two years older than me, and sought to please his father in all things. I believe that he thought that were I damaged 'twould be easier to send me off to a convent." She tightened her hands together in her lap.

"Was it he who breached your maidenhead?" He tightened his grip on her hands.

"Aye," she whispered.

Christopher released his hold on her hands, and reached up to caress the side of her face. Slowly he raised her so that their eyes met. "I am sorry. 'Tis a small man who seeks to force a woman to submit, and were it in my power I would punish this scoundrel for his deeds."

"You have been kind," she said. "It is in the past, and I fear no longer."

He brushed his thumb over her cheek. "Art brave, bechan," he said softly. "There is no need for fear, even of reprisal should I make a request you have no wish to fulfill." He dropped his hand away and sat back in his chair. "I would see you, here before the fire."

She closed her eyes, then stood and moved to stand before him. "I would fulfill your request, Christopher."

He locked his gaze upon hers, and reached up to untie the belt at her waist. Slowly he pulled the robe open, and off her shoulders, until it fell in a heap on the floor. Only then did he stand and look down upon her body. "Art beautiful," he whispered as he raised a hand to skim up her belly and cup her breast.

The breath she had been holding escaped in a small moan and she swayed against him. "Might I," she said, her voice strained, "touch you?"

"Aye," he said, and he shed his robe. He bent his head to watch her as she gazed upon him, and moaned aloud when her small hand closed around him. Tentative and shy, she stroked him as he looped his arm around her and held her close. "Here there is only pleasure," he said softly.

"Aye," she breathed, her face pressed tightly against his chest.

Before long he swept her up into his arms, and carried her to the bed. There would never be the same heart-stopping passion between them that Christopher shared with Dafydd, and yet they both acknowledged it and accepted it. Marged cried aloud with release and held tightly to him for as long as she could, curled against him when he did not leave the bed as was his wont.

SEVERAL nights later, Christopher retired to Dafydd's room alone at day's end. In the still room, he mixed the dried herbs with wine. He drew in a deep breath as he sat before the hearth and drank the intoxicating brew. Once the goblet had been drained, he rose and climbed into bed. As soon as his head hit the pillow, he drifted into a deep sleep.

In the hazy dawn Dafydd surveyed the troops. The formation was flawless, one unbroken line of archers, and close behind the troops on horseback all at precise attention. The king's banner of rampant lion augmented with protector falcon stirred in the light breeze. When Sir Edward's keep awakened, they would find the vast army camped upon their doorstep.

Messengers met from both sides, and neutral ground was chosen for the parley. Sir Edward rode forth with his master at arms, and Dafydd met him with Sir Cuthbert at his back.

"Where is King Christopher," Sir Edward snarled. "I do not parley with dogs."

Anger roiled within Dafydd, yet he remained outwardly calm. "Your liege is within his castle at Lysnowydh."

"If the king is not here, then who leads his troops?" Sir Edward said.

"Mind your mouth," Sir Cuthbert growled. "The king's marshal leads his troops."

"The king's marshal is a craven dog," Sir Edward said, and he turned to spit upon the ground.

Sir Cuthbert growled, and Dafydd raised an arm to hold him back. He edged his horse closer to Sir Edward's, and spoke softly. "Such stupidity does not become the master of such a large garrison. The choice is yours. Eat your words, or face retribution."

"You have not the means to force retribution upon me," Sir Edward ground out.

Dafydd arched a brow. His eyes never left Sir Edward's face as he raised his arm, and in unison the archers notched arrows and raised their bows. "Another signal from me, and the battle lines will be drawn."

"'Tis a charade, no more than that," Sir Edward said. "Mayhaps they will not follow you when my archers return fire."

"Then 'tis best you return to your keep now, prepare for siege," Dafydd growled. "The victory will be sweeter for having wrung it from you." He lowered his arm, and a volley of arrows flew up through the air, fell short of the castle walls. "Next time they will connect."

With a roar of anger, Sir Edward wheeled around, and galloped for his castle. Once he was inside, and the portcullis was lowered, the battle was joined.

IN the morning Christopher awoke refreshed. Though the dream had not shown him the outcome of the battle, he knew within his heart that Dafydd had been victorious.



THREE weeks later, outlying messengers arrived at the keep to report that a large army was on the move toward Lysnowydh. The garrison amassed on the battlements, Christopher waited in the bailey. In his heart he knew it was Dafydd returning and not Sir Edward leading a charge against them.

As the forces drew nearer, it was confirmed that Dafydd rode at their head, and the men posted at the ready streamed down into the courtyard to join in the triumphant return.

When the army rode into the courtyard, Dafydd headed straight to where Christopher stood waiting. He devoured the king hungrily with his eyes while he slid from his horse. He untied a wrapped bundle that was securely attached behind his saddle, and removed the wrappings to reveal a finely wrought sword. With all eyes watching, he dropped to his knees at Christopher's feet and lay the sword before him.

"I bring you news of victory," Dafydd said as he bowed low. "And the renewed fealty of Sir Edward, along with this token of his trust and admiration." He took the sword into his hands and raised it up to the king.

Christopher took the sword from Dafydd with one hand, and reached toward him with the other. His voice was steady and strong as he spoke. "Arise, Sir Dafydd. Your honor is already tucked deep within my heart, and Sir Edward's is acknowledged."

When Dafydd arose, Christopher pulled him into his arms, and the garrison mingled with the army cheered. "Welcome home, cariad," Christopher murmured against Dafydd's ear after he bestowed the kiss of peace. He stood back and said in a louder voice, "I would hear of the battle." He turned to find Sir Walter. "We must feast this night!"

"Aye, your majesty," Sir Walter said, his own face wreathed in smiles. "I have taken the liberty to send for Sir Richard, and the feast is already in the making."

The crowd broke into smaller groups, as the army was welcomed back. Dafydd

caught sight of Marged standing alone on the stairs as she gazed upon the scene. At his feet Dewi yipped and growled, hoping to be noticed. He turned to meet Christopher's gaze.

"I would bathe," he said softly as he bent to greet his pup.

Christopher wrinkled his nose. "Aye," he said. "Tis long since water has touched your flesh."

"'Tis long since any have touched my flesh," Dafydd murmured as he stood and gave Dewi a smack on the rump.

"Then we must needs amend that," Christopher said. He looped an arm around Dafydd and led him up the outer stairway into the keep.

Marged had retreated into the hall, and stood before the great hearth. Dafydd cast his gaze in her direction and nodded toward her when she looked up. Christopher released his hand and gave him a gentle nudge in the direction of the stairs.

"Go; your bath awaits."

Dafydd cast one last hungry gaze at Christopher, then turned and hastened up to their private chambers. As promised, John had drawn the bath. He stayed long enough to collect Dafydd's clothing, and then left him to bathe alone. For the first time in the many weeks since he had left the keep, Dafydd relaxed as he settled down into the steamy tub. He leaned back with closed eyes and allowed the water to close around his neck.

"I thought mayhaps you could use some help with your hair."

"I knew you would not stay below stairs," Dafydd said, a smile curved on his lips. He opened his eyes to find Christopher stood in the doorway and gazed upon him with open hunger in his eyes.

"I would give you privacy if you desired it," Christopher said. "I know 'tis a rare thing to find a moment alone with your own thoughts when you are on campaign."

"Nay, my king," Dafydd said as he sat up in the tub. "'Tis you I would rather have than my thoughts."

Christopher pushed away from the doorway and walked toward the tub, shedding his clothing as he moved closer.

"Do you mean to join me?" Dafydd asked.

"Nay," Christopher said as he sank down on the low stool at the head of the tub. "The water is far too dirty." He wrinkled his nose as he took up the cloth and lathered it with soap. "The meal is but an hour hence, and I feared you might wet me." He drew the soapy cloth over Dafydd's back, and scrubbed the ring of dirt around his neck.

"Art a wise man," Dafydd murmured. He leaned back against the tub when

Christopher applied gentle pressure to his chest.

"Mmm," Christopher said as he trailed the cloth over Dafydd's chest, and dipped his hand below the water. "I would hear about the surrender in hall, with Sir Richard and any other you desire to share the tale with." He laid the cloth aside and scooped up some soap to lather through Dafydd's hair. "Yet while we are private I would hear from you how you fared."

"You know me well, my king," Dafydd murmured. He tipped his head back and allowed Christopher to pour water over it to rinse the soap. "Tis alien to me, to make war against anyone. In truth I had many mixed feelings as we rode to Sir Edward's keep." He fell silent for a moment, then continued quietly, "E'en though 'twas alien, I found I relished the chance to make right a wrong done against me, against your kingdom. In truth," he looked up to meet Christopher's gaze, "I have gained a sense of pride from the encounter."

"As have I, Dafydd," Christopher said firmly. He shifted the stool so that he sat beside the tub, his hand braced on Dafydd's arm. "I never doubted your ability. I knew 'twas only a matter of time before your wrath was unchained. I pity those who choose to stand in your way in the future, and I believe that together our kingdom, yours and mine, will be one to be reckoned with."

"Aye," Dafydd said. "Mayhaps through this encounter I can finally acknowledge the truth of that. 'Tis true you have always said 'tis our kingdom, but until this battle, I believed it was in name only. Now I see, together we hold the power, the force."

Christopher growled, and leaned forward on the stool. His hand dropped beneath the surface of the water, and he closed it around Dafydd's stiffened length. "Long I have waited to hear you say the words, Dafydd, to hear you give voice to the beliefs in my heart." His hand tightened, and he bent forward to catch Dafydd's lips in a fierce kiss.

Dafydd moaned into his mouth, and water sloshed between them as he moved forward to better return the kiss.

"Up," Christopher hissed. "Too long have we been parted."

Water spilled over the edge of the tub as Dafydd stood and stepped out. Christopher rose behind him, and pushed him toward the hearth. Dafydd braced his hands against the low mantel and spread his legs wide as water dripped from his body and hissed into the flames.

"Art mine, cariad," Christopher murmured as he pushed fingers slick with soap into Dafydd's passage.

"Aye," Dafydd growled. "As you art mine."

With a stifled growl, Christopher slipped his fingers free and guided himself to thrust inside. He covered Dafydd's hand with one of his own, and slipped the other around his waist to grip his length.

"Tonight I will share your bed, rouse you slowly as you deserve, but now...." His voice trailed off as he began to thrust.

A wordless moan was his only answer. Dafydd's nails cut into the soft wood of the mantel. The warmth of the fire coupled with the heat of the king's body behind him, and he exploded in a white-hot conflagration. Christopher found release soon after, and he buried his face against Dafydd's back. After a moment Dafydd turned and pulled him into a firm embrace. Neither said another word as they communicated through the simple act of holding each other.

DINNER in the hall that night was a boisterous event. At the lower tables the troops shared stories with their families and members of the garrison. Many spontaneous toasts were offered to Dafydd throughout the evening as tales of his power were shared.

Sir Richard joined the party on the dais, and sat with Marged as Christopher gave most of his attention to Dafydd. Sir Cuthbert joined the group, and once again Patrick served as their page.

"'Tis Sir Dafydd's story to tell," Sir Cuthbert said, clearly uncomfortable with needing to mind his manners at the king's table.

"Aye," Christopher said as he raised his goblet. "And yet you know he will not give us the details." He smiled as he turned his gaze on Dafydd. "He will tell us that Edward was brought to heel by the precision of the troop formation as led by you, or that the archers were well trained by Sir Henry. He will give us no account of his own involvement."

Dafydd smiled, and his cheeks pinked. "Tis true. The troops were in straight alignment under Sir Cuthbert's direction, and Sir Henry's archers were flawless in execution. Twas a well-oiled machine. Sir Edward was neatly trapped inside his keep with only the provisions he had when we came upon him. In time he was starved out, and had no choice but to parley."

Sir Richard signaled that more ale be given to Sir Cuthbert, and he lounged back in his chair. "There is more to the story than just that, Dafydd. His majesty and I have stood many sieges together, enough to know that the army does not direct itself. It takes a strong force at the head to guide them."

"In Sir Dafydd," Sir Cuthbert said, his tongue beginning to be loosened by the ale, "we had a strong force, and none can deny that. Methinks Sir Edward thought the army at his doorstep would flee once he rode away from Sir Dafydd on that first day. But when he found the army did not flee, and trenched in deeper each day, he was forced to change his tune. From the placement of the archers, to the felling of a tree to make a ram, to the fouling of the well, they were well and truly caught."

"I would hear of the parley," Christopher said as he sprawled back in his chair

and took up his goblet. "In truth, I would have wished to be there to see the look of defeat in his eyes."

"There was no look of defeat," Dafydd said softly. "He gave in as he knew there was no hope of escape, and his people suffered. He does respect you, my king, mayhaps more now than he realized, but mayhaps he shall never respect me e'en though he has fallen victim to my strength." He shrugged as he sat back in his chair and took a long drink from his goblet. "He showed me his disdain by making me wait a week while the sword was fashioned."

"Aye, he did make us wait," Sir Cuthbert said. "Yet during the wait he had his men out among our own, trying as they might to win us over." His ruddy face was wreathed in smiles. "To a man all stood strong with Sir Dafydd." He stood and raised his tankard; many of the men at the lower tables leaped to their feet and also raised their tankards high. "Sir Dafydd," he roared, and the rest of the men stood.

Christopher rose and drained his goblet along with his men. "Hear me well, Lysnowydh," he said when the noise subsided. "In the past two years, we have not been without strife and turmoil. 'Tis not an impossible task I ask of you, and those who stand before me now see the right of it. All here have my respect, my love, and my promise of protection for you and all of yours. You make me proud."

The response from the assembled mass was deafening. Dafydd rose to stand beside Christopher and the crowd cheered again. The revelry lasted long into the night, but before too much longer the king and his consort disappeared upstairs.

LIFE within the keep settled into the accustomed routine again. The days grew shorter as winter approached. Crops were harvested, and the shepherds made ready to round the cattle up. Some would be slaughtered and the meat preserved for the coming winter months. Others would be housed within the walls of the bailey, safe from the ravages of winter.

Christopher began to divide his time between Dafydd and Marged. When Marged shared his bed, he honored her by sleeping the night by her side. Acceptance settled between the three of them, although Dafydd and Marged kept distance from each other.

"In truth, I would much rather spend every night here, tucked beneath the furs in your bed, cariad," Christopher murmured one night.

Dafydd moved his hand along Christopher's hip, his voice husky and deep. "I treasure the nights we have together, fy llew; 'tis enough."

"For you mayhaps." Christopher rose up; the furs skimmed down his back as he arranged himself over Dafydd's body. He cocked his head to the side and gazed down at Dafydd, washed in the glow of the candles. "For me 'tis never enough." He traced his hands up Dafydd's arms, swept them over his shoulders, and down to tease

along his chest. "The feel of you beneath me is a heady pleasure I shall never tire of."

"'Tis true enough, I never tire of it, yet it is the sweeter betimes, for waiting." Dafydd raised his hands and rested them on Christopher's hips. "I understand the need, and whilst I would not wish to share you for the rest of my life, I am willing for now."

Christopher dipped down, his body firm against Dafydd's, his lips tickling at his neck. "Ah, Dafydd, yet again you are my undoing." He pressed forward and felt Dafydd's response beneath him. When he spoke, his voice was a throaty whisper. "Take me, cariad, here within your sanctuary."

With a low growl, Dafydd tightened his hands around Christopher's lower back. "You said you treasured the feel of my body beneath yours," he whispered. "I would fulfill both of your desires." He urged the king up again, and twisted that he might reach the pot of cream on the table beside the bed. "Rise up on your knees."

Hands braced against the head of the bed, Christopher rose to his knees. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back as Dafydd's fingers slid inside him. "How I love you," he murmured.

Dafydd watched as he twisted his fingers inside Christopher's passage, saw how his cock twitched with desire. He raised his own knees and spread his legs. "Look at me," he commanded gently.

Christopher gasped as his eyes fluttered open, and he gazed down at Dafydd. He allowed Dafydd to guide him, and his mouth opened in a low moan as he felt him push up inside him. He braced himself on his feet and sunk all the way down. "Tis good," he whispered.

"Aye," Dafydd groaned in response. He closed his hand over Christopher's length, and let him set the pace.

It did not take long before they both found release.



SAMHAIN fast approached, and within the keep the residents of Lysnowydh laid out plans to celebrate the end of summer, the time when light and life drained from the world. Already the butcher walked among the cattle, deciding which to slaughter as the chief shepherd earmarked the hardiest to be kept aside for the new year.

As with any other spiritual day, the people planned a bonfire for Samhain Eve, and a feast would be prepared. Christopher acknowledged to the council that there was much to be thankful about in the year just passed. Cattle raiding had been light, he had chosen a mate who proved to be his equal in strength and might, and provisions had been made to ensure the future of the kingdom.

"She has not yet proven fertile," Father Geoffrey said, his mouth tautened in lines of disapproval.

A frown creased the king's brow. "Marged has only been in our midst since mid-summer," he said. "In time the heir will come."

"Mayhaps," Father Geoffrey continued. "Tis more likely were you to spend more time in her bed." He gave subtle emphasis to the word her, thus confirming that while he smiled acceptance of Dafydd along with the rest it went against his nature and his beliefs to give full support to the king's unusual liaison with the Welsh woodsman.

Christopher rose to his feet and rounded the table to tower over the hapless priest. "Father Geoffrey," he said, his voice tight with contained anger, "you have served this kingdom long and well, and as such I suffer your obvious contempt of my alliance with Sir Dafydd." He laid his hand upon the priest's shoulder. "But hear me well: such contempt begins to wear upon me, and you would be better served to keep it well hidden lest you find yourself upon the road with only the clothing on your back."

Father Geoffrey's face darkened. "You would not dare to turn me out," he said as he stiffened his spine. "I have served your father, and his father before him. I

blessed your mother upon your birth, and have stood beside you through many conflicts."

The rest of the council held collective breath as king and priest eyed each other.

"I acknowledge your service," Christopher said, his hand tightened slightly upon the priest's shoulder, "but I will always hold Dafydd in the highest favor, the highest regard." He paused, his eyes bored into the priest's.

Father Geoffrey's mouth drew up as if he had tasted a lemon, but the color eased, and he said, "I hear, and I understand." He looked aside, and the tension eased.

Christopher released his grip, and turned aside as the rest of the council let out their held breath. "In time Marged will conceive."

ON the practice yard, Dafydd slid from the back of his horse and pulled the helm from his head. He caught the horse's reins, and stood panting at his head watching as the drill continued. When Royce, the squire assigned that day to assist him, appeared at his side, he said, "Return him to the stables," and passed the horse's reins to the squire's hand. "Tis time for me to join the council."

"Aye," Royce said. "Will you return later, my lord?"

"After midday meal mayhaps," Dafydd said with a smile. "In truth I would work in the yard while the weather still holds than spend the day holed up inside."

"Who wouldn't?" Royce replied with a cheeky grin. He turned to take the horse across the yard.

Dafydd took the stairs up into the keep two at a time, and once inside headed toward the stairs that led up to his chamber. He intended to wash and change his shirt before he joined the council. As he rounded the first turn in the inner stairway, he encountered Marged on her way down, her face pinched and white as she reached out to clutch at the wall. She seemed not to see him below her on the stairway.

"Marged," he said as he hurried up to catch her as she stumbled toward him. "Art ill?"

She laid her cheek against his chest as she came to rest against him. "Nay," she said weakly. "'Tis just a complaint of the belly, nothing more. 'Twill pass."

He turned and led her back down the stairs then guided her to sit on a bench in the window enclosure.

"How long?" he asked gently as he sat beside her, her hand held within his.

Rosy color washed over her cheeks. "Tis a week." She lowered her voice. "Or more. Once my fast is broken, the food comes up again. I do not wish to trouble you, or the king, and I am able to complete my duties."

Dafydd tightened his hand upon hers, and glanced behind him to see who loitered in the hall. "Do you think," he said as he turned back to look at her again, "you might be with child?"

She gasped, and tried to pull her hand back but found he held it tightly. "Sir Dafydd, you can know naught of such things! 'Tis most likely I have eaten something that does not sit right."

"You said it has been for a week or more, and methinks it has been more and mayhaps you are hiding the truth. You and I have eaten the same things each day and yet I am not sick," he said with a small smile. "And I do know of such things as I had one brother and two sisters younger than me. I saw how it was with my own mother."

The color drained even further from Marged's cheeks. Dafydd rose to walk quickly across the hall to the side table where wine was kept. He poured a goblet of watered wine and returned to her side.

"Drink this," he urged. "'Twill help your stomach to settle."

She took a small sip, and the color returned to her cheeks. "My thanks, Sir Dafydd."

Dafydd shifted beside her on the bench, and urged her back to lean against him. When he felt her relax, he spoke softly. "Would you have me call for Alyce, that she might confirm my suspicion?"

"Nay," she said softly, and after a short pause she said, "My link with the moon has not been broken in more than a month, and 'tis not usual." She drew a shaky breath. "Your suspicion is likely correct. I made myself not believe it because...." Her voice trailed off.

He allowed her space to collect her thoughts, supported her gently against him. At last he said, "The king must know."

"Aye," she whispered.

"He will support you, as will I," he said.

"Sir Dafydd," she said and she pulled back to meet his gaze, "you must hate me."

He gasped in surprise. "Nay, Marged. A thousand times nay." He brushed his knuckle against her cheek. "I shall never hate you. You give the king the gift of life, and for that you shall have my eternal gratitude, and eternal love."

Tears filled her eyes. "Art lucky, Dafydd."

"What King Christopher feels for you is tenfold what I feel," Dafydd said. "You will always have a place in our home."

Across the hall the council chamber door opened, and the members began to exit in preparation for the midday meal. Dafydd dropped his hand from Marged's cheek.

"I will go and bring Christopher here that you might share your news in private," he said.

"I would that you would remain when you bring him back," she said.

Christopher emerged from the chamber just after Father Geoffrey, and he smiled when he found Dafydd waiting. "Ah, Dafydd," he said as the priest hurried away. "You managed to spend the entire morning in the sun instead of cooped up inside the keep. I would punish you for shirking your duties, and yet you have made it impossible for me to do such as I know you but drilled the troops."

Dafydd smiled. "Aye, I had meant to come to you sooner, and yet I was delayed." He took the king's hand and began to lead him across the hall to the enclosure where Marged sat waiting.

"Delayed." Christopher chuckled. "There was much you could find to delay you, I am sure."

"Only one thing," Dafydd said softly. They rounded the edge of the enclosure.

Marged rose to her feet and dipped into a curtsey.

"Ah, Marged," Christopher said. "Art a sight for sore eyes."

"Your majesty, I have something to tell you." She raised her head and looked into his eyes. "Tis my belief that I am with child."

It was as if the sun broke from the cloud cover and bathed Christopher's face as he smiled and pulled her up toward him. Dafydd stepped back and watched as Christopher caressed the side of her face just as he had himself.

"Ah, bechan," he murmured. He dipped his head down to catch her lips in a gentle kiss. "Your news has made me very happy."

She buried her cheek against the soft velvet of his surcoat. "I believe the child will be born near Beltane."

Christopher enfolded her with both his arms, and met Dafydd's gaze over the top of her head. "Tis fitting," he said, "that the child be brought into the world during Beltane tide." He raised one hand toward Dafydd, and when Dafydd moved closer he kissed him above the top of her head.

All three stepped back, and Christopher kept hold of both of their hands. "We shall tell the kingdom on Samhain, give them hope that life grows during the darkness of winter."

THAT night Christopher arranged a special meal in his chambers, for just the three of them. By virtue of their service, Alain and John had been given the news of Marged's condition but admonished to keep it secret until it was announced at Samhain. Although she had not been told directly, Anne had already suspected the truth. The

three loyal servants were given their own special meal in the antechamber while the king, his consort, and his lady feasted before the fire.

Agnes sent up rare roasted beef seasoned with salt, a salad of young lettuce dressed simply with the juice of a lemon, potatoes roasted in their skins, a bowl of new peas, a round loaf of bread complete with a comb of honey, and a crock of fresh-churned butter. For dessert was a tart made with apples and raisins. Christopher and Dafydd drank rich ruby wine from France, and Marged enjoyed a lighter wine that was well watered.

"And I shall inquire within the village for girls willing to come and help with the spinning and stitching and the like," Christopher said as he picked up his goblet.

"Nay, your majesty," Marged said with a gasp. "I will complete all my duties as before."

There was a silence as Christopher eyed her over the top of his goblet. "Marged," he said at last as he set the goblet down beside his plate, "art not a servant in this household." His voice was stern. "Your duties but help you to pass the time; it has always been my intention that you be freed from them."

"Your majesty," she said softly, "I am not your lady wife, and as such I do not have the right to act as chatelaine of Lysnowydh. The duties I have taken upon myself keep me active, give me reason for being here."

"Your reason for being here is that you bear my child," Christopher said.

Dafydd laid his fork upon the table. He saw the distress in Marged's eyes, and heard the anger in Christopher's voice. "My king," he said softly. "The activities Marged engages in will not harm the child. In truth, if she sits all day with naught to occupy her 'twill do her more harm than good. It is true that she is here to bear your child, yet you give it a tawdry sound by saying it thus."

"She is not my whore," Christopher said.

"I have not said she is," Dafydd replied, calm in the face of the king's wrath. "Mayhaps I take the place that is rightfully hers." He held up his hand to stave off Christopher's retort. "The truth of the matter is that even before I became your handfasted mate you allowed me the right to drill your squires, gave me the title of marshal. If you had followed the urgings of your council instead of your heart you would have a lady wife to bear your heir, and I would be yet a humble woodsman snug in my cottage with the honor of having you seek me out when you might. Even so I would have had my work to keep me occupied."

During the silence that followed, Marged clasped her hands in her lap. Dafydd watched Christopher stare into the fire until the lines of anger eased from his face.

"Again you have made me see the error of my ways while allowing me to keep my dignity, Dafydd," Christopher said softly at last. He favored Dafydd with a warm smile, and then he turned to face Marged. "Did you know that Dafydd was your ally?" Marged smiled through the sudden tears that had collected. "Aye, your majesty."

Christopher reached over to lay his hand atop hers on the table. "In this chamber there is no need for that formality, as I have told you. I will inquire in the village for a girl to help you with the weaving and stitching; she will be your charge to direct. I shall watch you, and when you tire I shall order you to rest. I will brook no arguments from either you or your protector." He smiled good-naturedly at both of them in turn. "And now we must needs eat this tart or Agnes will think she has failed us."

Dafydd stood to clear the dinner plates from the small table, and Marged rose to help with serving the tart. As they worked together at the side table, their eyes met. Gratitude was reflected in her eyes; support was echoed in his. Behind them Christopher watched, pleased with the easing of animosity.

AS Samhain approached, the flurry of activity within Lysnowydh reached a fevered pitch. All the villagers helped with the harvest. Wheat was ground into flour, hay was stored in thatched ricks and secured, barley and oats were divided and stored in bins, apples were taken to the cellars. The cattle had been divided, with half being settled into their winter quarters and the other half slaughtered.

In the kitchen Agnes kept the kitchen servants busy from before dawn until late into the night. Not only did they prepare the Samhain feast, but they also prepared and salted meat, made hearty loaves of bread, and turned apples into cider.

Wood was delivered, and Sir Walter deferred to Dafydd as to the quality and the payment. Dafydd promised he would take some men out into the woods to augment the meager supply delivered by the new woodsman.

Eventually the night arrived. Unlike Beltane when the rituals took place with the dawn, at Samhain they took place at dusk. The large bonfire was laid and all cheered when it was lit. The next morning the ashes would be collected and spread upon the fields to keep them warm and safe during the winter months.

Once the bonfire had been lit, and the youths that would keep it going were set in place, the people retreated within the walls of the keep for their feast. King Christopher and his nobility would eat within the hall; the peasants ate upon boards set within the bailey. All agreed that Agnes had prepared a wonderful meal and they ate to overflowing.

Once the meal was finished, nobility and peasants alike returned to the bonfire. Father Geoffrey gave a blessing, and then it was the king's turn to speak. He stood upon the platform that had been built for the occasion; the warm flames of the fire bathed his face. Behind him Marged and Dafydd stood together, flanked by the members of the king's council.

"It has been a momentous time for Lysnowydh this past year," Christopher said as all the murmuring of the crowd died away. "At Beltane we embraced Sir Dafydd formally into our midst, and near Lammas Lady Marged joined us. Our herds of cattle were increased in the spring, and fared well over the summer. The harvest was bountiful this year, and we are set to embark into the dark half of the year well provisioned."

The fire crackled as another log was added, and the people murmured the truth of what their king said.

"Traditionally it is believed that Samhain signals the exit of light and life from the world, and that during the winter the life but stirs below the ground. New life exists only in whisperings." Christopher paused, and held his hand out toward Marged. She released Dafydd's hand and stepped forward. "For Lysnowydh this year, life will grow apace, before our eyes." He raised Marged's hand and smiled upon her before turning toward the people once more. "Lady Marged is with child."

A cheer arose from the assembled masses, and in the glow of the fire Marged blushed and dipped her head. Christopher laid his arm around her gently and pulled her close as he bestowed a kiss on the top of her head.

Dafydd watched from the rear of the platform, content at the genuine affection that was shown to Marged by all.

UNDER the cover of furs, Christopher drew Dafydd close against him. Once the bonfire had burned down to embers, they had returned to the keep and sent Marged off to bed. Now they sought comfort from each other.

"My heart is full, cariad," Christopher murmured against Dafydd's chest. "I am warm beside you, and the future is golden."

"Aye, 'tis golden," Dafydd said. He slid his hand up Christopher's back and tangled it through his hair. "Golden as the lion's mane, fy llew."

"Art a poet," Christopher said. "A poet and a diplomat." He shifted closer.

"Nay, my king," Dafydd said. "I but speak my heart, and wish for your happiness."

Christopher rolled their bodies so that he was propped up over Dafydd. "Just my happiness?" he asked as he pressed his hips against Dafydd's.

"Our happiness."

"'Twas my wish," Christopher said, "that one day you and Marged would grow past discomfort with one another. I see in her eyes now that the day has come. It pleases me that you see fit to defend her."

"I do not defend her to please you," Dafydd said as he opened his mouth to nip

at the king's lips. "Mayhaps within her I sense a kindred spirit, mayhaps I simply seek to see the smile on her face."

"Whatever the case," Christopher said, "it does my heart good."

"Then I am happy," Dafydd said. He shifted his legs wider to allow the king to settle between them. "This night I would have you take my happiness to new heights."

"Your desire," Christopher whispered, "is my pleasure."

And as the night slipped into the dawn of the winter season, they joined their bodies.



SEVERAL weeks after Samhain, Christopher received a summons to London from King Henry. Although he wished to stay snug within his own castle during the winter months, he knew that a summons could not be ignored. Dafydd was left in charge of the council, and Christopher promised to make the trip as short as he could.

"Would I could take you with me," he murmured to Dafydd as they stood in the chilly morning air on the day he was set to depart.

"I will be in your heart," Dafydd said as he bent to brush his lips over Christopher's. "As you will be in mine."

"Watch over Marged," Christopher said. "Make sure she does not tire herself."

"Aye," Dafydd said.

Christopher reached up and pulled Dafydd down for a deeper kiss, and then he stepped back and swung up into his saddle. "I shall return ere Midwinter's Night."

Once the horses had clattered out of the courtyard, Dafydd pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders and climbed the battlements to watch the riding party until he could no longer see them.

THE days grew shorter, and snow drifted through the air but did not stick on the ground. One gray afternoon Dafydd emerged from the council chamber to find Marged sitting alone beside the great hearth as she worked on her stitching. He crossed the hall toward where she sat.

"Might I join you?" he asked.

She looked up from her work; her eyes were clouded as if she were in deep thought, yet they cleared when she focused upon him. "Aye, Sir Dafydd."

Few were about in the great hall; many preferred the smaller hall near the kitchen on cold days such as this. Dafydd moved a chair closer beside her, and leaned in toward her. "As with our king, I do not require you to exercise such formality when 'tis but you and I." He smiled. "I am but a humble woodsman who finds himself elevated, and the title still sits ill upon my shoulders betimes."

Marged smiled, her hands idle in her lap. "Tis much the same with me."

"Ah, but you were born of gentle stock," Dafydd said. "Surely you bore the title Lady before you came to Lysnowydh."

She cocked her head to the side. "Mayhaps," she said softly. "Though when my father died and left my mother and me adrift we watched the titles drift away with our fortune." She turned to look at him. "Would you answer a question, Sir... Dafydd?"

"Aye, you have but to ask," he said.

"Were you always but a woodsman? You seem... you have...." Her voice trailed off as if at a loss.

"I would press you to finish your thoughts," he said. "What do I have?"

"You seem born to the nobility, to the role of king's marshal. 'Tis not much of a stretch for you to lead the king's troops, and a humble woodsman would be hard-pressed to claim as much after only a year." She blushed. "Forgive me being forward."

"There is naught to forgive," he said. "My people are from Tenby. My father held a small parcel of land from Pembroke, yet it was hardly rich enough to support he and my three elder brothers. When I came of age, it was clear to me that there was little to hold me there."

"Surely your family did not wish to see you leave them," Marged said.

Dafydd shrugged. "Twas difficult times; wars were waged with little cause. Though I trained alongside my brothers, I was hindrance more than help when already three able men led our troops into battle. Once my younger brother Dewi died there was little to hold me there. My mother wished me to stay, but I did not wish to be tied to her apron, and so I set off on my own. I crossed the channel to Bristol, and made my way south into these lands."

"How came you to become Lysnowydh's woodsman?" she asked.

"I stopped in the village below on my journey. There was fierce resentment of the Welsh, but I learned that the castle was in sore need of a woodsman. I proved my worth by delivering quantities of wood they were not able to gather on their own." He paused, and then said, "Once I caught a glimpse of King Christopher, I knew I would not move on soon."

Marged worried the edge of her stitching between her fingers. "Dafydd," she said as the silence grew, and then continued in a halting voice, "did you always...

prefer only men?"

"I preferred beauty," he said. "Not empty beauty, but steel wrapped in velvet. I never thought to approach the king; I thought myself below him. He fell into my arms in the midst of a snowstorm and e'en when distance separates us we have not been apart since that night."

"Tis magic," she said softly, her eyes glowing.

"Not magic," he said. "'Tis love."

Her face took on a wistful look. Behind them the hall began to fill with activity as the trestles were laid for the evening meal. Marged picked up her stitching again and began to work. Dafydd turned to watch the activity behind them as Patrick entered the hall to lend a hand to the servants. As Dafydd watched, Patrick cast covert glances their way.

"Marged," Dafydd said at last. He watched as she looked up, and saw the rosy glow that covered her cheeks as she gazed past him to the hall behind.

"Aye?" she said. Her eyes followed Patrick as he moved about setting salt cellars, and delivering baskets of bread.

"When the child is born, is it your wish to stay here in Lysnowydh? Or will you seek to return to Lady Mary.?"

Startled, she pulled her eyes from gazing at Patrick to look at Dafydd. "I would do what King Christopher wishes."

"That is not what I asked you," he said softly. "I asked your wish. Would you wish to stay here?"

"In my heart, aye, I would wish to stay," she said. "Yet I place my future in the king's hands, and will abide with his decisions."

"'Tis well," he said. "I would also wish you to stay."

She smiled tentatively at him, and soon they rose and sought their seats for the evening meal.

AFTER bidding Marged a good sleep, Dafydd retired to his own chamber. The fire was high in the hearth against the bitter cold outside. He dropped a pinch of herbs into a goblet of wine and then set it before the flames to warm. He mulled over the conversation with Marged as he waited for the wine to warm.

He knew 'twas more than beauty that made him admire Christopher. Although he knew that Marged understood such things as intuition and dream becoming reality, he had kept the thoughts to himself as he always did.

The image of Christopher had come to him in dreams for years before he

settled in Lysnowydh. It was always the same: an ethereal golden beauty that bestowed warmth, but was tough beneath the golden exterior. The dream sprite would only bend when coaxed, and could only be coaxed by Dafydd.

The first time Dafydd had delivered wood to the keep at Lysnowydh, he had not been surprised to find the embodiment of his dream. He had always believed in his heart that one day he would encounter the sprite that kept him company as he slept. He believed that the sprite had directed his steps once he left Wales.

He would not share these thoughts with anyone, not even Christopher himself. It was one of the chief reasons why the Welsh were mistrusted, their belief in such things. He bent forward and picked up the goblet of wine, and swirled it that the herbs would release their powers.

Once the wine was gone, he rose, disrobed, and climbed into bed. As he slept the dream sprite came to him, and as such he slept warm with Christopher through the night, and knew that all the way in London Christopher also felt the added warmth.



CHRISTOPHER returned from London just ahead of the first true storm of the winter. The courtyard bustled with activity as he slid from the back of his horse. Sir Walter met him as stable hands came forward to take his horse.

"Welcome home, your majesty. 'Tis good you arrived ere the storm unleashes its fury."

"Aye," Christopher said as he cast an eye toward the heavens. "Tis fiercely cold on the open road; I am that glad to be home." He scanned the jostling crowd.

"Sir Dafydd took a group of the men out scavenging for wood this morn. Many of them were glad of the chance to ride, already the inactivity of winter sits heavy upon them," Sir Walter said before the king could ask.

Christopher smiled ruefully. "'Tis early times for the men to be tired of inactivity." He untied the bundle from his saddle before the horse was led off. "I shall bathe, and then sit before the fire in the main hall. Mayhaps Marged will join me."

"I shall bring her hither from her sewing chamber whilst you bathe, your majesty," Sir Walter said.

Although weary, and chilled to the bone, Christopher climbed the stairs to his bathing chamber. He knew Alain was equally weary and cold, yet he was glad to find the fire blazing in the hearth, and the tub steaming in welcome.

"Go, send John to tend to my bath," Christopher said. He patted Alain on the shoulder. "Find your wife and a tankard of ale; you have earned your rest."

Once he was bathed and dressed in fur-lined garments, Christopher made his way down to the hall to find Marged awaited him before the hearth. With a smile he came forward and took her hand, placed a small kiss upon the back of it.

"Art well?" he asked as he raised her from her curtsey.

"Aye," she said with a rosy smile. "My belly has settled, and I believe I have

felt the first fluttering of the child within me."

Christopher laid his hand upon her stomach. "I am glad to hear you both fare well." He stepped back. "I have brought you a treat from London. Fine cotton cloth and colored silken threads for your stitching." He reached into the purse at his belt and withdrew a small package. "King Henry sends this."

Curious, Marged unwrapped the package and found a small brown root.

"Ginger," Christopher said as he took his seat. "Tis good for complaints of the belly. Mayhaps Dafydd can brew it into a tea for you."

"Art kind, your majesty," she said softly as she resumed her seat. "As is King Henry to think of me thus."

"King Henry was pleased to hear of the child," Christopher said. "He bade me keep him informed on your progress."

Just then the men began to stream in from outside. Christopher rose when Dafydd appeared in the doorway. All else was forgotten as they walked toward each other. Christopher pulled Dafydd into his arms and held him close.

"Cariad," he murmured, "I have missed you."

Dafydd pulled back to kiss the king lightly on the lips while still holding him tightly. "But you dreamed of me."

"Aye," Christopher said with a lazy smile. "Each night you appeared in my dreams. Were it possible, I would take you up to bed right now, and yet it has been a week and more since I have eaten a decent meal. I would sup first."

"Ah, you wound me," Dafydd whispered. "Your hunger for food surpasses your hunger for me."

"Never," Christopher said. "Tis but I would have strength to give you a proper greeting."

"Then I shall instruct Agnes to feed you well," Dafydd said, "that you might greet me with all your strength."

"Art wicked," Christopher said. Reluctantly he released his hold and stepped back. Again he dug in the purse at his belt and withdrew a package. "I know not what the use is for this, yet something told me that you would."

Dafydd unwrapped the package to find a long bean pod, black in color. He raised it to his nose, and smiled. "Vanilla," he said. "There is much it can be used for. My thanks."

Christopher smiled. "King Henry sent many herbs: lavender, rosemary, sweet thyme. I would give you first choice to take what you will before I turn them over to Agnes."

"'Tis difficult to grow such herbs here," Dafydd said. "I will be glad of the stock."

Marged joined them, and together they walked to the dais and took their seats for dinner. As the meal was served, the storm hit with full force. Many gave thanks that they had shelter within the keep for the night.

During the meal and after as they sat before the hearth, Christopher told tales of his stay in London to Dafydd, Marged, and the landed gentry who called Lysnowydh home. At last he rose and led Dafydd to bed. Neither was sure which was the stronger—the force of the storm, or the force of the love they shared while wrapped beneath the furs. Either way, they stayed abed late the following morning, contented and well loved.

LIFE continued in the keep into the bitterest part of winter. Sir Cuthbert and Dafydd were kept busy intervening in minor squabbles amongst the men as all went stir crazy with the lack of activity. When the weather permitted Dafydd took parties out on patrol, but the rides were too few and far between for some. Many managed to grin and bear it, and find their own ways to bide the time.

One night as the evening meal finished, Christopher leaned over to request that Marged join him that night in his chamber. With a blush and a small gasp she agreed, and left the table to make her way up the stairs. After she left he turned to reach for Dafydd's hand below the table.

"I would but ensure she fares well," he said softly.

"You need not explain yourself to me, my king," Dafydd replied. He squeezed Christopher's hand. "I would spend time in my still room this night."

The king raised Dafydd's hand and pressed a small kiss on the back of it. "Mayhaps tomorrow the weather will permit us to ride." He raised his head and met Dafydd's eyes. "Just you and I."

"I would look forward to that," Dafydd said softly.

Christopher had given instructions to Anne earlier in the day, and when he arrived upstairs he found Marged dressed in a fur-lined bedrobe and sitting before the fire. With Alain's help he stripped from his clothes and donned his own bedrobe, then took a seat beside Marged before the fire. They sat in silence while Alain poured them each a goblet of mulled wine.

"Would you desire anything further?" he asked as he set the pitcher of wine aside.

"Nay," Christopher said. "Send Anne in the morning, and see the boys come to add wood to the fire during the night."

"Aye, your majesty," Alain said. He bowed and left them alone.

Christopher leaned back in his chair and stretched his feet toward the fire. "Art

warm enough?" he asked.

"Aye," Marged replied. She took a sip of her wine and continued softly. "In truth I thought you would not invite me to your chamber again."

He turned to look at her. "Why did you think that, bechan?" he asked gently.

"I can no longer join you in your bed," she said. She bowed her head to hide her flaming cheeks from him.

"Marged," Christopher said, "you have more worth to me than a bed partner. Mayhaps I have not been the most diplomatic, as Dafydd has suggested, when I talk of such things, but I have a care for you, and I enjoy spending time with you alone."

Slowly, she raised her head and gazed upon him. "In truth?"

A frown creased his brow. "It is not my habit to lie, especially not to those I love," he said. An edge of steel had entered his voice.

"I did not mean to anger you, your majesty," she said. She swallowed hard, and her eyes welled with tears.

The frown deepened. "Then mayhaps you must tell me why you question me."

Marged balled her hand into a fist, her cheeks trembling with the effort of holding back tears. "I fear you will cast me off, Christopher, and I could not bear it."

Christopher set his goblet aside and stood to pull her into his arms. He gathered her close and settled her in his lap as he took his seat again. "I will not cast you off, bechan," he crooned gently as he rocked her against him. "What gives you that notion?"

"You love Dafydd; I am only here to bear your child, as you have said. Once I have served that purpose I have no further use." She buried her face against the soft of his bedrobe. Once the floodgates of her emotion had been opened, it was hard to stop. "When I leave here, I know not what will become of me."

"Sweet Marged," he said softly, and he stroked her back as he held her close. "You will always be welcome in Lysnowydh. It would be heartless and cruel for me to separate you from your child once 'tis born." He pressed his lips against the top of her head. "Dafydd is my mate, and he always will be. Because I love him does not mean there is no room in my heart for others."

Her tears soaked into the front of his robe. "You showed me that bedsport does not have to bring pain. I thought to never...." Her voice trailed off as her tears continued.

"Ah," Christopher said. He reached down to cup her cheek, urge her up so that their eyes met. "Your initiation was unfortunate. The boy who had your maidenhead has no room to call himself aught but a scoundrel." He rubbed his thumb over the trails of tears, brushed them aside. "You will always have a place in my kingdom, should you desire it."

"Should I desire it?" she asked.

"Aye," he said. "'Twill be your choice."

"Your majesty," she said as she released the breath she was holding. "Art beyond kind."

He smiled and bent forward to kiss her cheek where the tears still tracked silently. "You said I love Dafydd, and 'tis true, but know that I also love you."

With a watery smile she eased up to kiss him softly, then tucked her head down against his chest. They sat together and gazed upon the fire while each thought their own thoughts until at last Christopher led her to bed. He tucked her against him beneath the furs.

"Pleasant sleep, bechan," he murmured.

"And you too," she said sleepily.

THE next day was too cold for the ride Christopher had promised Dafydd, as were the days that followed. It was several weeks before the weather was clear enough for the two of them to ride forth from the castle. Even with the break in the weather, they were not able to ride long before the cold forced them to return to the keep.

"Tis cold," Christopher said as they dismounted in the courtyard.

"Aye," Dafydd said. He moved closer, his gloved hand on Christopher's arm. "When I lived in the cottage and it grew this cold, many times I huddled in bed just to keep warm."

Christopher turned to look up into Dafydd's eyes. "Art naughty to put that thought into my head, cariad."

Dafydd arched a brow. "Am I? Do I not but state what is already in your head?" He bent his head to whisper into Christopher's ear, "I saw your eyes stray toward the path that leads to the hunting lodge."

With a stifled roar Christopher stepped back. "Inside, now."

"As you wish," Dafydd said. He sauntered away across the courtyard, and up the outer stairs. Without stopping in the hall, he headed up the stairs to his own chamber, knowing the king would follow.

When Christopher appeared inside the hall, Sir Walter hurried forward. "Your majesty," he said, "there are reports from—"

Christopher raised a hand. "They will save," he said tightly. He turned his head to bellow, "Alain! To me!"

Sir Walter stood back, startled, and watched as Christopher engaged in terse

conversation with his servant. Once Christopher had turned on his heel and headed for the stairway he hastened forward to intercept Alain. "Is all well?"

"Aye," Alain said with a grin. "The king but seeks the comfort of his bed. The reports must save for the morning."

Understanding dawned across Sir Walter's countenance and he also grinned. "I suppose the reports will save."

Upstairs Christopher burst into Dafydd's chamber, and found him standing before the hearth. He advanced across the room and caught Dafydd's arm, pressed him back against the stone hearth. He closed his mouth over Dafydd's in a hard kiss and reached down to loosen his belt.

"You have lit the fire, Dafydd," Christopher groaned against Dafydd's mouth. "Now you must needs either fuel the flames or douse them where you stand." Nimble fingers loosened the ties of his chausses, and he slipped his hand inside to cup Dafydd's length.

Dafydd groaned softly and reached up to tangle his hand through Christopher's hair. As he pressed against him, his chausses slipped down to his knees. Impatient, he pulled away from Christopher and stepped back to struggle out of the rest of his clothing. Goose bumps raised on his flesh in the chill of the room. "Tis you must fuel the flames, my king."

With a stifled roar Christopher advanced and pushed Dafydd back toward the bed. Keeping him pinned against the frame, he struggled out of his own clothing. "Get up," he said. "On your knees."

Dafydd turned, and climbed up into the bed. He hunkered down against the furs with his knees spread wide. Christopher crawled toward him and caressed the moons of his ass before raising his hand and bringing it down in a stinging smack. Dafydd arched up and cried out in pleasure.

"You have neatly caught me, Dafydd," Christopher growled as he smacked again. "Mayhaps I should cease, I but give you what you want. I should not reward you for teasing me thus."

"Nay," Dafydd moaned. "Do not."

"Do not what?" Christopher asked. "Do not strike you or do not stop?"

Dafydd tightened his hands in the furs and said, "Do not stop."

Christopher pulled back and struck again, the imprint of his hand vivid red upon Dafydd's ass. He leaned over his back as he reached to dip his fingers into the cream pot. He bent down and nuzzled against his shoulder, slid up to find his ear and bit down. "I did not hear you say please."

With a groan, Dafydd turned his head on the furs. "Please, your majesty, you know 'tis what you want as well."

Christopher straightened up and smacked down hard again, rewarded when

Dafydd groaned loudly. "Art doubly wicked, Dafydd," he growled. "You couch your words in such a way that I must needs give you what we both want." He slid his creamed fingers down between the halves of Dafydd's ass and thrust them deep within. He continued to strike Dafydd while rotating his fingers inside him until he felt the muscles loosen.

Dafydd pushed back against the king's fingers; his goose bumps were replaced with a sheen of sweat. He uncurled one hand and groped behind him to grip Christopher's leg. "Take me now, my king, ere my desire overcomes me." He moaned again, turned his head, and strained back that he might catch a glimpse behind him. "Please, take me."

"Ah, Dafydd," Christopher said, and he drew out the end of his name in a low moan. "How I love you." He eased his fingers free, and sunk inside, delivering one last smack before gripping both of Dafydd's hips tightly.

For one long moment their bodies melded together, and then Christopher began to move. Dafydd loosed his grip on his knee and raised his hand to stroke himself as Christopher slammed inside him.

"Tis good," Christopher moaned. "I would feel you explode before me."

It took no further urging; Dafydd tightened around the king's length and then drew in his breath before releasing with a low wail. He shuddered with the intensity, and Christopher increased the rhythm of his thrusts. Dafydd felt the king burst inside him before he heard his roar of release. He released his hold upon his own cock and gripped the furs tightly against the onslaught. As they subsided down against the furs, the chill of the room touched their overheated flesh. Twisting together, they snuggled under the covers, skin pressed against skin.

Christopher settled so that his ear pressed against Dafydd's chest and he listened to his rapidly beating heart. "I love you, cariad," he said simply.

"And I love you, my king," Dafydd murmured. "Much more than words can convey."

"Dafydd," Christopher said after his breathing slowed to normal, "I would that Marged stay here in Lysnowydh once the child is born."

"Aye," Dafydd said softly. "As would I. And I believe it is her wish as well."

"Tis my intention that she marry," Christopher said. "Suiting of her station. Mayhaps a vassal from an outlying region."

"What of Patrick?" Dafydd said. "He is yet a squire, but I believe the admiration is strong betwixt them. He grows apace, and 'tis my belief that ere long he will earn his spurs."

"Patrick?" Christopher said. He traced his hand in lazy circles upon Dafydd's belly. "E'en when he earns his spurs he will forever be a landless knight. I seek to honor Marged."

"Would you honor her with love?" Dafydd said. "Allow her the same passion that you have found?"

Christopher rose up on an elbow and looked down at Dafydd through the day's fading light. "How know you of this admiration betwixt them?"

"You have only to watch them to see it. It shines from their eyes, yet only when each believes the other is not looking," Dafydd murmured. His eyes twinkled.

"I shall have to watch them," Christopher said. He dipped his head to find Dafydd's lips.

Dafydd returned the kiss full measure, and nestled against Christopher when the kiss was broken.

"Alain has brought food to yon chamber," Christopher murmured. "In a moment I shall go and bring it. 'Twill not be necessary to take ourselves below stairs this night."

"I shall serve the food, my king," Dafydd said.

"Nay," Christopher said. He pulled Dafydd tight against him. "There are few enough ways I can repay the searing passion we share; give me this much."

"There is no need to repay," Dafydd murmured. "And yet it fills me with that which I cannot name when you honor me thus. Be it you stripping your own clothing from your body with rampant impatience, or something as simple as you serving our meal."

"An equal to you teasing me to unleash that part of me that I hold tightly in control." Christopher turned his head to press his lips against Dafydd's chest. "Ours is surely a love for all time."

"A love that was foreshadowed."



OVER the course of the next month, both Dafydd and Christopher spent time observing Patrick and how he responded to Marged. Christopher acknowledged that Dafydd was correct: there did seem to be genuine feeling betwixt them, although both were careful to keep their feelings hidden.

One afternoon Christopher entered the keep to find Marged carrying a basket of wool across the open hall. It was his first instinct to hurry forward and take the basket from her while gently chastising her for carrying it in the first place. He paused in the shadow of the door instead when he saw Patrick race to her side and take it from her. Standing in the shadow of the window enclosure, he watched as she smiled up at him. As they passed close he overheard part of their conversation and heard Patrick say all the things to her that he would have said himself.

Christopher waited in the window enclosure until he saw Patrick emerge from the sewing chamber, and then he stepped forward. He braced his hands on his hips and said, "Patrick."

Startled, Patrick whirled around. When he saw it was the king who hailed him, he dipped into a bow. "Aye, your majesty."

"I would have words with you," Christopher said. He turned and strode away, out the front door of the castle into the courtyard.

Patrick hastened after him and pulled his cloak tightly about him with a mixture of cold and apprehension. Outside he found the king had stopped in the middle of the courtyard.

"What is your purpose in talking with Marged?" Christopher asked, his face an unreadable mask.

"Your majesty," Patrick gasped, "I but carried her basket. 'Twas heavy."

"Nay," Christopher said. "I have seen you, making moon eyes at her when you think she is not looking, and know not that I watch you. Methinks 'tis more than that,

and I would know your purpose."

Patrick's face flamed bright red and thus gave truth to the king's accusation. "I... enjoy her company, in truth, your majesty."

"Then you admit that there is more to your intent than lightening the load of a woman with child. You favor her company; you seek above your station." Christopher advanced, blocked Patrick against the stable wall.

"Your majesty," Patrick said, his face drained of color. "I seek not above my station. I am but only a squire in your household. 'Tis true I enjoy seeing Lady Marged smile, yet I know I have no claim, nor will I ever have claim beyond serving to carry her basket."

"If I commanded you to leave her be, would you?" Christopher said.

"Leave her to carry her own loads?" Patrick said. "Nay, your majesty, I would not."

The scowl deepened on Christopher's brow. "Art bold," he said.

"Your majesty," Patrick said as he straightened his back against the wall behind him, "you have trained me well. I mean no disrespect to either you or Lady Marged."

"See you remember that," Christopher said. He released his hold and stalked back toward the castle.

Patrick stood and watched the king walk away, puzzled by the encounter, and then he straightened and turned to walk into the stable. Just inside the door he stopped short. Dafydd sat upon a bench; he threw a knotted rag into the shadows for Dewi to chase. After a moment Patrick walked forward to sit on the bench beside Dafydd.

Dewi pranced up with tail wagging. He deposited the soggy rag in Patrick's lap, and then stood back panting.

"He wishes you to throw it for him," Dafydd said.

With a sigh Patrick picked up the rag and tossed it toward the open doorway. It ricocheted off a post and landed in the shadows beside a stall. Dewi whined and dodged toward the stall and away, frightened of the shuffling sound of the horse on the other side of the wall.

"Heavy thoughts weigh you down," Dafydd said softly.

"I have but angered the king," Patrick said, "and 'tis the last thing I would wish to do."

Dafydd leaned back, his legs stretched out before him. "I do not believe he was angry."

Patrick swung his head to the side and gazed at Dafydd. "You saw him from here; he was mightily angered."

"I heard him," Dafydd said with a shrug. "He did not sound angered to me."

Dewi yipped and rushed toward the stall again, only to run back with his tail between his legs. Patrick rose from the bench and went over to retrieve the rag. He tossed it high in the air and Dewi jumped up to grab it.

"He accused me of making moon eyes at Lady Marged," Patrick said.

"Ah, but that is not an accusation; 'tis truth," Dafydd said. He yanked the rag from Dewi's mouth and tossed it again, this time toward the open area in the center of the stable.

"Sir Dafydd," Patrick said, "I fully acknowledge, along with all others in the keep, that Lady Marged is property of the king. I would never approach her in any way other than what would be appropriate between a squire and the king's lady."

"Aye," Dafydd said. "I know, as does the king. As such, he was not angered with you; he but tested you."

Dewi dropped the rag and ran off into the yard, barked a welcome to a patrol returned.

"Tested me?" Patrick said.

Dafydd pushed himself up from the bench, looked down, and said, "Aye. Were you weak you would have denied that you enjoyed Lady Marged's company. Only a strong man would admit what you did." He turned then and followed Dewi out into the courtyard, leaving Patrick to ponder his words.

"I WOULD that you join me this evening," Christopher said to Marged as they finished the evening meal several days later.

Marged dipped her head in acquiescence, and when her plate was cleared away she rose from the table. As the child grew within her she seemed to glow with inner radiance. Many watched her as she made her way across the room.

"She is beautiful," Dafydd murmured.

"Aye," Christopher said. "She is beautiful as the child grows within her."

They rose together to walk toward the stairs that led to their chamber. Dafydd headed to his still room, and Christopher continued on into his own chamber where he found Marged waiting before the fire, wrapped in a furred bedrobe. As before, Christopher undressed with Alain's help, and then took his seat beside her.

"How do you fare?" he asked.

"I am well," she said softly. "The child moves within me."

"I would see it," Christopher said.

Marged stood and walked closer to stand before him. Shyly she opened her robe and turned so that the firelight bathed her belly. She reached for his hand and laid it along the side of the bulging curve.

"Oh," Christopher said as he felt the tiny kick beneath his palm. "Tis strong."

"Aye," she said, a dreamy expression upon her face. "I think mayhaps 'tis a boy."

Christopher scooted forward out of his chair and knelt upon the furs before her. Slowly he caressed the side of her belly, felt the kicking foot move as his hand moved. With his other hand he braced the small of her back, and then bent closer to lay his lips upon her.

She reached down, laced her fingers together behind his head, and held him close. "I believe he knows you are close."

He kissed her again, and turned so that his cheek pressed against her, his arms wrapped around her. "My child," he said softly, "art lucky to have a beautiful mother who loves you as she does."

"And two fathers to protect you as you grow," she said, a catch in her voice.

"Aye," he said softly. "Two fathers to guide you." Slowly he stood, and pulled her against him tightly, skin pressed against skin. "Tis impossible to express the esteem with which I hold this bond betwixt us, Marged. The magnitude of what you offer humbles me. Art as strong as the fiercest warrior."

"Christopher," she whispered against his chest, "your kindness to me is an honor I shall not soon forget. I am blessed with your love."

He bent to catch her lips, and ease her up that he might kiss her deeply. Between them the child stirred, and she swayed against him. They turned and he guided her to the bed, settled her amongst the furs. He slipped out of his robe and eased down beside her.

"Tis a wonder the skin stretches," he murmured as he continued to caress over her belly.

"Aye," she said. "Just when I think it can stretch no further, it does."

"Mayhaps Dafydd will make you a balm," he murmured.

"He is kind," she said. She turned her head restlessly on the pillow, and moaned low in her throat as his hand brushed lower. "You make me burn," she whispered.

He rose up, pressed his lips against her breast in soft kisses, teased gently. She moaned again and turned toward him as he dipped his hand lower between her legs. He twisted behind her and held her along the curve of his body. "Shh, bechan," he whispered. "I also burn."

By simply holding her thus, and nuzzling against her neck, he felt her release

against his palm. She moaned softly against the pillow below her. "Tis good, Christopher." And when the tremors had left her body, she rolled toward him and trailed her hand down the front of his body.

"Nay," he whispered. "'Tis enough just to hold you."

Her fingers curled around his length. "Give me this, my lord," she said softly. "Mayhaps this is the last time we shall share this way." She stroked up and was rewarded with a soft moan from him.

Christopher rolled upon his back and gazed up at her, watching the emotions play upon her face. She had changed in the time since she had first come to them a timid girl. Mayhaps it was the child that gave her this confidence. Before long he arched up and released against her with a soft moan.

"You will always remain in my heart, bechan," he whispered.

"And you in mine," she said brokenly as she curled against him.

He reached down and flipped the covers over them. He knew she had the right of it; he would not invite her here for this intimate contact again, but the memory of it would remain imprinted on both of them.

WHILE it was still cold outside, the snow began to give away to rain. In some respects this made it worse for the inhabitants of the keep, particularly the men. The outer bailey became a sodden mass of mud. Where the shadows were long the ground remained frozen.

One soggy afternoon Dafydd and Christopher sat before the fire engaged in a game of chess. Marged kept them company as she sat nearby stitching tiny shirts for the child. Dewi had been allowed inside and he snored peacefully at Dafydd's feet.

"I have you neatly caught," Christopher said as he sprawled back in his chair.

"Aye, mayhaps," Dafydd said absently. He leaned forward on the table and studied the chessboard.

Marged shifted in her chair, bent forward and pressed her hand against the small of her back.

Christopher turned to look at her and sat up. "Do you have pain, Marged?"

She smiled weakly. "Aye, but 'tis the normal pain." She settled back in the chair again. "If I but move, he settles again."

"You seem certain 'tis a boy you carry," Christopher said. "'Tis nearing time we think of a name."

"Tis for you to decide upon the name, your majesty," she said.

"I would leave it to you and Dafydd," Christopher said as he settled back in his chair. "I would the child have a Welsh name."

Dafydd looked up from his study of the chessboard. "I but thought to give the child your father's name," he said.

"Aye," Marged said quickly. "Tis a noble thing to name the child for your sire."

Christopher smiled. "Tis not that I do not wish to honor my father's memory by naming my child for him, and yet I want my son to stand upon his own merits, not lean upon those of someone who came before him. 'Tis still uncertain; it may be a girl you carry."

"If 'tis a girl," Dafydd murmured as he moved a chess piece, "I would call her Carys." He set the piece down and looked up into the king's eyes. "Check."

"Art wily, Dafydd," Christopher said as he gazed upon the board. "Carys. 'Tis a pretty name. What is the meaning?"

"Love," Marged said softly. "If 'tis a boy then mayhaps Carradoc; the meaning is the same."

"Art romantics," Christopher said with an indulgent smile.

Just then Sir Walter's voice cut across the hall, raised in anger. They turned in time to see a small group of men struggling at the door that led in from outside. The group was pushed back, and they saw it was King Warin who sought entrance.

"Nay, you have been banned from Lysnowydh," Sir Walter roared. "Art not welcome in our midst."

"Hold," Christopher shouted as he stood. "Allow him forward that he might state his cause for coming here thus."

The men stood back, but held Warin's men to their position by the door. Dafydd rose to stand beside Marged, his hand upon her shoulder.

King Warin sauntered slowly across the room toward them. "Well, well," he drawled. "Is this the happy family?"

"Come no closer," Christopher said, his hand upon his sword hilt. "My seneschal has the right of it. I made it clear the last time you came upon us that I would not welcome you into my home again. State your reason."

Warin stopped midway across the room and smiled lazily at them. "Come, King Christopher. I but came to bid my good wishes to you and your lady. Ah, but she is not your lady wife; she is but a common concubine who bears your heir."

Dafydd lowered his hand to his sword and stepped forward, shoulder to shoulder with Christopher. He shielded Marged behind him.

"If you came to verify for yourself, then yes," Christopher said. "Lady Marged bears my child, my heir in the eyes of King Henry. Beyond that I will have no further

discussions with you, and I remind you that you are not welcome here."

"I would have a private word with you, Christopher," Warin said. "If you can tear yourself from the strings of your woodsman just long enough."

Dafydd snarled, and Christopher turned to murmur, "He seeks to anger you, Dafydd. I will but send him on his way." He looked over Dafydd's shoulder to where Marged stood white-faced beside her chair. "See to Marged."

In the center of the room, the two kings stood toe to toe.

"Have a care, Christopher," Warin said softly, "for your little family."

"Do you threaten me?" Christopher said.

"Aye," Warin replied.

Christopher straightened up, his face a hard mask of rage. "Twill take more than words to threaten me. Take your empty jealousy back home with you. The next time you venture on to Lysnowydh lands, you will not get this far."

"And now you threaten me," Warin said.

"Nay, I do not threaten you," Christopher said. "Tis a promise that orders will be given to attack if you stray into my lands again."

Warin looked over Christopher's shoulder to where Marged and Dafydd stood before the hearth. "Art a lucky man, Christopher, with both of them gracing your bed." He shifted his gaze back. "With both at the same time 'twould be all a man could ask for."

"Begone," Christopher roared.

With no further words, Warin turned and sauntered away. He did not even spare a backward glance as he walked past the men at the door and disappeared from the hall.

Christopher turned and stalked toward the council chamber.



AFTER the surprise visit from Warin, regular patrols were sent out to secure the borders. Christopher met with the council and expressed his anger that the borders of the kingdom were breached in such an easy fashion. Every excuse was shot down with the final outcome that it was his kingdom, and as such he expected vigilance to be used in protecting him and all he held dear.

Dafydd met with Sir Cuthbert and although they pressed every captain they could not determine where the lapse in protection had generated. Dafydd addressed the men in the outer bailey, and let them know in no uncertain terms that it would not be tolerated again. Extra drills were dealt out to all, and though they grumbled the men understood the severity of the situation.

The weather warmed steadily. Many felt the end of their long winter inactivity coming to a close, and most were able to get out-of-doors to raise their faces to the sun. Christopher had given strict orders that Marged was to stay indoors.

"I fear I shall go stir crazy," Marged said one afternoon as she cast aside her stitching.

Anne looked up; her eyes met those of Matilda across the sewing chamber.

"A brisk walk around the hall should set you to rights," Matilda said. "Mayhaps a jaunt to the battlements if 'tis fresh air you crave."

"Tis more than fresh air," Marged said irritably. "I long to feel the grass beneath my feet, breathe in the soft scents of spring."

"We can walk within the inner bailey," Anne said softly.

"Nay," Marged said. She rose and pressed her hand against her lower back. "Even the outer bailey would not serve with its press of people. I would walk to the village."

"My lady," Matilda said sternly, "King Christopher is out on patrol, Sir Dafydd along with him. There is no one to escort you on a walk. You must needs stay indoors

where 'tis safe."

"Lysnowydh is not a prison," Marged said. "Surely with all the added watching it would be safe to walk within sight of the keep. If I seek to walk, I shall walk. The men will watch from the battlements." She stretched again. "The child needs the fresh air, as do I."

"I shall escort her to the inner bailey," Anne said under her breath to Matilda. "Tis likely the men will not allow her to walk to the village."

"Aye," Matilda said, "see that she is well watched. I'll not have the king's wrath upon my head."

With a quick smile for Matilda, Anne walked forward to take Marged's arm. Together they walked from the sewing chamber, through the hall, and down the stairs to the inner bailey. The day was mild with a soft breeze blowing from the ocean. They strolled through the kitchen garden, and out to the outer bailey. When they reached the portcullis Anne was proved correct; the porter would not allow them to pass.

"The king said no one is to pass, my lady," the porter said, his arms folded over his chest. "There be plenty o' fresh air in the courtyard."

"Stephen," Marged said, her shoulders squared. "Would you have it upon your head that the child suffered because you did not allow me to pass through to walk upon the grass outside the wall? 'Tis not as if I seek to ride upon the road to London. I only wish to feel the sea breeze on my cheeks, free from the odors of the yard, and feel the softness below my feet, not clay that is clogged with offal."

The porter seemed to falter, but before he could react further a voice called from the other side of the moat. "Hail, I bring news from the king."

A lone rider clattered across the bridge. Both Anne and Marged looked on with curiosity; the rider did wear the gold and blue of the king. He stopped before Stephen.

"King Christopher desires the Lady Marged join him some miles from here for a wee picnic among the heather," the man said. "Tis his belief that Lady Marged has spent too many hours indoors, and he desires she give his heir some fresh air." He smiled winningly at Stephen then turned to face Marged. "He bids you come alone," he said and gave her a saucy wink.

"You have not shown your face around here much lately, Hugh," Stephen said. "In truth I hardly recognized you."

"I have but spent a year in Sir Ranulf's keep. His majesty sent me forth last year, but called me back when the snows began to melt."

"How is it that he sends you on a personal message from him, without first welcoming you back within our midst?" Stephen persisted. "He rode out on patrol early this morn with Sir Dafydd alongside of him. Methinks he would not think to have a picnic whilst patrolling the borders."

"You but stall, Stephen," Hugh said. "Twould not do to keep his majesty

waiting. In truth the sun will begin to sink ere a few hours have passed. I would not wish to face his wrath were I to not bring the lady to his side, nor would you were I to tell him that 'twas you who prevented me."

"Please, Stephen," Marged said. "I would join the king."

Stephen chewed his lower lip, clearly in thought. All knew the king's temper well and Hugh's words rung with truth. "Very well," he said at last, "but Anne must go along of you."

"He said for her to come alone," Hugh wheedled. "I think mayhaps he does not wish an audience."

Marged flushed bright red, and Stephen chuckled. "Either way, Anne must go along." He turned to bellow, "Bring the Lady Marged's palfrey, and a mount for Anne."

Within a few minutes, Marged and Anne were mounted, and together they rode off with Hugh.

A FEW hours later the sun did begin to lower in the sky. King Christopher returned from patrol. Amid the flurry of activity in the stables he dismounted, and was approached by the stable master.

"Your majesty, is the Lady Marged not with you?"

Christopher frowned. "And why would Lady Marged have ridden on patrol with me? She is but in her sewing chamber."

"Stephen sent for her palfrey at midday. 'Twas said he received a message from you that Lady Marged was to join you some ways from the keep for a picnic."

Dafydd came forward to stand at Christopher's back as he roared, "Send for Stephen."

The porter recounted the exchange with the messenger. "He said he came directly from you."

"I sent no one for Lady Marged. In truth 'twas my express command that she be kept within the keep." Christopher scowled. "Who was this messenger that came?"

"'Twas Hugh, your majesty. He said he had been in Sir Ranulf's keep for a year, but that he had lately returned, and that you wished for the child to have some fresh air."

"Christ's blood!" Christopher roared. He strode away and bellowed that his horse be saddled again.

Dafydd moved closer and reached out to grab the front of Stephen's jerkin and pull him closer. "You allowed Lady Marged to ride forth from the keep with none but

a single rider?"

"And her servant Anne," he said feebly.

Dafydd's face darkened in anger. "Hugh was sent forth from Lysnowydh this year past under the charge of treachery when he did seek to besmirch my honor, and that of the king."

All color drained from Stephen's face and he sank to his knees. "Lord have mercy upon me," he whispered.

"Mayhaps the Lord will have mercy; King Christopher will not," Dafydd said. He turned and strode toward where Christopher made to re-mount his horse. "Hold; 'tis growing dark. You cannot ride forth now; you know not where she has been taken."

Christopher's face was set in lines of a fiery hot wrath. "In spite of all, 'tis Warin who has taken her. 'Tis exceedingly likely that Hugh would have fallen in with mine own enemy."

Dafydd laid his hand across Christopher's on the reins. "Then we must needs wait for the morrow. Send this night for Sir Richard that we might descend upon Strasnedh with a mighty force."

There was a long silence and then Christopher bowed his head. "Aye, you have the right of it." He turned to look upon Stephen, who knelt upon the ground, his face in his hands. "Take him to the dungeon," he said shortly. "I will not hold with traitors."

There was no reckoning with the king when anger took him.

MORNING brought Sir Richard and all of his men. As the men jumbled together in the outer bailey, Christopher related the events of the previous day.

"Do you know of a certainty that 'tis Warin as has taken her?" Sir Richard asked. They stood before a table in the hall hastily downing bread and cold meats.

"Hugh was lately a squire in my kingdom. He was part of the group baited by Sir Robert to besmirch Dafydd's honor, and hence mine own. The three of them were sent forth with naught but the clothing on their backs just over a year ago."

"They should have been hanged for treason," Sir Richard growled.

Christopher's face was set in hard lines this morn, and it was obvious he had slept little. His eyes were cold as he cast his gaze upon Dafydd. "They were not hanged, as someone pleaded mercy for them."

"Mercy?" Sir Richard said, aghast.

"'Tis past," Christopher said shortly. "We must needs arrange the men and ride

forth with all due haste to Strasnedh. If my suspicion is wrong and Marged has not been taken hence, we shall have to find the trail before it grows cold."

A muscle tensed in Dafydd's jaw as he pulled on his gauntlet; the king's implication was clear. He listened with half an ear as Christopher and Sir Richard completed the last of their plans, and followed in their wake to the courtyard.

Christopher addressed the men briefly after he had mounted his destrier.

"Today we seek to restore Lady Marged back to her rightful home. 'Tis likely she has been taken by King Warin. Understand me well: all caution must be exerted to ensure that Lady Marged returns unharmed. Listen well to my commands."

Once they were on the road, Dafydd urged his horse up alongside Christopher's. They rode in silence for a time and then Dafydd said, "Is there aught you would say to me?"

Christopher sighed and tightened his hands on the reins, then turned toward Dafydd. "Nay," he said. "Twill save for our return."

Dafydd's face was set in equally hard lines, and he said, "As you wish, your majesty." He slowed and fell into position alongside Sir Cuthbert.

THE mighty force met little resistance on the road to Strasnedh. They were watched, but they met no opposition. The forces amassed on the field before the drawbridge, and were surprised when it lowered before they could send someone to treat for admittance. A loan rider approached them. Once he moved into range, an uproar erupted from the men closest to see him. 'Twas Sir Robert who approached.

"His majesty King Warin, Lord of Strasnedh, bids only the king of Lysnowydh and his consort enter the keep." His features were lit with a nasty glow as he emphasized the word "consort." He shifted his eyes to Sir Richard and the other captains. "You may bring a retinue of ten men, yet your captains must remain outside the walls."

"Aye," Christopher said. He turned and held a hushed conversation with Sir Richard. It was agreed that Sir Richard would stay outside the keep with the balance of men at the ready. Sir Cuthbert selected a retinue, and together they spurred their horses after Sir Robert.

Once they had crossed the bridge and entered the inner bailey, stable hands came to hold their mounts. Christopher, Dafydd, and the hand-selected men followed Sir Robert up inside the keep.

King Warin sprawled in his chair before the hearth. Sir Robert swaggered to the center of the room, and then made his announcement. "King Warin, the Lord of Strasnedh, bids you welcome to his lands."

When he stepped to the side, Christopher saw that indeed Marged sat in the

chair beside him, her face white and pinched with fear. Anne crouched at her feet. Both women looked dirty yet no further the worse for wear. Christopher hastened closer.

"Ah, ah, King Christopher," Warin said, his lips curved into a sneer. "Come no further."

Midway across the room Christopher stopped, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. Dafydd advanced to stand at his shoulder; the men began to move into the room but were held back as Warin's men stepped forward.

"Release the Lady Marged," Christopher said.

"Come now, King Christopher," Warin said, his face twisted into a sneer. "If it were that easy, I would have sent her forth ere you came. I require something in return before I will allow her return."

"Name your price: gold, cattle, any amount, 'tis yours," Christopher said.

Warin clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "You number the hairs on her head with gold? She is worth naught more than cattle?" He sprawled back further and held his goblet out, and a page crawled forward to refill it with wine. He turned to look at Marged. "He lays a price on your head; your worth is measured. Mayhaps if I ask too much he will refuse."

"Christ's blood, Strasnedh," Christopher roared. "By simply stating you require something in return for my lady you but lay your own price upon her head." He advanced closer, heedless of the warning. "Lady Marged has much worth to me. The cost matters not but that she is returned to my side."

"Is it the fair lady, or mayhaps that what she carries in her belly that interests you the more?" Warin drawled.

"You try me sorely, Warin," Christopher growled. "I desire both the lady and my heir be returned."

Warin rose from his chair and sauntered from the dais toward where Christopher stood in the center of the hall. He beckoned to Dafydd. "There is something I desire, just nothing that can have a price laid to it." He moved closer so that only Christopher and Dafydd could hear his words. "That which I want is something you once gave to me freely, Christopher." He moved closer, his lips mere inches from Christopher's cheek. "Something you once mightily enjoyed, that which I would have again."

"I will not barter in flesh with you, Warin. Return what is rightfully mine." Christopher spoke loud enough for all to hear. "What you want shall not be given."

"Then your lady shall not be returned," Warin said softly. "Tis a pity I shall have to take what I desire from her. Mayhaps the heir will not survive."

Before Christopher could answer, Dafydd stepped forward. "I will trade my body for hers," he said softly.

"Nay!" Christopher shouted. His voice broke on the word.

Warin reached out and grasped Christopher's wrist. He moved closer, and said softly, "Aye. One whore for the other."

Dafydd held his hand out to Marged, and she flew from her chair. He pulled her into his arms and bent to whisper in her ear, "Tell him this was my choice." He released her, and she stepped behind him to Christopher.

"This is not ended, Warin," Christopher said, agony clear in his voice.

"I know," Warin said. "Yet know that you will not retrieve him with as much ease as you retrieved your concubine." He paused to let his words sink in, and then raised his voice. "Collect your men and begone."

For a long moment Christopher stared at Dafydd's back, and then he said, "Prepare for war, Warin, and know that I will win."

"We shall see," Warin said. He reached out, laid a hand on Dafydd's shoulder, and exerted pressure and forced him to his knees. "We shall see."

A CHILL settled over Dafydd once Christopher had been escorted from the hall. The searing cold of the floor below his knees twisted with the abject misery that came from the knowledge that Christopher held him responsible for all.

"Up, dog," came a rough voice, and he was yanked to his feet. When he hazarded a glance around, he saw that Warin had departed. He was seized by both arms and led across the hall.

"You will find King Warin's dungeons comfortable," Sir Robert said. He prodded at Dafydd's back with the hilt of his sword. "Mayhaps more comfortable than I found the hole you had me tossed in at Lysnowydh. You are weak, *Sir* Dafydd, too weak to bear the title. In life you must learn that your enemies should never be given a second chance."

While Sir Robert talked Dafydd was indeed taken to Warin's dungeon, but it was unlike any dungeon he had ever seen before. Smoky torches lit a door set in the wall, and Sir Robert unlocked the door with a key that hung from the belt at his waist.

"In truth, I am glad you were weak. 'Twill be a satisfaction I cannot name to watch you suffer. 'Tis a pity I cannot watch King Christopher's agony, yet it will not be hard to imagine."

Dafydd was shoved forward into the room; he stumbled but remained upright. The room was nearly bare, with only a pallet in one corner, a bucket beside the door, and one feeble torch that smoked more than it shed light.

"Strip," Sir Robert barked the order. "Or the clothing will be torn from your body."

Under the watchful, leering eyes of Sir Robert and the two guards, Dafydd stripped the clothing from his body.

"And now, you wait," Sir Robert said. He and the guards departed, leaving the room dimly lit and filled with smoke.

Dafydd walked to the scratchy pallet and sank down on it. When the chill of the room set him to shivering, he took up the scratchy blanket, and waited.



THE first part of the ride back to Lysnowydh passed in tense silence. Christopher kept the pace slow so that Marged would not be overly jostled. He scowled and muttered under his breath, and the men gave him a wide berth until at last Sir Richard moved forward to ride abreast of him.

"What is in your mind?" he asked quietly.

"I would return Marged to Lysnowydh, gather provisions, and return this night." He turned to look at Sir Richard.

"Tis not wise," Sir Richard said. "You must send to your vassals, amass a proper army, else you will not defeat King Warin."

"Warin will not wait whilst I gather my vassals," Christopher growled. "He will begin his attack this very night."

"Christopher," Sir Richard said, "this dispute between Lysnowydh and Strasnedh has been brewing overlong. He has plotted and planned, and has struck you where he knew 'twould do the most damage. If you return before properly strategizing the assault 'twill do naught but prolong Dafydd's agony."

Christopher paled, and looked away.

Sir Richard sighed. "You must plan a siege, your majesty. This bickering between the two kingdoms must come to an end. Take the time to plan wisely. Fall upon Strasnedh with the might of your kingdom behind you. 'Tis the only way to show him what Dafydd means to you."

"Dafydd will bear the brunt of the suffering," Christopher said with anguish in his voice. "Would that I could return right now to free him."

"Were it not Dafydd 'twould be Marged," Sir Richard said. "One way or another Warin would find a way to lay the most pain upon your head. This is why I implore you, make the siege a lasting memory of torment for Strasnedh that the war between you will cease when 'tis over." A muscle tensed in Christopher's jaw, and at last he murmured, "Art right, old man. I need your level head to keep me stable."

"Your own head grows more level with each passing year," Sir Richard said. "I will stay to assist in your preparations."

"My thanks," Christopher said. He spurred ahead to make the balance of the ride in solitude.

DAFYDD heard the scratching of the key in the keyhole before the door opened, and he stood. The torch within the room had long since burned out, and it was replaced with a new one by the lone guard that accompanied King Warin.

"Kneel."

Instead of complying Dafydd spread his feet wider and squared his shoulders. His hands were clenched in fists at his sides.

"Let me tell you how it is going to be," Warin said as he moved closer. He kept his eyes riveted to Dafydd's. "When I enter this room you will kneel before me. When you do not you will be lashed."

Dafydd remained standing and gave no indication that he had even heard Warin speak.

With barely a flicker of a glance, Warin communicated to the guard. Dafydd's arms were pinned behind his back. He was dragged across the room, and his hands manacled against the wall.

"Your spirit will be broken, Dafydd, no matter how long it takes."

The sting of the lash took him by surprise, and he bit down upon his lower lip to keep from crying out. In all there were ten, and he slumped on his knees when he was released, shivering and silent.

The torch was taken when they left, and he was alone in the dark again.

LYSNOWYDH was a whirl of activity in the week that followed. Messengers were sent to all corners of the kingdom, most with swift response. Many of the lords returned to claim their full support, leaving their men to prepare and follow. Councils of war were held, and then began the waiting game.

Christopher was surly and sullen by turns. None dared to approach him as his

temper lashed out at any that happened too close. Evening meals passed in terse silence until he took himself to his bedchamber. Once he had left, the lords in residence continued heated debates about the best course of action for laying siege to the kingdom they all despised.

Alain was the only one who saw the civil side of Christopher. In the evenings he assisted the king in bathing, gave him wine, and left him to stew before the fire. When he left him each night, he knew that the king hurt, but was at a loss as to how to fix it.

One night, as he left the king's chamber to find his bed on a pallet beside the door, he found Marged waiting outside.

"My lady," he said and he bowed as he took her hand. "What brings you here?"

"The king," she said simply. "I would speak with him."

When Alain straightened he glanced over his shoulder, then gave Marged's hand a squeeze and said softly, "I am not sure that is for the best." He turned to look at her again. "He broods, my lady. He is not fit company."

"Aye," she said with a watery smile and a catch in her voice. "Mayhaps he would not see my face. He traded my life and the life of his heir for the one person he holds dear in all the world." She paused to compose herself. "And yet I would see him."

Alain drew in a deep breath, and then nodded. He escorted her to the door of the room, and said softly, "Your majesty, the lady Marged would speak with you."

They waited, and at last they heard a soft sigh and Christopher said, "She may come."

The room was dark, illuminated only by the glow of the fire. Christopher slumped in his chair; he did not even turn to acknowledge Marged as she moved closer. The tears that swam in her eyes fell over. She knelt at his feet and laid her head against his knee. Only then did he stir, and he laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Art well, bechan?" he asked.

"Aye," she whispered. "Tis you I worry for."

He was silent, his hand a gentle caress on her shoulder. At last he said softly, "I would protect you and the child at all costs, Marged. Art my future."

She twisted to face him, and took his hand in both of hers. Tears spilled down her cheeks and her voice cracked as she spoke. "Mayhaps we are your future, but Dafydd is your life."

He closed his eyes, and took a choked breath. When he spoke she hardly heard him. "The last words I spoke to him were angry words."

"Oh, Christopher." She rose up and molded her body awkwardly to his.

"I can never take them back, and that is all he has to keep warm while he

submits to whatever twisted perversion Warin has in his mind," he said. "And the knowledge of that is cold company for me each night. He made his decision thinking that I hold him responsible for all."

"He told me," she said, "I was to tell you it was his choice. His decision was his own. I know not what transpired betwixt you, but I know Dafydd well enough to know that he made his decision out of deference to me, not because he held himself responsible."

Christopher closed his arms around her and held her close with arms that shook. "Would that I were as certain of that as you are."

"You will free him, and return him to us, my lord," she said as she held him tight.

"Aye," he whispered against her neck. "Stay with me this night, bechan, that I might feel your warmth beside me in bed."

She nodded, and he helped her to stand. Rather than call for Anne, Christopher clumsily helped her to undress, and then tucked her in bed beside them. They took comfort from each other, and when morning came Christopher displayed a new resolve. Gone were the sulky moods, replaced by a new determination.

NIGHT and day; all were the same in the darkened room. With each successive visit from King Warin, Dafydd lost a bit more of his will.

When food was deposited through the slot in the door, he could not rouse himself to crawl across the room to retrieve it. He shivered, and yet the blanket pulled across the welts and turned all to scalding pain. He was silent, the anguish held tightly inside him.

The inner peace that he had always drawn upon before seemed illusive now. Try as he might he could not center himself, and far worse, when he closed his eyes he could not summon the dream sprite.

All was misery, and pain, and hopelessness. He even ceased to be shocked at each new depravity visited upon his body when King Warin came into the room. He managed to close out the words, but the pain was never-ending.

Alone, he began to wish for blackness. And slowly, it began to come.

BY the end of the week, all was in readiness and return to Strasnedh was set; they but awaited arrival of one more set of troops. In the hall each night was an air of certainty

that they would be triumphant. As the departure neared, Christopher became more stoic and reserved as though he drew upon some inner core of resolve.

The night before they were set to depart he retired to his chambers and found John waited to assist him instead of Alain.

"Have I but chased your father off with my foul demeanor?" he asked.

"Nay," John said as he helped Christopher disrobe, "I but asked to stand in his place this night that I might speak with you."

Christopher arched a brow as he held his arms out for his bedrobe. "Aye, you have my ear."

"Your majesty," John said and he dropped to his knees, "I would go with you tomorrow when you return to Strasnedh."

"You would follow the army into battle?" Christopher said as he tightened the belt of his robe. "Art not a soldier, John."

"Aye," John said, a fervent glow in his eyes. "Yet Sir Dafydd means much to me. I would be there when he is returned as 'tis sure you will be successful."

Christopher moved closer, reached down and caressed the side of John's face, a genuine smile on his own face for the first time in weeks. "Twill not be easy, and there is much danger involved. Think well before you request to join a siege of war."

"I have thought upon it, night and day since you returned, your majesty," John said. "Sir Dafydd would fight for me if 'twere the other way 'round. 'Tis my desire to fight for him."

"Then you shall come, John," Christopher said. "He will have need of you, and I welcome your passion."

"Thank you, your majesty," John said. "I will not let you down."

"Nay, I know you will not," Christopher said. He turned and sat in his chair. "Would that all my subjects were as loyal as you and your father."

John scrambled to his feet. "Your majesty." He turned and took up a goblet that sat on a low table before the fire. "Whilst you are away in London Sir Dafydd makes himself a goblet of mulled wine. He says that when he takes it before bed it helps him to see you are safe." He chewed his lower lip and then continued softly, "Tis not certain that Sir Dafydd is safe, but I would offer you his wine that," he hesitated, "you might feel close to him."

Christopher drew in his breath, and reached up to take the goblet. He held it reverently in both of his hands. "He but bade me make this drink once, and I was able to see him in my dreams." He looked up and gave John a small smile. "My thanks."

"Tis my pleasure," John said. He bowed his head.

"If you are to accompany us on the morrow, you must needs fly to make ready," Christopher said.

"Aye," John said. He raised his head and smiled. "Yet I am already mostly prepared. I meant to convince you to allow me to go along."

"Tis well," Christopher said.

Once John had departed Christopher took a deep breath and gazed into the flames. He knew 'twas likely that any vision the wine would bring would be painful, and yet he knew he had to see. At last he raised the goblet to his lips and drank. Warmth filled him and increased with each sip of the spicy wine. He set the goblet aside and turned to find his bed.

Sleep came over him soon after he laid his head on the pillow. He was not prepared for the anguish that came in his dreams, or the vision of seeing Dafydd curled on the dirty pallet in the darkened room. He cried out in pain, reached out futilely to the vision, only to have it vanish.

DAFYDD floated in a state of half sleeping, half waking. He had finally settled the blanket so it covered him without scratching. When the key scraped in the door he watched through his lashes as Warin entered the room. He could not hear his hushed conversation as the torch was set in place, and then the door closed again.

The king spared Dafydd nary a glance as he silently disrobed. Each article of clothing was carefully placed on a hook. His sword was placed on a shelf that was just out of Dafydd's reach. He knew because the one time he had lunged for it he had been dealt a clubbing blow to the backs of his legs. Next to where the sword was laid was a long whip that was coiled like a snake.

The sharp crack of the whip caused Dafydd to flinch, but before he could react he felt it sting against his back. He grouned hoarsely as he struggled to his feet, swayed dizzily, and finally found his balance.

"Why do you not give up, Dafydd?" Warin asked as he stalked closer. His hair hung in greasy strings down his back, and it looked as though it had been years since a barber's blade had touched his beard. "There is none here to see, and yet you still greet me with defiance."

Dafydd's hands were clenched in fists at his sides, and somehow the self-inflicted pain of his nails cutting into his palm kept him able to hold his ground.

"Is it that you fear Christopher will cast you aside if he learns of your weakness? 'Tis no matter, really, as you will be of no use to him once I return you. Art a broken shell now, filled with naught save my leavings." He paused in his pacing, sneered into Dafydd's face. "In truth, I would have thought he would return ere now. Two weeks and

more have passed and not a sign of any that bear the lion's standard."

Eyes closed for just a moment, and then Dafydd tightened his hands and let the nails cut deeply into his palms. He flicked his eyes open again and resumed his rigid posture.

"Mayhaps," the king continued as he resumed his pacing, "'tis your wish that he not return. Mayhaps you enjoy our little games here. If you were to just say the words I would have you restored from the dungeons, given a room in the keep, and we could continue our liaison in a more suitable fashion. All you need to do is ask me, Dafydd."

Dafydd stood in resolute silence. Warin had stopped behind him, and he braced as he heard the whip being drawn up, looped around his fist. It was impossible to hold back the cries any longer when the lash curled over his back.

"Will you not say it, Dafydd? Will you not beg me for mercy?"

The lash cracked over his back again and Dafydd staggered and moaned. Warin pressed his advantage and the next time he sent the lash cracking across him he swept his foot behind Dafydd's and sent him tumbling to the stone floor.

"I will break you, Dafydd," Warin said as he fell upon Dafydd's back. He pulled him roughly up on his knees, nudged his legs wide. With no preparation given he pushed himself deeply inside Dafydd's passage.

Dafydd arched up, the cry torn brutally from his throat. His fingers tore upon the stone floor and added to the agony.

With brutal force Warin pulled out and slammed in again and Dafydd's knees scraped against the floor. Again and again until Dafydd slumped down, heedless of the fact that now his cheek scraped against the dirty stone floor.

"What does he call you, Dafydd," Warin grunted, "when you are abed?"

"Nay," Dafydd whispered, and his fingers clawed at the floor again.

Warin curled down and reached up to yank the hair back out of Dafydd's face with one hand while he reached underneath to cup Dafydd's flaccid member with his other. He stroked and thrust against him, groaned lewdly into his ear.

"Cariad...," Warin moaned. "Now you are mine... cariad...."

Somewhere in the recesses of his mind, a voice cried out in anguish as Dafydd slipped closer to unconsciousness. He was hardly

aware of the roar behind him as Warin finished. He slumped down against the floor and waited for the king to leave. Only then did he allow himself to slip into a dreamless sleep. He lacked the will to drag himself across the floor to the pallet.

He was indeed broken.



ALTHOUGH winter had all but faded, there was a frosty chill in the courtyard as the troops prepared to leave the next morning.

Christopher came down the stairway to find Marged in close conversation with Patrick. He watched them unobserved as Marged gave Patrick a small square of crimson silk, and amid all the turmoil that brewed within his own soul he could not help but smile. As Patrick took the favor and touched it to his lips, Christopher approached.

"Would you also offer me a favor, my lady?" he asked.

Marged gasped, and soft color stained her cheeks as she turned toward him and dipped into a curtsey. "Your majesty, I did not hear you approach."

Patrick stepped back, his face mottled, his expression unreadable. "My apologies, your majesty," he said stiffly.

"Nay, no apologies," Christopher said. He moved closer to lay his hands upon both of their arms. "In battle all things are uncertain. It has long been the custom for a knight to carry the favor of his lady that he might return safe when the battle is done."

"I am no knight," Patrick said softly, "nor do I have leave to accept a favor from your lady, my liege."

"You are not knight, *yet*," Christopher said, "my permission is given for you to accept her favor."

Patrick nodded, and bowed his head. "My thanks, majesty."

"Go," Christopher said. "Your thanks are not needed; your fervor is." When Patrick had hurried off, Christopher turned again to face Marged. "I ask again, will you give me your favor to carry into battle?"

Marged stepped closer and raised on tiptoes to kiss his cheek lightly. "Nay, my lord. I but keep you safe within my heart always, right alongside Dafydd." She stepped back. "Bring him back safely."

Christopher bent to kiss her. "I will," he whispered.

Before the sun had fully crested the horizon the army marched off, well disciplined into regiments. They covered the ground between Lysnowydh and Strasnedh during the space of that day, and when they arrived in the late afternoon they found the gates locked tightly against them. It was as they had expected.

The weeks of hard planning paid off as the lords efficiently divided and set their own troops to assigned tasks. Sir Godfrey and his men had been set in charge of filling the moat with rocks to effect a bridge. Sir Ranulf's men set about assembling the trebuchet and collecting the offal that would be hurled over the walls of Strasnedh's keep. Sir Edward's men constructed a turtle and battering ram. All the lords set their archers in a line to send hails of fiery arrows inside the keep.

Sir Richard stood beside Christopher as the sun sank, watched as the chaos settled into a well-oiled routine.

"'Twill not be long," Sir Richard said.

"Aye," Christopher said, his face set in hard lines. "Warin will pay for every mark laid upon Dafydd's body."

"Aye," Sir Richard said. "Just do not let your need for revenge cloud your judgment."

A muscle tensed in Christopher's jaw. "Tis why I have you, old man," he said softly. "To stay my hand from vengeance."

"Strasnedh is filled with innocents who do not deserve to suffer because their king has trespassed against you," Sir Richard said.

"I care not for the people of Strasnedh," Christopher said, his voice harsh. "Should they suffer is no concern of mine. They chose to throw their lot in with Warin; they will bear the consequences and my wrath."

"Your wrath is justified," he said and laid a hand on Christopher's arm. "Yet a noble heart discerns between innocence and guile, wrong and right."

"Mayhaps," Christopher said.

Sir Richard turned away to supervise the arrangement of the encampment. Christopher watched the walls of the keep turn red from the glow of the setting sun.

"I will free you, Dafydd," he said softly.

KING Warin stood upon the battlements with Sir Baldric, his marshal. Below in the yard was pandemonium as the soldiers mingled with servants, each bent upon their own tasks. Small fires blazed in various places, set by the arrows. Livestock that had not been driven out to grazing pastures were herded inside the stables to protect them

from the eventual missiles that would be sent their way.

"I but wondered what kept him," Warin said as he watched with his hands folded behind his back.

"Tis clear, he has taken his time to plan for an all-out siege of war," Sir Baldric said. "Would you address the men?"

"Nay," Warin said. "I leave that in your hands. See Sir Robert is rousted. The servants must be kept indoors that they do not hamper the men's work." He turned and strode across the battlements toward the stairs.

"Where are you off to?" Sir Baldric called.

"Someone must tell our guest of Lysnowydh's arrival," Warin shouted back.

Sir Baldric turned back and stifled a shudder as he gazed down upon the courtyard again.

The hall was in as great a state of chaos as the yard. Warin raised his hand and barked orders to see to Sir Robert or Sir Baldric, depending upon whom questioned him. He descended the stairs to the dungeon and found a lone guard outside Dafydd's chamber.

"Go," Warin said as he took the key ring from his belt. "Send for Simon to await by the door. An army encamps outside the walls; you will be needed."

With a short bow the soldier turned and hurried up the stairs. Warin opened the door, took a torch, and entered the room.

Dafydd slept on, only dimly aware that Warin had entered the room. Fever ravaged through his body, and he shivered.

"Art weakening, Dafydd," Warin said, as he nudged none too gently with his boot. "Tis the first time you have not striven to show me you match your lion in stamina. You must needs wake and give me your attention."

Pain radiated through his body, and when he woke the shuddering brought on by the fever made it worse. With a great effort Dafydd forced his eyes open but found he had not the strength to stand. Delirium clouded him. "Why?" he croaked.

"Ah, he speaks," Warin said. "Is it that you wonder how I know of your lion's stamina? Shall I tell you how it was between us?"

"Nay," Dafydd said. He closed his eyes and winced as he cleared his throat. "I know how 'twas between you. What I wish to know is what you wish to gain by holding me thus. If you meant to destroy his kingdom 'twas his heir you should have kept; that is what he holds most dear in all the world."

With a sneer of distaste, the king squatted down beside him. "You sell yourself short, Dafydd. 'Tis you he holds most dear in all the world." He smirked. "I care not for his kingdom; 'tis the man I wish to destroy."

"Why?" Dafydd said again.

Shadows covered Warin's face so that Dafydd could not see him clearly. "Tis between he and I."

Dafydd shivered; in part it was due to the sinister tone in Warin's voice, and in part to the fever. Warin bent closer to retrieve the soiled blanket and he draped it over Dafydd's shoulders.

"Your fever worsens," he said. "Mayhaps you will not live to see your lion again." He rose to his feet. "He but camps outside the walls, and if he is successful in breaching my walls I shall toss him in here with you when I am done with him, that you two might seek hell together."

With a strangled cry Dafydd pushed up just as Warin turned on his heel and strode across the room. Too weak to push himself further, he sank back onto the dirty floor. The door closed with a resounding thud.

Outside Warin found Simon beside the door. "He sickens. Go and find the barber; I would not have him die. Yet."

Simon waited until Warin disappeared up the stairs to follow. It was not the barber that Dafydd needed, but what he did need would be hard to find. He slipped into the kitchen and wheedled what he could from the haggard cook.

"There is not much in the way of herbals," the gruff man told him. "There be little hold for such here. Take what you find and be quick about it."

The herbs were old, and dried, but Simon made a brew of willow bark for the fever, with a pinch of valerian to ease Dafydd's sleep. He glanced back furtively but found the cook busy at the spit. He took a large pinch of saffron and added it to the brew. Taking advantage of the cook's distraction, he helped himself to a bowl of mutton broth and a crust of soft bread.

He knew it was too late to undo everything completely as he bore the tray back down to the dungeon, but if Dafydd were strengthened mayhaps the damage would not be as complete as Warin desired.

AT the end of the following day, Christopher and Sir Richard stood upon a hillock overlooking the siege. The rock bridge across the moat was nearly finished. The steady thud of the battering ram against the front gate was a backdrop to the shouts from the archers. The whoosh of the trebuchet was met with satisfying shouts from within the walls.

"Warin has prepared well," Sir Richard said. "I fear 'twill be another week and more ere we breach his defenses."

"We have not a week," Christopher said. "Dafydd suffers apace."

"Aye," Sir Richard said. "The men but work day and night; 'twill take time."

"Time we do not have," Christopher murmured.

"Your majesty," Sir Cuthbert shouted as he ran toward the two men, "we caught a Strasnedh spy lurking about. He awaits you below."

"You have my leave to deal with him," Christopher said, his eyes fixed firmly upon the castle before him.

"Nay, my liege," Sir Cuthbert growled. "This one you must see yourself."

"Did you not hear the king?" Sir Richard roared.

"Tis Simon, my liege," Cuthbert said. "He begs your mercy."

Christopher spun around and shouldered past them. He found Simon held between two of Sir Cuthbert's men. "Dog," he roared, and he swung back and struck him full across the face.

"Mercy, your majesty," Simon whimpered. "I bring news of Sir Dafydd."

"What news? That when I sent you along of Sir Robert and Hugh from my keep that you vowed to take revenge upon Sir Dafydd, and now the revenge is complete?" He pulled his sword from its sheath and held it against Simon's neck. "I should run you through where you stand."

"Sir Dafydd lives yet," Simon said. "He is held below in king Warin's dungeon. He sickens; I but come to offer you my aid."

Christopher pressed forward and Sir Richard stepped in. "Hold, your majesty; hear him out."

With an effort Christopher stepped back, but kept his sword unsheathed. "Speak," he spat out.

"King Warin holds Sir Dafydd below in the dungeon. The defenses of the keep are strong, yet they can be breached from within. 'Tis just that I cannot do it alone, and there are none with which I can ally myself." Simon took a deep breath. "I was wrong, your majesty. I beg your forgiveness."

"Why should I believe you?" Christopher said. "Hugh was sent forth to my keep to deceive me; 'tis likely you have been sent forth with the same purpose."

"Nay, your majesty, I have not." He hung his head. "In truth I deserve the tip of your sword more than your trust. I but allowed myself to follow Sir Robert's hatred. It has not been an easy life here in Strasnedh, and were I anything other than a coward I would have returned to Lysnowydh long since." He raised his eyes. "Sir Dafydd has shown nothing but courage in captivity, and King Warin has shown he is evil incarnate. I would help you, your majesty, and suffer your contempt ever after if just to see the devil pay his dues."

Christopher's shoulders slumped as he sheathed his sword. He turned to look at Sir Richard. "What think you, old man?"

Sir Richard eyed Simon, then gave a signal that he be released. "He speaks the

truth."

"Aye," Christopher said, "'tis my thought as well." He turned to look at Simon again. "What is this plan of yours?"

"If you but give me one of your men, I can bring him inside with me that I might open the castle gates whilst he frees Sir Dafydd from his cell. 'Tis chaos within you walls."

Sir Cuthbert stepped forward. "I shall go along of him."

"Nay," Simon said. "Art too big; you would be recognized. A smaller man could spirit through the melee and gain the dungeon easily. We must needs make haste. Sir Dafydd worsens."

"I will go, your majesty," Patrick said as he stepped forward from the shadows.

"You must send a knight, your majesty," Sir Cuthbert said. "Not a squire as is still wet behind the ears."

Patrick bristled up, the crimson sash bright against the muck of battle already covering his clothing. He swiveled his eyes from his former master to the king.

"Sir Cuthbert has the right of it, majesty," Sir Richard said softly. "While I am certain that Simon speaks the truth, there is the chance that he has become master of lying, much as Robert had ere he left the keep. You must needs send a knight."

Christopher turned and stared toward the keep with burning eyes. The men watched him in silence, each fathoming the king's pain in different measures. When he turned back he pulled his sword from the sheath and bellowed, "Kneel."

Instinctively Patrick knelt before him as Sir Cuthbert and Sir Richard watched in astonishment.

"In remembrance of oaths given and received." Christopher brought the sword down on Patrick's right shoulder. "In remembrance of your obligation." The sword was transferred to his left shoulder. "Be thou a good knight." He reached down and pulled Patrick up into an embrace. "Serve me well, Sir Patrick of Lysnowydh," he growled into his ear. "Return Dafydd to me and your horizons open."

"I go for Sir Dafydd, your majesty," Patrick said fervently. "Tis my only goal."

"'Tis well," Christopher said. He spared not a glance to either Sir Richard or Sir Cuthbert; he knew that they silently gave their support to this rash act.

DAFYDD welcomed the soothing powers of the draft Simon left beside him as he slept. He only managed a few swallows of the broth before fatigue overcame and he drifted into the delirium sleep of fever. Many images danced before his eyes until at last he found Christopher upon the hillock, as he gazed intently at the keep. The saffron had worked its magic, and the burden of guilt was raised from his shoulders. Christopher glowed with golden warmth, and the promise of home.

He reached out, scabbed fingers closing over the edge of the pallet. "Fy llew," he whispered brokenly.



JUST as dawn touched the sky the next morning, Patrick and Simon left the encampment to make their way along the roundabout path that Simon had followed the previous evening. It had been decided that once inside the keep Simon would guide Patrick to the dungeons and then continue on to open the gate. He said grimly that once the gates were open it would take a soldier to hold guard upon Dafydd. While the newly knighted Patrick was not a full-fledged soldier yet, it was generally agreed that if questioned he fit the mode of plaything that King Warin favored most and thus could pass unquestioned.

During the session in which the plans were laid, John approached and asked permission to be included in the initial party that breached the walls, to follow directly behind Christopher.

"Absolutely not," Christopher had said. "You must needs stay well behind the lines. Alain would have my head if any harm came to his only son."

"I beg leave, your majesty," John had said, head bowed low. "If any harm comes to Sir Dafydd, my father will have my head faster than any soldier."

When Christopher had sought to argue further Simon had timidly offered, "If you please, your majesty, Sir Dafydd has suffered much. 'Twould be wisest to allow John to follow you. Once through the gates I will lead him directly down to the dungeon. Sir Dafydd needs clothing and the comfort of one who knows him well."

There had been much further discussion with both Sir Cuthbert and Sir Richard offering the observation that Simon could be leading both Patrick and John into easy imprisonment in the dungeons. In the end all had agreed to the plan, and Christopher stood at the ready with the men who had been chosen to make the first sally into the enemy's domain.

It was as if a fine wire held them all drawn tight. It had been nearly three weeks since Dafydd had been taken, yet this hour in the chilly dawn felt as long as a year for all involved.

Christopher twisted in his saddle to find John close behind him. "Courage," he said softly.

"Aye," John said. "Victory."

At that moment a great roar went up within the keep before them. Christopher and his men surged forward as the mighty gates of Strasnedh swung open. The battle was joined as King Warin's soldiers spilled out from the keep. They were unprepared for the direct attack and many fell victim to the swinging swords of their enemy.

After opening the gates Simon had managed to stay within the shadows. Once John cleared the opening Simon emerged and together they managed their way through the fighting unscathed. The dungeons were reached without incident, and they found Patrick standing before the door. Simon removed the key from his belt.

"Twill not be pretty," he said. "He has suffered."

"Aye, you have said as much," Patrick growled.

Simon inserted the key in the lock and opened the door. He took up a torch and entered the room. Patrick reached out to lay a hand on John's arm.

"See to him; I will stay without to guard against intrusion."

"Aye," John said.

Dafydd was curled on his side upon the pallet. He didn't stir as John knelt beside him and laid a hand upon his arm.

"Dear god in heaven," John murmured. Dafydd's flesh burned with fever. He turned anguished eyes upon Simon. "We must needs work quickly."

"Aye," Simon said. "Dress and wrap him. Between the three of us and the turmoil within the keep we should be able to sneak out undetected."

As carefully as he could, John began to dress Dafydd. Dafydd moaned, but did not regain consciousness. Once dressed they wrapped him tightly in a blanket and bore him out. Patrick stayed before them with sword drawn, and they made their way up and out of the keep without incident.

Once safely back within the encampment they laid him gently upon the ground. Patrick saw to the construction of a litter while John brewed an infusion of willow bark and rosemary.

When it was done he gently lifted Dafydd's shoulders and held his head up that he might force a bit down his throat. Dafydd stirred and choked, but did not regain full consciousness. He moaned as they loaded him into the litter, and then fell silent again.

"We must needs begin back to Lysnowydh," John said. "Twill be slow going, and most likely king Christopher will o'ertake us before we arrive home."

As the men surged into the keep, Christopher rode ahead, heedless of any he trampled beneath his horse's hooves. He spied Sir Robert up on the battlements, out of harm's way as he added his voice to Sir Baldric's commands. Christopher turned and shouted to the squires below him, "Mind yourselves," and he leaped from the saddle and threw the reins in their direction. In truth his destrier was well trained in battle, and would continue to fight even without his master upon his back.

Christopher made his way up the stairs and twisted lithely past the attackers until he found himself in one-on-one combat with Sir Baldric. He parried and thrust and shouted, "My battle is not with you. Stand aside."

"Nay," Sir Baldric roared, "your fight is against all of Strasnedh. Stand and fight or call yourself coward."

With a roar Christopher lunged forward, battled Sir Baldric back so he teetered on the edge of the walkway. "Move aside or end your life on the point of my sword," Christopher growled.

"Tis your life will be ended," Sir Baldric retorted.

His lips pulled back in a feral grin, Christopher edged forward slightly and pushed sword point against armor, and Sir Baldric teetered over the edge and fell to the yard below. Not bothering to see his fate, Christopher pushed forward until he had Sir Robert pinned against the wall. The tip of his sword gouged into Sir Robert's neck.

"Where is your master?" he shouted.

"You are no match for King Warin," Sir Robert shouted in return.

"Aye, I am no match," Christopher growled. "I am his better. Your life will not continue past this day. Tell me where he is and die quickly."

"It matters not," Sir Robert taunted. "Already your precious faggot sickens. If he lived the night past he will not live past the end of this day. You are too late; your efforts are in vain."

With a roar of bloodlust mingled with a cry of anguish, Christopher pressed closer. The blade of his sword sliced through Sir Robert's neck and sent a stream of blood coursing down over the front of his jerkin. His voice became deceptively soft. "You sealed your fate on the day you were sent forth from my kingdom. Each day since then has been lived on borrowed time. Tell me where Warin is."

Sir Robert gasped for breath and sagged back against the wall. "He is below, in the dungeon. He does but bury his lance within your faggot again."

Christopher pulled back, raised the sword high above his head, and with one more roar of fury sliced into Sir Robert's neck, watching as he crumpled upon the stones. Then he turned and hurried down the stairway back into the courtyard.

Sir Richard hailed him as he reappeared. "King Warin is within the keep, my liege. He but sends his men forth and holes himself up inside his castle."

"Burn all," Christopher roared, bloody blade in hand. "Leave nothing but a burned shell when we depart."

"Aye," Sir Richard shouted, and he turned to shout the orders as Christopher rushed past him toward the keep.

The interior of the main hall was quiet in comparison to the outer courtyards. The servants either hid or had joined the melee in the yard. Christopher paused to clean his blade on a discarded cloth he found upon a table in the main hall. When he turned to survey the hall again he found Warin sprawled in his chair before the hearth.

"You wait for death," Christopher said as he advanced across the room.

"Nay, I wait for you," Warin said.

His sword blade still naked in his hand, Christopher stepped up on the dais and leaned down over Warin so that they were eye to eye. "The trespasses you have committed against me warrant your death."

Warin was silent for a moment and it was hard to read the expression on his face. "And what of the trespasses you committed against me, amante?"

Christopher drew in his breath. "Nay," he whispered. "Do not seek to condemn me for things that you misunderstood. You never had claim to call me lover."

"There was no misunderstanding, Christopher. We had an arrangement, you and I. When you sought to end it, I told you it was not finished. That one day you would regret your decision." Warin curved his lips into a sensual smile. "Your Dafydd will not survive the journey back to Lysnowydh. His death will be your penance for the rest of your days."

"Art mad," Christopher ground out. "I will but take a page from Dafydd's book, and spare your life that you might live with the destruction of your keep, and your people, for the rest of your life." He raised the sword and trailed the tip over Warin's cheek, opened a thin cut. "This shall be your reminder that I mean what I say."

Warin did not flinch, and he remained seated with his eyes locked upon Christopher's.

"My promise to you is this," Christopher said as he lowered the blade. "If Dafydd does not survive this ordeal, then I shall return to finish this job."

"Then I will await you," Warin said, "as you will return before week's end."

Christopher stood up, sheathed his sword, and backed across the room. He would not be lulled by Warin's quietude. Once he gained the door, he turned and fled down the stairs out into the destruction that was the courtyard of Strasnedh. Sir Richard and the men had gained the upper hand, and all the wooden outbuildings were in flames. What little resistance they still faced faded when the men saw

Christopher emerge from the hall unscathed. It was a clear sign that their king had capitulated.

"Stay to see the job finished," Christopher said to Sir Richard. "I must needs go and see to Dafydd."

"Aye," Sir Richard said. "What of Warin?"

"He will not trouble you," Christopher said as he caught his destrier's reins and vaulted into the saddle.

"Your majesty!"

Christopher whirled to find Simon fast approaching. He spurred forward to meet him by the gate.

"A party of men departed some time ago with Sir Dafydd, I but waited to give you the news."

"How does he fare?" Christopher asked. He pulled back on the reins and his destrier danced with impatience.

"Hurry, your majesty," was Simon's response.

With a war cry Christopher turned and rode hard from the yard, through the ruined gates and down the road that led away from Strasnedh, Simon hard on his heels. He did not pause to look back at the destruction he left behind, and within an hour of hard riding he spotted the party ahead of him on the road. They rode easy to spare the bumps in the road to the litter.

"Hold!" Christopher shouted as he rode them down. He slid from his mount's back and approached the litter, finding Dafydd bundled tightly inside, his eyes closed. Christopher tore off his gauntlet and laid his hand gently along Dafydd's cheek. Dafydd stirred, turned into the warmth, but did not awaken. Christopher bent closer and whispered against his ear.

"Art strong, cariad. Hold on."



DURING the ride back to Lysnowydh, Christopher rode beside Dafydd and watched as his face became paler. He sent messengers ahead to ensure all would be in readiness when they arrived home. Another messenger was sent ahead for a new horse and then the long journey to London.

Each bump in the road sent a moan from Dafydd until at last he fell silent.

"We must needs pick up our pace," Christopher said, anguish in his voice. "In truth he does not feel the bumps and I fear for his life."

The courtyard was a mass of confusion lit by torches when they arrived just after dark. Sir Walter barked orders for all to stand well back as the litter was untied from the horses.

"Alain awaits above, your majesty," he said. "And Marged has offered her own chamber should you wish to carry him there and save the trip up the narrow staircase."

"Bid her my thanks," Christopher said, "and yet I would have him taken to the comfort of his own room."

"Aye, 'tis well," Sir Walter said.

Christopher had eyes for no one save Dafydd and the men carrying the litter as they made their way through the crowd, up the outer stairs, and then up the narrow inner stairway that led to the chambers above. The men set the litter down before the fireplace in Dafydd's room and Christopher bade them leave. Only John and Alain remained.

Once they began to remove the blankets and clothing, Dafydd began to shiver.

"He burns with fever," John said.

"Aye," Christopher said. "We must needs bathe him with cold water. I will hold him while you clean him."

"John," Alain said. All formality had been dropped between them as they worked. "Go into Dafydd's still room and gather the herbs and salves you will need whilst the king and I bathe him."

Together Alain and Christopher carried Dafydd into the bathing chamber. Christopher stripped down to his chausses and climbed into the tub. He bit his lower lip between his teeth as he looked upon Dafydd's back and the web of welts, many of them broken open and clearly the cause of the fever. Alain lifted Dafydd into the tub, and Christopher braced him gently against his chest.

Dafydd's shivering increased as Alain gently cleansed him with a cloth and cold water. Christopher eased him forward that his back might be cleansed as well, and then cradled him back against him as Alain worked on his legs and feet. At last Alain looked up, a stricken look on his face communicating his shock.

"Hold him," Christopher said firmly.

Alain moved to brace Dafydd's back, and Christopher shifted in front of him, and gently eased his legs apart. Dafydd's knees were scraped raw, his inner thighs covered with what appeared to be burns, but it was the torn flesh higher up that caused Christopher to murmur, "Christ's blood."

He reached for the cloth and cleansed him as gently as he could. When John appeared with the salve, Christopher insisted on applying it himself. When he was done they carried Dafydd back to bed. John settled him while Christopher hastily pulled his clothes on again.

"I've made him an infusion of willow bark, rosemary, and valerian," John said. "He should drink some every hour until the fever goes down."

"Aye, and I will keep cool cloths upon his forehead," Christopher said.

"You must eat, your majesty," Alain said, "lest you fall ill yourself."

"Bring food here," Christopher said. "I shall not leave Dafydd's side."

He rolled Dafydd upon his side, took a seat beside him on the bed, and bathed his forehead and back with cool cloths. Once John and Alain had departed, he bent down and whispered, "I am here, Dafydd. I will not leave you."

ONCE each hour through the night, John crept into the room to assist Christopher in forcing the infusion down Dafydd's throat. He brought clean basins of water and cloths. Christopher was finally enticed to eat something, but he refused to leave Dafydd's side.

When dawn came Dafydd's skin felt cooler yet he had not regained consciousness. Christopher rose from his seat and stretched, then went and relieved himself in the garderobe. He returned to find Alain laying a tray with foods to break

his fast beside the bed.

"Art good to me," Christopher whispered.

"You must needs keep up your strength," Alain said, his head bowed. "Below stairs Father Geoffrey is ensconced in the chapel saying prayers for Sir Dafydd's health."

"He but wishes to regain my good wishes," Christopher said. He picked up a crust of bread and broke off a piece.

"Mayhaps," Alain said with a shrug of his shoulder. "Lady Marged has joined him, and in truth many within the keep go about their tasks with half an ear strained toward yon stairway."

Christopher chewed the bread, lost in thought. "What news from Strasnedh?"

"None yet. Methinks Sir Richard but stays to ensure your orders are carried out. Lady Mary should arrive here by midday."

"Aye," Christopher said. He sat on the edge of the bed. "I would brook no visitors until I know Dafydd passes the threshold." He reached for a clean cloth and dipped it in the basin. "If he does not I would take horse at a moment's notice and return to slay Warin."

"Your majesty," Alain said, and he dropped to his knees before Christopher. "Tis my fervent desire that Sir Dafydd mend, that he return to your side and ours within the kingdom. Tis not my place to speak such...."

"Nay, Alain," Christopher said softly, and he laid his hand upon Alain's head. "Tis your place as my body servant to speak whatever is in your mind."

Alain tipped his head back and met Christopher's eyes. "Twas well done of you, your majesty, to spare King Warin's life that he might reflect upon the error of his ways. 'Twas well done to give young Simon your trust." He paused, and then emboldened he whispered, "Twas well to grant young Patrick knighthood."

A small smile curved Christopher's lips and his hand became a gentle caress upon Alain's head. "Art my conscience betimes, Alain. 'Tis well." He turned and cast his gaze upon Dafydd. "Send John with more willow bark."

"Aye," Alain said. He rose and turned to leave the room.

ALL through the day Christopher stayed at Dafydd's side. As darkness began to fall, the fever broke and his flesh became bathed in sweat. Only then did Christopher pull warm blankets over him. He continued to bathe him with tepid water and watched as his eyelids fluttered. He knew that within a few hours he would awake.

John arrived with a tray of food for Christopher, and another infusion of willow bark.

"Sir Richard arrives from Strasnedh," he said softly. "Lady Mary is with Lady Marged in chapel."

"Aye," Christopher said tiredly.

"I have told Sir Richard you will not see him until mayhaps the morrow. He but asked after Sir Dafydd's progress."

"Tell him he improves," Christopher said. He looked up at John. "You have served long, young John. You must needs seek your bed."

John nodded and backed from the room.

Christopher sat on the edge of the bed again, gently raised Dafydd's head, and watched as he drank the infusion. No longer did he have to force it down his throat. He set the goblet aside and stroked Dafydd's cheek.

"You must needs use all your strength, Dafydd," he murmured. "I would live out the balance of my days with you beside me." He shifted back so that he reclined against the wall behind the head of the bed, Dafydd's head cradled gently in his lap. The long day began to take its toll, and he drifted to sleep without touching the food John had brought.

AN ember popped in the hearth and brought Christopher awake with a start. 'Twas dark in the room; not even the night candle had been lit. He stirred stiffly and began to ease Dafydd's head from his lap that he might stand and rebuild the fire. Before he moved too far, he felt Dafydd reach up to take hold of him.

"Do not...."

Christopher gasped and slid his arm down around Dafydd's neck. "Dafydd... I would but build up the fire that you do not chill."

"Nay," Dafydd whispered hoarsely. "Do not leave me, Christopher." He turned his face against Christopher's belly, his voice muffled. "Do not."

"I will not," Christopher said, and he bent closer, held Dafydd tighter in his arms. "Not ever." He felt Dafydd's body was as taut as a bowstring against him. "Art safe now, cariad. 'Tis only you and I."

The tension released in a snap, and Dafydd's body began to tremble. In the darkness the anguish he had kept locked inside him spilled out, his tears soaking through to the skin. And in the darkness Christopher's tears mingled with Dafydd's, and each took comfort from the other.

WHEN morning came Christopher disentangled himself from Dafydd's body and slid

from the bed to tend to the fire and to himself. He moved the chamber pot closer and helped Dafydd stand then rolled him back into the bed onto his belly.

"You must needs eat something that you might regain your strength," he said softly.

"I am not hungry," Dafydd murmured.

"Aye, and yet you will eat," Christopher said firmly, "once I have bathed you again. I will not have your wounds fester that they bring the fever back upon you now 'tis cleared." He settled the cotton sheet over Dafydd's hips. "Do you have much pain?"

"Nay," Dafydd said.

"I think mayhaps you are not telling me the truth," Christopher said.

"As you would not tell the truth were the positions reversed," Dafydd said.

"Ah, 'tis true enough," Christopher said.

Just then John came in bearing a tray. When he saw Dafydd's eyes open, he dropped to his knees beside the bed. "My lord," he said softly. "I am that glad to see you awake."

Dafydd reached out toward John. "As I am glad to see your face again."

"Ask Agnes to send a broth; mayhaps flavored with a beef bone," Christopher said. "We must needs build his strength."

"Aye," John said. "And I will mix a tonic."

"You have learned much, John," Dafydd said. "'Twas likely your tonic that brought me back."

"It was," Christopher said. "We owe John much thanks; he is a well true and loyal man."

John dipped his head and blushed. "Tis my right and honor to serve you." He rose to his feet. "I will bring water that we might bathe him again."

"Bring water," Christopher said. "I will bathe him whilst you see to Agnes, and inform Sir Richard that Dafydd wakes."

"Aye, your majesty," John said.

Dafydd balled his hands in fists and pressed his lips firmly together as Christopher bathed his back and legs. 'Twas clear he suffered pain as the salve was applied anew, and yet he made no sound. He managed to drink a bit of the broth, and then down a goodly portion of the tonic John presented him.

"Tis cloves, coriander, and lavender," John said.

"Tis well," Dafydd murmured. "Art becoming a healer." He drifted into a light doze before John could respond.

"He sleeps a normal sleep, your majesty," John said. "Tis not the fevered sleep; now he will heal."

While Dafydd slept Christopher bathed himself, donned fresh clothing, and went below stairs.

THE king took himself directly to his council chamber and gave Sir Walter strict orders that none should enter save Sir Richard. He had no desire to encounter the overly pious Father Geoffrey and had no wish to meet with Marged. Until he was certain that Dafydd would not relapse into fever, he wished as little conversation as possible.

"How fares Dafydd?" Sir Richard asked as he came into the chamber.

"He yet lives," Christopher said.

"Does he suffer much?"

"He suffers," Christopher said, his lips drawn into a tight line. "I would hear how you left things with Strasnedh."

Sir Richard stood before the hearth and stared into the flames. "Warin is a traitorous dog, and yet his men are loyal to him. They seemed to falter when they realized he gave in to you, yet they rallied once they realized we meant to destroy the keep."

Christopher sat in his chair and stared with unfocused eyes at Sir Richard's back. His hand clamped tightly to the arm of the chair as he listened.

"None survived," Sir Richard said harshly, "and the keep was left uninhabitable."

"And what of Warin?" Christopher said.

"Twas my understanding you meant to grant him his measly life," Sir Richard snorted. "Not that he has much left to live for. His castle is destroyed, his men are killed, e'en his servants are either fled or cut down in their tracks. We left him as you left him, skulking within his hall."

"Aye," Christopher said. "He shall have long to understand his error."

Sir Richard turned and came to sit at the table beside Christopher. "What would you have me do with Simon? There is hostility toward him from those who were not at Strasnedh with us."

Christopher reached up and rubbed his hand along his brow. "I would leave it in your hands."

"You must give yourself time to rest, Christopher," Sir Richard said. He sat forward and laid his hand on Christopher's arm. "Twill not help Dafydd if you turn

ill yourself."

"Aye," Christopher said, his voice ragged with worry and fatigue. "And yet I hold myself responsible for what was done to him. I will not rest until he walks among us with his head high and puts this ordeal behind him."

"Is it likely that he will?"

"I know not," Christopher said. He lowered his hand from his face. "I know what Warin is capable of; I have seen the marks upon his body. I must needs coax the words from him, yet 'twill not be easy for him to tell, and I know 'twill not be easy for me to hear." He tightened his hand into a fist. "Curse the day I ever gave the monster what he wanted that it brought me to this."

"Christopher," Sir Richard said softly, "all men make choices they must needs live with. You cannot lay blame upon yourself. Dafydd would not want to live under your protective shadow. He will come to terms with this and likely in his mind he but spared Marged."

Christopher's lips curled into a rueful smile. "Mayhaps. Yet 'tis more likely Warin filled his ears with lies and the truth skillfully woven. This will not damage us, yet 'twill take time to live past, methinks."

Sir Richard squeezed Christopher's arm. "All things heal with time. I will stay, lend a hand to the general running of the household whilst you nurse Dafydd. Mary will lend support to Marged."

"My thanks, old man," Christopher said.

"Thanks are not needed."

DAFYDD slept the rest of the day, and woke only to use the chamber pot, take a bit of broth, and change positions in the bed. In the afternoon John showed Christopher how to make the tonic.

"Cloves for the pain, coriander to prevent fever, lavender for headache, valerian to help him sleep, and saffron to keep infection away," he said. As he stirred the mixture he murmured, "And 'tis said that saffron will bring the second sight."

Christopher took the goblet from him. "You have learned much about these things."

"Aye," John said. "Dafydd is a patient teacher."

Dafydd was awake when they returned to his chamber. John took his leave and Christopher came forward with the goblet. He held it as Dafydd drank, then set it aside and took a seat in the chair beside the bed.

"I will not ask you how you feel as I can guess 'tis none too well, and I can guess 'tis not your wish to worry me," he said with a soft smile.

Dafydd's eyelids drooped as the tonic began to take effect. "Aye, you have the right of it," he said, "on both accounts."

"I would say one thing," Christopher said. He leaned forward, forearms braced on his knees. "Twas cold comfort to me, whilst you were held, that my last words to you were angry words. Know now that 'tis not my belief that any of this was your fault."

The easy tears that were brought on by fever and pain welled in Dafydd's eyes. "If I had not granted—"

Christopher reached out and laid his hand over Dafydd's wrist. "Nay, we shall talk on this later when you are full healed. I but wanted to clear that barrier betwixt us." He stood, bent down, and pressed his lips against Dafydd's brow. "I will leave you to sleep."

"Christopher," Dafydd's voice cracked as he spoke, "Please stay with me, e'en though I sleep. Whilst we were parted I could not even find you in my dreams. I need...."

"Aye," Christopher said, and he shed his robe and fitted himself in the bed so he was facing Dafydd. "Sleep, cariad. I will not leave you."

Dafydd made a strangled sound as he found Christopher's hand and clutched it tightly. "Twas how he broke me, my king," he whispered. "He called me cariad...."

Christopher gasped, and gripped Dafydd's hand tighter. "Art not broken, cariad; art mine. Beunydd."

Tears spilled silently and Dafydd held the king's hand as he drifted into fitful sleep.



OVER the next several days, Dafydd improved, and yet every time he stirred from his bed the fever returned. Christopher admonished him to stay put, yet Dafydd fretted that he kept him from his duties. Secretly, he also worried for his own strength as he felt it wane with the enforced bed rest.

To appease them both, Christopher spent each morning seeing to the affairs of the kingdom whilst Dafydd sat in a chair before the fire. Before the fever set him to shivering, he worked the muscles of his legs and arms by raising a bucket filled with water. Once spots began to dance before his eyes, he bathed himself with water from the bucket and waited for either Christopher or John to come and assist him back into his bed.

By week's end Christopher had met with both Patrick and Simon. Simon was finally accepted into the fold of the kingdom, due in large part to the sponsorship of Patrick amongst the squires and lords, and John amongst the servants. Christopher promised that Patrick would be properly introduced to the household as knight ere long, and that at such time the proper ceremonies would be honored.

Christopher had also spent a morning with Marged. She grew large with the child, and while he knew she was uncomfortable she did not complain, and she asked after Dafydd.

"He mends," Christopher said softly. "Tis a long road before him."

"Aye," she said softly, her hands folded together on her belly. She chewed her lower lip between her teeth and kept her head bowed.

"What is it, bechan?" Christopher asked. He sat forward in his chair and laid his warm hand over her clammy ones. "Do you fret for the child?"

"Nay," she whispered. "'Tis that I fret for Dafydd." She raised her head; her eyes swam with tears. "I fear because I know he made this choice on my behalf, and he paid a heavy price."

Christopher gasped and gently squeezed her hands. "Dafydd is filled with a

strong sense of chivalry, and were he to be given the choice again he would have responded in like manner. There is much we need to talk about, he and I, but you must not worry overmuch. When he is well he shall see you, and set your mind at ease."

"Aye," she said. "'Tis just that 'tis clear he suffers much."

"He does, and yet he mends, you must believe me," he said firmly.

Marged dipped her head again. "Aye, your majesty."

THE following day Christopher declared he would not leave Dafydd's chamber and Dafydd would not leave his bed. John had instructed him often enough that he knew how to brew the healing draught, and he commanded that none should enter Dafydd's chamber save only the gates of hell had opened outside the walls.

"Today you shall rest, cariad," Christopher said. "I know you but push yourself beyond your capability whilst you think no one watches." He sat upon the bed beside Dafydd, ready to hold him down should he disobey. "The sores on your back have broken open again; 'tis the reason why the fever returns."

Dafydd sighed, settled back beneath the furs, and attempted to suppress a shiver.

"Nay," Christopher said, and his voice had softened considerably. "You must needs leave the furs off so that the fever might cool." Gently he peeled the covers back so that only a thin sheet covered Dafydd's body. "Settle, and cooperate, and I shall bathe your body." He looked up. "Would you like that? Hmmm? My hands upon your body?"

A deep moan collected in Dafydd's throat, and his shiver was mixed with desire. "Aye, my king," he said softly.

"Then you must needs stay abed whilst I retrieve the basin," he said. "If you disobey I shall send Alain to bathe you."

"Art wicked," Dafydd murmured.

"Aye," Christopher said with a wink. He retreated into the bathing chamber, and when he returned he wore only a loose bedrobe. He set the basin beside the bed, and climbed up to sit beside Dafydd. Slowly he pulled the sheet from his body. "Art chilled?" he asked solicitously as he dipped the cloth into the basin.

"Nay," Dafydd whispered.

"'Tis well," Christopher murmured. The cloth was cold, and his practiced hand felt along ahead of it that Dafydd indeed did fever anew. He dipped and wrung the cloth many times until at last he dragged it down the center of his belly. He groaned softly, and sat forward so that the shoulder of the robe slipped down his arm. When he

sat back his arousal was obvious through the part in his robe.

Dafydd rolled toward him, and reached up to gently caress his length. Christopher reached down and clamped a hand around his wrist, halting him.

"Shh," he crooned gently. "Not yet."

"You hunger, my king," Dafydd whispered. "I would not... that you...."

Christopher slid down so that he lay full length on his side in front of Dafydd. "That I turn into an ogre as I did when we traveled from the castle?" He gently pried Dafydd's hand free and smiled at the blush that covered his cheeks. "I would share this with you, yet I would not undo all the work we have wrought this morn." He reached up and caressed the side of Dafydd's face. "Your body is not ready yet. Be patient."

As he moved forward to catch Dafydd's lips in his own, he shifted his hand back down and began to stroke himself, lazily at first until the kiss between them deepened and his moan filled Dafydd's mouth. Only then did he pull away and roll upon his back, eyes closed, legs spread, hips thrusting up into the tight circle of his own fist.

"I feel 'tis your hand upon me, Dafydd," he panted. "'Tis good...."

Dafydd raised his hand to his mouth and bit down upon his knuckle as he watched. Christopher had the right of it; no matter how much the erotic display fed his inner lust, his body did not respond outwardly.

He knew it would take more time, but the fact that he shivered inside made him content. His moan joined Christopher's own when climax was met, and despite orders to the contrary he reached over and laid his hand atop Christopher's when it finally stilled.

Christopher rolled his head to the side, his lips parted as he caught his breath, his eyes softened with the orgasm. "I love you, cariad."

"Aye," Dafydd murmured. "And I love you."

For a time they lay side by side, and then Christopher rolled toward him again. He reached down to pull the sheet up over them and whispered, "Sleep now, with me alongside of you. In a while I shall fix your draught, and entice you to eat."

Indeed Dafydd's eyes drooped, and his voice was husky with sleep. "'Twas your plan, my king, to lull me to sleep so that I would not arise and sit in the chair."

"Aye," Christopher said softly. "Yet my purpose was twofold."

Eyes closed now, Dafydd smiled. "Aye," he said softly, and before too much longer he had drifted to sleep.

"MY lord."

Christopher stirred and opened his eyes to find Alain hovering over them. He frowned. "Has Satan himself come to call?" he growled.

"Nay," Alain said, "a messenger from King Henry."

The scowl deepened on Christopher's brow. "I asked that you not disturb me. Surely you but know how to keep a messenger of the king occupied until the evening meal when I will come below to meet with him."

"Tis Sir Cedric, my lord," Alain said softly. "And he has brought the king's personal physician along with him."

"Cedric," Christopher said as he slipped from the bed. "I would not have expected thus." He turned to retrieve his robe.

"I have your clothing ready in your chamber, and John awaits outside to tend to Dafydd whilst you dress. 'Tis certain the physician means to examine Dafydd."

"Aye," Christopher said as he pulled the robe tightly around him. He strode to the door and bade John enter the room. "Bathe him again, prepare the draught, stay here with him until I return."

"Aye, your majesty," John said and bowed his head.

Despite the fact that King Henry had sent his chief councilor, Christopher deigned to don his court clothing. Within a quarter of an hour, he descended the stairs and found Sir Cedric waiting before the fire.

"Cedric," Christopher said as he swept across the hall. "Tis an honor to receive you here in Lysnowydh."

Sir Cedric smiled, and extended his hand that they might grip each other's forearms and bow a greeting. "When King Henry received your message he dispatched me posthaste, along with a contingent to see how things remained at Strasnedh." They released hands and stepped back. "Art valuable to the king, you and yours. He has sent Bernard, his personal physician, that he might see to Sir Dafydd."

"Tis most kind," Christopher said. "And yet we have treated Dafydd ourselves, using the medical knowledge of the Welsh. He improves apace."

"Twould be wise," Sir Cedric said in a soft voice, "to allow him his examination. Twas a generous offer by our king."

"Aye, of course," Christopher said. "And when 'tis finished mayhaps we can sit before the fire that I might tell you of the battle with Warin."

Sir Cedric nodded. "'Tis King Henry's wish to hear of the trouble firsthand."

Christopher turned to find Alain hovering near the foot of the stairs that led above to the king's chamber as 'twas the signal they had agreed upon that Dafydd was ready for the king's physician.

Bernard was a tall, gaunt man garbed in black robes. He carried himself with a regal grace born from long years at court. His nose twitched in disdain as he entered Dafydd's bedchamber.

"The bed curtains must be drawn, and the window covered lest bad humors be born in on the rays of the sun," he said in a scratchy voice. He set the bag he carried down on the table beside the bed. "How long has the patient fevered?"

"The fever abates," Dafydd said softly.

Bernard held up his hand. "The patient must not speak; he must guard his strength for recovery."

"Sir Dafydd was full torn with fever when we first brought him back from Strasnedh," John said hastily. "But we have—"

"I must not hear the words from servants," Bernard said, his face twisted with disdain. "I will hear them only from you, your majesty."

"Very well," Christopher said, and he turned to give both Alain and John a cautioning look. "Go cover the window, and draw the hangings tightly about the bed." He turned back to face Bernard. "The fever was full upon him for two nights and a day when first we returned from Strasnedh. Young John gave him many draughts of willow bark, rosemary, and valerian, and the fever subsided. The weals upon his back have broken open and festered, thus the fever has returned."

"Witchcraft," Bernard said with a sneer. "I must needs examine the patient." He continued to speak of Dafydd as though he were a lifeless body and not a man. "All will leave whilst the examination is effected." He reached down to grasp the sheet where it lay across Dafydd's chest.

Christopher snaked a hand out and clamped it over Bernard's wrist. "Nay," he said firmly. "The marks upon his body are not for your eyes and you must believe me when I say he improves."

There was a moment of tense silence and then Bernard extracted his hand. "In what month was the patient born?"

"January," Dafydd whispered softly.

Bernard appeared not to have heard as he set about withdrawing a jar from his bag. With a sigh of exasperation, Christopher bent forward and whispered to Dafydd, "What date in January?" he asked softly.

"I know not," Dafydd said. "'Twas early in the month."

"He was born in early January," Christopher said.

"Ah," the physician responded. He turned to look down his nose at Christopher. "I must needs bleed him to reduce the bad humors within his body. 'Tis most likely the fever returns due in part to the witchcraft his servant has practiced upon him." He reached inside the jar and extracted a wiggling leech. "Will you allow me to place the leech where it will do the most good, or should you wish to do it

yourself?"

"Tell me where you wish to place it, and I shall uncover that part of his flesh," Christopher replied.

"Capricorn must have no damage to the knees as it weakens the system. I must place the leeches on his belly, and they must be changed within four hours. Because you will not allow me a proper examination of the body, I cannot cut his veins to release the blood." He stepped back to allow Christopher to remove the sheeting.

Christopher carefully slid the sheet to the side so that only a small portion of Dafydd's belly was exposed. He watched as Dafydd winced when the leech's tiny teeth cut into his flesh. The sheet was replaced and the other side exposed. In all, three leeches were placed upon his belly.

"I will send my assistant up to sit with the patient to ensure that the leeches are replaced," Bernard said as he straightened up.

"'Tis not necessary," Christopher said smoothly. "Dafydd's body servant will remain by his side."

The physician nodded, a sour look on his face. "As you wish." He turned to gather his things and left the jar of leeches on the table beside the bed.

Christopher said softly to Alain, "Go below and inform Sir Cedric I will join him anon; I must needs have a word with Dafydd."

"Aye, your majesty," Alain said. He waited until Bernard was ready, and then led him below stairs.

"Uncover the window," Christopher said as he pulled the bed curtains back. "Tis nonsense. I believe the rays of the sun carry healing powers, not bad humors."

"Aye, your majesty," John said.

Christopher pulled the covers back and revealed the wiggling leeches. "Remove these," he said curtly. "Tis not my belief that by depleting his blood supply further he will heal."

"There is one thing he said that may have merit," Dafydd said softly. He shifted so that the covers fell away from his legs and displayed the wounds upon his knees. "It is a belief among the Welsh that health and well-being are betimes connected with the sign of the sun under which one was born." He raised his eyes to look at John. "Mayhaps you can make a poultice, yarrow mixed with rosemary wrapped in fine muslin to cover these sores. "Tis possible they are the source of the fever, and not my back."

"Aye," John said. "Tis truth." He turned and hurried into the still room.

Christopher sat on the side of the bed and began to carefully pry the leeches from Dafydd's belly. "We will make you well, cariad," he murmured. "'Tis my oath to you."

"I know, my king," Dafydd said.

THAT night after the meal, Christopher sat with Sir Cedric in chairs pulled up before the hearth.

"How long will you stay?" Christopher asked.

"A week and more," Sir Cedric said. "King Henry but wishes to ensure that all is well here before Bernard and I depart for home." He cast a sideways glance. "He wishes Bernard to check upon the Lady Marged as well."

"Aye," Christopher said with a sigh. "At least he will not feel the need to affix leeches to my lady. And in truth 'twould set my mind at ease to ensure that Marged fares well. She seems to, yet I do not believe she would complain were she not well."

"Tis one of the many mysteries of ladies and childbirth, methinks," Sir Cedric said. He took a sip of his wine and said, "The party I sent forth to Strasnedh ere we arrived has reported back."

"And?" Christopher said.

"Of course 'twas as you said. The keep is destroyed, the outlying fields have been torn asunder, and no man remained alive within miles of the castle. There was no sign of Warin, yet the party was led to believe that he skulks close within the area. Mayhaps he plots revenge."

"Mayhaps," Christopher said. "'Tis hard to know what is in his mind betimes."

"Regardless of the truth of the matter, 'tis clear to King Henry that the attack upon Lysnowydh was not prompted by Lysnowydh's king, nor any who live within the kingdom." He raised his hand as Christopher opened his mouth to speak. "King Henry knows well the history betwixt you, and in his mind the past was not sufficient reason to excuse the wrongs done to you and yours in the present. Whilst I pass the week within your keep, parties will scour the surrounding environs. If Warin is found, he will be returned to London with us as our prisoner. 'Tis more likely he will not be found, in which case the men will seek for those who lately lived within Strasnedh that can share the right of the story."

"There is one such within my kingdom now," Christopher said. "Simon was a servant in Warin's household, but was sent forth from my kingdom in the year past as he was part of a contingent that conspired to besmirch Sir Dafydd's name. I granted them their measly lives, and they fell in league with Strasnedh." He turned to gaze into the fire. "Sir Dafydd intervened in their favor, else I would have hung them all as traitorous dogs."

"You said he was within your kingdom," Sir Cedric said softly. "How came that to pass?"

"He became our ally. Warin's ways sickened him and he assisted us in

breaking past the defenses. Were it not for him 'tis likely we would not have reached Dafydd in time."

Sir Cedric inclined his head. "Then he shall accompany us back to London. Betwixt you and I alone," he lowered his voice, "this incident has served to spur King Henry to build a case against Warin and his cowardly ways. 'Tis likely this single event will turn the tables against him for all time."

"Then you may take Simon, and any others you find, with my blessing," Christopher said. "Would that the countryside be rid of the blight."

"And it shall." Sir Cedric said.

Talk turned then, and Christopher listened with only half an ear. On the morrow he would spend time with Dafydd again, broach the subject of what had been done to him whilst he was held in captivity. Although he knew it would be painful to relate, and painful to hear, he knew that holding it was likely preventing Dafydd's body from fully healing.



PLANS laid with the best intentions often go awry, and such was the case for Christopher and his plan to speak with Dafydd the next day. While they broke their fast, Sir Cedric requested a tour of the kingdom, and Christopher knew he could not entrust such to anyone else. With Dafydd an invalid, second in command in the kingdom fell to Sir Cuthbert, yet he was not equipped to entertain King Henry's chief councilor.

As the boards were cleared, Christopher scrawled a hasty message to Dafydd, urging him to rest and saying that he would see him in the evening hours. Alain and John vowed to keep their eyes upon Dafydd that he would continue to improve and not lapse back into fever again. As he passed from the hall, he found Dewi sitting at the foot of the stairway staring dolefully upward. He bent to scratch behind his ears, then turned back to hail John.

"Allow this mutt up into Dafydd's room. Mayhaps he shall help Dafydd to ease."

With a cheeky grin John took hold of the scruff of Dewi's neck. "I shall keep him in the still room if the king's physician snoops about."

"Tis well," Christopher said, and he leaned in closer to whisper, "yet see Bernard stays out of the sick room if at all possible."

His mind set somewhat to rest, Christopher mounted up and rode out with Sir Cedric. In truth, he needed this respite from the sick room. He loved Dafydd with all his heart, but was hard-pressed to admit to anyone, least of all himself, how difficult it was to see Dafydd in such a state. He had been long used to an active lifestyle within his kingdom, and enforced inactivity had begun to take a toll on him. He threw himself into his duties, showed his kingdom to Sir Cedric with great pride. They remained close to the keep, as Christopher vowed he would return each night that he might see how Dafydd fared, and Sir Cedric agreed wholeheartedly.

In the end, it kept him from Dafydd's bedside for an entire week.

The enforced separation was good for Dafydd as well. Although he would not admit it, there were times when he found Christopher's constant hovering a burden. He knew that recovery was not a pretty sight, and holding himself with some semblance of pride whilst the pain wracked his body was not an easy task. In his heart, he longed for the day when he was whole again, and the ordeal could be put behind them both. He knew there were still issues to be dealt with and he vowed that they would not live out the balance of their lives with doubt and blame hidden on each side.

John was his constant companion during the week that Christopher rode with Sir Cedric amongst the closer regions of the kingdom. Dafydd felt little shame in allowing John to assist him. Between his direction in the preparation of the poultices and draughts, and John's ever-growing skill in carrying out the directions, Dafydd began to improve apace. The sores on his knees began to scab over and heal, and as they did the fever was chased from his body for good.

Although it was difficult, he kept to his bed until the fever was gone for several days. When it finally was, he arose to sit before the fire for a few hours at a stretch, with Dewi at his feet. By week's end he had made the journey from his chamber, through the bathing chamber, and into the king's chamber. From the window there he watched the squires drilling and was pleased that they were not slacking off in his absence.

Soon he would be well enough to venture below stairs, but he vowed to wait until Christopher was returned to his side for that.

Thwarted from seeing to Dafydd, Bernard turned his attentions upon Marged, and in her he found a willing ally. She was unwilling to admit to Anne, or anyone else within Lysnowydh, that the prospect of childbirth was frightening to her, but for some reason she found she was able to admit it to the dour physician. Perhaps because he was used to the primarily male members of King Henry's court, Bernard was fascinated with Marged.

His first order of business, after he had made an examination, was to seek among the women of the village for a midwife. When one was found she was moved to the castle and set up in a room near Marged's. Much time was spent in the preparations, and by the end of the week Bernard deemed that all would be ready when the time came to receive the king's heir.

Marged asked if Bernard would be staying to oversee the birth, and as much as he said he would like to he knew he would return to London with Sir Cedric long before the child was born.

At the end of the week, Lysnowydh bid farewell to Sir Cedric and Bernard. Both had positive reports to give to King Henry. Simon joined them in the return trip. Although Sir Cedric's party had ridden the countryside in search of any left alive in Strasnedh, none had been found. Sentries were left to watch, although there was little hope that any would be found.

Once King Henry's party had departed, the keep began to return to normalcy.

DAFYDD continued to improve in the week that followed Sir Cedric's departure, yet he was still not ready to rejoin life among the people in the keep. Now that the danger was past, Christopher kept himself active during the day. He assumed Dafydd's responsibility with the squires, and came to eat his evening meal each day in Dafydd's chamber.

Each day with John's help, Dafydd rose and dressed. He moved about the chamber, worked in his still room, and walked into the king's chamber that he might gaze out the window. The fever did not return; all that remained were the errant pains that still plagued him.

Several days went by, and one rainy evening after they had eaten their meal, Christopher and Dafydd sat before the fire with goblets of wine. Dafydd's was mulled with rosemary and willow bark.

"Has the pain subsided?" Christopher asked.

"Aye," Dafydd said. He took a sip of his wine. "In truth, 'tis not gone entirely, and yet it has abated."

"'Tis well," Christopher said softly. He was quiet for a moment and then deemed the time had come to broach the final subjects that lay before them. "Dafydd, I would have you tell me what he did to you."

"Nay," Dafydd said softly. "I cannot."

"Tis not a choice I give you," Christopher said, a hint of steel underlying the softness. "I know you wish to spare me, but as it is I can guess, and I would as soon know the truth."

"So you may torment yourself with the knowledge ever after?" Dafydd asked.

"The knowledge will torment me whether you speak of it or not," Christopher said. "Betimes 'tis best to just share in it that we might lessen it."

"Tell me first," Dafydd said, "how did you leave him ere you brought me home?"

"Cowering in his keep, awaiting my return to slay him should you not live."

Dafydd closed his eyes and sighed deeply. Then he stood and went to settle upon the bed. "Come, that I might hold you, and I shall tell you all."

Christopher rose from the chair and eased himself down against Dafydd's body. He reached for his hand and held it in his, cradled against his chest. He listened as Dafydd recounted what he had already guessed based upon the marks on his body. It became clear to Christopher that Dafydd had resisted at every step of the way, thus the numerous lashes and torn knees. He had been given little food, and no clean water. No treatment had been given for the wounds; hence they had festered and

caused him to sicken with infection. When at last he fell silent, Christopher raised Dafydd's hand and pressed his lips against the back of it.

"You have not told me all," he whispered.

"Aye," Dafydd said hoarsely, "I have."

"Nay," Christopher said. He twisted so that their eyes met. "I have seen your body, cariad. I know he forced himself upon you, that he hurt you."

A muscle tensed in Dafydd's jaw. "Do not make me tell you that."

"I will not make you," Christopher said. He reached up and traced a finger down Dafydd's cheek. "I would but have you tell me what he said that I might tell you the truth behind his lies."

Dafydd closed his eyes again. "He told me he wished to destroy you, not your kingdom, and that the reason for that was something betwixt the two of you only."

Christopher lowered his hand and pressed his cheek against Dafydd's chest. "There was a time when Warin and I shared much. I have told you that," he said softly. "I did not tell you the way it was betwixt us." He drew in his breath and let it out slowly. "Always now Warin is the aggressor in sexual relations. Between he and I though, 'twas I who took the lead. I gave him the sweet pain he desired, that which he metes out now in retribution to any unlucky enough to cross his path."

After a silence, Dafydd said, "I do not understand such things. Between you and I there is naught but pleasure; there is no need to cause pain."

"Aye," Christopher said, "it is as it should be. Warin but feeds upon his own discontent, and I shall forevermore rue the day that I led you into this evil thing."

"Nay, my king," Dafydd said softly. "I do not. Mayhaps there was a day when your anger would have ruled your actions and you would have slain him where he stood for what he had wrought. And yet you tell me you let him live that he might pass the rest of his eternity knowing what he lost. That is the triumph." He was quiet for a moment, and then he continued. "Misfortune such as this bonds us tighter, methinks."

"Mayhaps you are right," Christopher said. "And yet 'twould be easier on my soul if it never happened."

"We cannot change what is in the past, Christopher," he said softly.

"None can change what is in the past," Christopher replied.

Dafydd chewed upon his lower lip and at last he said softly, "Had I not pleaded mercy for the men, they would not have fallen in with Warin."

"Nay," Christopher said fiercely. "Mayhaps you misunderstood me in the hours before we left Lysnowydh to retrieve Marged. I was angered, but my anger was not with you."

"Yet if you had hung Sir Robert for treason instead of letting him go, this would not have been brought upon us," Dafydd said.

"And Warin would have found yet some other way to get at me." Christopher's features softened somewhat and he moved closer. "Dafydd, there was a time when the wish for vengeance lay heavy upon me. When I sought to strike out at any wrong crossed against me. You have shown me otherwise. Had I followed my heart back then the life of an innocent would have been lost. Hear me well, Dafydd: none of this was your doing. Some things are preordained and we cannot change them."

"I hear you," Dafydd whispered. "'Tis just that 'tis hard to believe you."

"In time," Christopher said, "mayhaps you will believe me. Until such time I will not push you, just ask you to know that I love you, cariad, and I shall always love you. You have given me the gift not only of your person, but also of your wisdom. Warin shall now live the balance of his life knowing what he has lost, knowing that he is responsible for the destruction of his own kingdom. There will be no likely allies for him to fall in with; all he knew is destroyed. That is a far greater punishment than if I had cut him down in his tracks for the dog that he is." He bent closer and laid his lips upon Dafydd's brow. "You have made me see the light, Dafydd, and for that I shall be forever grateful."

"'Twill take time, my king, and yet I do know that you love me, and that I love you."

"I am a lucky man to have you, Dafydd," Christopher murmured as he settled down against Dafydd.

"'Tis not luck; 'tis fate," Dafydd said drowsily as the mulled wine began to take effect. "I have told you that you were in my dreams e'en before I came to Lysnowydh. When I lay in Warin's dungeon and I could not find you in my dreams, I feared all was lost."

"But 'twas not," Christopher said firmly. "And 'tis not. Art mine, and only mine."

"Beunydd," Dafydd murmured.

As the rain continued to tap softly against the window, they drifted to sleep.

PERHAPS the belief that Dafydd had carried in his heart that he was held responsible for Marged's abduction and his own captivity had been the barrier that kept him from full recovery. Once he and Christopher cleared the air, his body seemed to heal completely. Most of the pain dissipated, and he was at last ready to venture below stairs.

Most within the keep knew Dafydd was reserved in the main, and knew that he would not take kindly to being fawned over. When he emerged from the king's

private stairway for the evening meal the following day, most kept their distance. The few that approached offered genuine smiles of welcome and warm hands extended in friendship. Dafydd began to relax as he realized that his presence was nothing out of the ordinary, at least outwardly, to the people of Lysnowydh.

As they moved across the hall toward the dais, he saw that Marged waited, and he paused. Christopher turned as if he felt Dafydd's hesitation without seeing it. He murmured softly, "Go and wait in the wall chamber. I shall send her within. 'Tis not for the keep to see. You must make your peace."

Dafydd nodded, and turned to walk stiffly across the hall toward the chamber. He was armed with the knowledge that he was not responsible, and Christopher had told him that she felt the same, yet he still worried over what he should say to her.

He stood facing the narrow slit that served as a window, and felt her enter the room before she spoke. They stood in silence for several moments before he turned to face her. She remained close to the door; her face was pinched and wan. In that moment he realized that in all likelihood their feelings of guilt were similar. He opened his arms; thus she was encouraged to walk toward him.

"Dafydd," she murmured as she felt his arms close around her. Her face against the soft velvet of his surcoat, she said, "Edifara."

"Nay, beraidd," he whispered. "There is no need for you to be sorry, for either of us to feel responsibility for King Warin's wickedness."

"Nay," she said, her voice catching on a sob. "If I had abided by King Christopher's wishes and stayed indoors, I would not have been taken captive."

"Aye," he said, his own voice cracking. "And if I had allowed King Christopher to hang Sir Robert, he would not have aligned with King Warin and you would not have been abducted." He reached down to cup her face in his large hand, eased her back that they might see each other's eyes. "This was not our doing, Marged. We but followed our destiny, what were preordained steps for us. In the grand scheme of things, 'twas meant for this hardship to befall us. It has made us stronger, bound us tighter together, and more importantly, has bound each of us tighter to our king." He stroked her cheek gently with his thumb. "What does not kill us makes us stronger."

Tears poured freely from her eyes. "How can you not hold me responsible?" she sobbed.

"Mayhaps 'twould be easier for you if I did," he said. "As 'twould be easier for me if Christopher would allow me to take the responsibility." He paused to clear his throat. "But we must both come to terms with the fact that King Warin was an evil, evil man. Were it not this, 'twould have been something else. 'Twas his desire to ruin our king, and if we allow this to be forever between us, he will have succeeded." His face became fierce. "And I cannot allow that."

Marged gasped, and leaned forward to bury her face against him again. "Art wise, Dafydd," she whispered.

"Nay, beraidd," he crooned. "I am honest." He held her until her body stopped shaking, and then stepped back from her. "Let us rejoin the king, let him see that we have made peace that he might also find peace within his own soul."

One last tear tracked down her cheek. "I love you, Dafydd," she whispered.

"Aye," he said as he took her hand. "As I love you."

When they emerged from the wall chamber, there was an audible sigh of relief amongst the people. While they had not meant to intrude on what was between the king, his consort, and the mother of his heir, they all wished for a return to the unlikely normalcy that was their kingdom.

Christopher stood from his seat at the main table and beamed as Marged and Dafydd approached. Once they took their seats, he roared, "Let the feast commence. Sir Dafydd is returned to us full healed, and my lady Marged burgeons with new life. All is well again in Lysnowydh."

"Hear!" the crowd roared in return.

As the feasting began, Christopher spoke softly with each in turn, and only then did Dafydd feel tears well within his eyes.

DAFYDD eased back into his duties slowly. At first he could only spend an hour or two with the squires, as sitting a horse was difficult. He spent much of his time watching as he paced within the shadow of the wall. His mind was active, and the squires felt the sting of his supervision even though he did not directly supervise them much of the time.

One week after he had returned to the helm, Christopher found him shouting orders and Sir Cuthbert riding among the ranks to ensure that they were followed. He smiled as he approached, and signaled for Sir Cuthbert to break ranks and ride close.

"You must needs finish the drill on your own," he said as Sir Cuthbert dismounted. "I have need of Dafydd. I shall return him on the morrow."

"Aye, your majesty," Cuthbert said with a wink. Long service with the king allowed him this familiarity.

Dafydd fell into step alongside Christopher as they walked away from the practice yard. Once inside the courtyard he headed toward the outer stairway that led to the keep, but Christopher caught his hand and pulled him back.

"To the stables, Dafydd. Not back inside on such a nice day." He smiled.

"The stables? I thought you said you had need of me...."

Christopher stopped and put his hands on his hips. He was clad simply this day in a loose cotton shirt and an old worn leather jerkin along with an old pair of chausses. He smiled impishly. "Tis not only the bedchamber where I have need of you, cariad." He tipped his head to the side and watched the soft color creep across Dafydd's cheeks. "Ah, 'tis well that I can still make you blush." He stepped forward and pressed a kiss to the tip of Dafydd's nose. "The color becomes you."

"My king," Dafydd said, still somewhat flustered, "what need have you of me in the stables?"

"To mount your horse and ride forth with me," Christopher said. He held up a hand to stay the protest. "Tis not far I mean to make you ride, but ride you must."

"As you wish," Dafydd said, and he followed Christopher into the stables.

The horses were already saddled and waiting. Christopher watched as Dafydd swung up into the saddle and bit his lip as he winced once he was settled. He easily swung into his own saddle and led the way. Once they were out on the open road, he fell back to allow Dafydd to catch up.

"To where do we ride?" Dafydd asked as he rode abreast. Whatever pain he felt was now neatly hidden.

"You shall see," Christopher said. He turned to study Dafydd as they rode under the shade of the trees. "There was aught I meant to ask you. You said as that you had seen me in your dreams ere you came to Lysnowydh. I thought 'twas the fever speaking, and yet mayhaps 'twas not."

"'Twas not fever, Christopher; 'twas truth. Always you are in my dreams, mayhaps as a sprite. I believe you but guided my steps ere I came here. 'Tis my belief that we were destined to meet."

Christopher gazed at the trees as they rode further into the forest. "Not just to meet, mayhaps to fall in love."

"Aye," Dafydd murmured, a frown on his brow as he began to recognize the path they followed. "The Welsh have long believed that our destinies are ordained before we are born. I felt a force directing my steps, and when I first laid my eyes upon you I knew 'twas you who were my destiny." He turned his horse's head to follow as Christopher left the main path for a smaller one through the woods. "Twas near here, my king, where first I did lay my eyes upon you."

"'Tis truth," Christopher said. He spurred his horse forward and into the clearing that contained the small cottage. "And 'twas also here where we first touched." He turned to meet Dafydd's gaze. "Tis long since we have shared our bodies, cariad, and so you had the right of it: that is the cause of my need." He slid from the saddle and waited for Dafydd to join him.

With a practiced eye Dafydd looked over the exterior of the cottage, and saw that all had been kept much as he had left it. He slipped from the saddle, and turned away to hide the gasp of pain. He felt Christopher's hand on his shoulder, heard his whisper in his ear.

"Twas here we first began this journey; 'tis here we continue it. I will not force you, as I did not force you that winter's night," he said as he tightened his grip

on Dafydd's shoulder. "Go inside and wait for me whilst I see to these beasts."

"Aye," Dafydd said. He pushed open the door and stepped within the cool interior of the cottage. A small fire burned in the hearth and his heart fluttered as he realized the depth of the king's intent. The only change he could determine was that the bed frame was now covered with a mattress from the keep, and soft furs replaced the worn ones he had been accustomed to. As he moved in and stood before the fire, he felt desire course through him as it had not in the days since he had submitted to Warin.

Christopher joined him soon after. He turned Dafydd toward him and enfolded him in his arms. "I love you much, cariad," he said softly. "You must needs give me your trust."

"I need not give it to you," Dafydd replied, "as you have had it always. 'Tis my desire to lie with you in yon bed where we first discovered what was between us."

Without speaking further they stood back from each other and shed their clothing. Outside the sun was sinking, and inside the glow of the fire bathed their bodies. With a practiced eye Christopher saw that all Dafydd's wounds had healed. There were scars upon his knees and back, but all else had faded to only memories. With his hand still gentle upon Dafydd, he reached down and drew the covers back, and urged Dafydd down upon the bed.

"Art as magnificent now as you were then," Christopher said as he settled down beside Dafydd on the narrow bed. He shifted so that he was propped up above him, and looked down into his eyes. "I cannot promise that I will not hurt you, Dafydd," he said softly, "because I know I shall. I will not ask you if you wish me to stop, because I will not stop." He dipped his head and pressed his lips upon Dafydd's chest. "Art strong, Dafydd. Whatever pain I cause will pass, and mayhaps be the genesis of something stronger between us."

"My king," Dafydd said in a ragged voice, "you must needs make me yours again or my body shall explode." He shifted beneath him. His hardened length slid along the king's own and he groaned softly. "In truth, 'twould be greater pain to never feel you inside me again."

"Shh," Christopher crooned softly. "I will be easy with you."

No further words passed between them as Christopher closed his mouth over Dafydd's and kissed him deeply. All seemed to pass in slow motion between them as they reacquainted themselves with each other's bodies. Christopher coated his fingers in the ready pot of cream that had been left on a low stool beside the bed. As he slid his fingers between Dafydd's legs, he felt him stiffen below him, and he renewed his gentle touch and kiss until he felt him relax and spread his legs wider.

At last he rose up, spread Dafydd's long legs on either side of him, and dipped his fingers in the pot again. It was almost full dark, yet he was just able to make out that Dafydd's body had healed greatly. He slid his fingers inside again, listened to Dafydd's moan, and watched as his cock twitched. Slowly he drew his fingers free and applied a liberal amount of cream to his own hard length.

"Look at me, Dafydd," he whispered. "Let me hold you with my eyes."

Dafydd opened his eyes and reached for one of Christopher's hands. He threaded their fingers together. His eyes clouded with pain as Christopher began to ease inside of him, but he did not let go, did not cry out.

"Tis home, Dafydd," Christopher said once seated firmly inside. "Tis where we belong always."

"Beunydd," Dafydd murmured. He shifted so that both his legs wrapped around Christopher's waist. "Anwylyd."

Christopher dipped down to touch his lips to Dafydd's, and then began to move his hips gently, small movements that built as the heat built between them. Dafydd's moans of pain turned to cries of release, and were met with Christopher's own. Once the climax was passed, Christopher pulled free and twisted down to mold his body alongside Dafydd's own.

"'Twas not my intention to keep you here o'ernight," he murmured as he nuzzled Dafydd's neck.

"Aye," Dafydd whispered. "Just a little while longer yet."

"Mmm," Christopher said. "A little while longer...."

Sated, they drifted into a light doze, arms and legs entangled tightly together. They dozed until a firm hand reached down to shake them awake.

"My lord," Alain said urgently, "twas not my desire to disturb you." He hurried on before the king could protest. "Tis the lady Marged. The child wishes to be born. Soon."



CHRISTOPHER and Dafydd arrived back at the castle in the dark hour just before dawn. The courtyard was awash with torchlight, and stable boys waited to take their horses. Although the king had not intended that they pass the night in the small cottage that had once belonged to the woodsman, they had indeed nearly slept the night through. Once they had dismounted and hastened into the main hall, they were met by Sir Walter, and found that many had gathered near the great hearth.

"What news?" Christopher asked.

"As soon as she was wakened with pains, I sent Alain forth to fetch you, your majesty," Sir Walter said. "I shall call for Blanche that she might tell you how it goes."

"Tis well," Christopher said. He turned to find John hovering nearby. "Fetch a pillow for Sir Dafydd's chair."

"Aye."

Blanche was a plump woman who had served as midwife in the town that surrounded the keep of Lysnowydh, yet there had been no need for her within the keep in many years. She bustled out, full of self-importance to face the king.

"How does she fare?" he demanded.

"She struggles, my lord," she said softly. "The pains have not begun in earnest yet, and yet she cries out with them."

Christopher frowned. "Who is with her?"

"Her maid Anne, Alyce, and Matilda."

Dafydd moved closer to whisper against Christopher's ear, "You must go to her, my king. In this time she needs family, someone close to her, and she does not have that. The closest she comes to that is the Lady Mary, but we have no time to send for her. She needs you, Christopher."

Blanche gasped. "Nay, your majesty. A man has no place in the birthing chamber, least of all a king. Leave the tedious chore of bringing your heir into the world to those best equipped to handle it."

As though he had not heard her, Christopher turned toward Dafydd, and took his hand. He raised it and kissed the back. "Art wise, cariad."

Dafydd bent down and brushed his lips over Christopher's cheek. "Go to her."

Christopher squeezed his hand, turned, and strode across the room.

"Wait, your majesty," Blanche squawked, and she hastened after him. "You must not enter the birthing chamber."

Nearly at the door, Christopher whirled about, his face a mask of icy rage. "Silence," he roared. "Tis not your place to tell your king of what he can and cannot do. Be careful lest I ban you from my presence." He stalked closer and lowered his voice. "If you have a care for my lady, then hold your tongue and bide my command."

Blanche stepped back, her face white. "Aye, your majesty."

Dafydd watched as Christopher turned and continued across the room, Blanche in his wake. He turned to walk toward the hearth, grateful as he sank into his chair that Christopher had called for the pillow. The pillow was proof beyond a shadow of doubt that Christopher loved him. He settled in to wait, along with Sir Walter and the other men of the kingdom.

MARGED'S wall chamber contained only a small brazier for heating, and so she had been moved to the sewing chamber. The room was brightly lit and overwarm. Christopher found her huddled in a chair before the blazing hearth, clad only in her shift, her face a mask of misery. He strode across the room and pulled her up into his arms.

"I am here, bechan," he said softly. "I will not leave you."

"Your majesty," she whispered as she tightened her arms around his neck. "I did not... Blanche said...." She clung to him and whimpered as a pain passed through her small frame. "I am not strong."

"Hush," he crooned gently. "'Tis a heavy task set before you, and you will not face it alone. 'Tis my vow, and my promise."

Blanche hovered close beside him. "She must sit, your majesty, or lie upon the table."

Christopher turned to sit in the chair himself, and cradled Marged in his lap. He gently caressed her belly, and she began to relax against him. "Why have you not brought her bed?"

"Children are not birthed in bed, your majesty," Blanche scolded.

Matilda stepped forward. She saw the anger on the king's face, and the indignation on the face of the midwife. "Blanche," she said gently and laid a hand on her arm, "see to the women. They have brought what you requested."

Heaving a sigh, Blanche turned to walk across the room to examine the work Anne and Alyce had done in her absence.

Matilda knelt down beside the chair and laid her hand soothingly on Marged's back. "Despite what Blanche may have told you, your majesty," she said softly, "'Tis well you are here. 'Tis your gentle touch she needed the most. She settles now you are here."

"Aye," he said softly, his lips pressed against the top of her head. "Rest, bechan. Gain your strength for the task ahead of you." He turned and murmured softly to Matilda, "My thanks. This is not within your realm, yet I am glad you are here."

"'Tis my honor, your majesty." She smiled, her hand a gentle caress upon the small of Marged's back. "I think of the lady Marged almost as my own." After a moment she stood and retreated across the room, gave the king and his lady their space.

Christopher held Marged within the circle of his arms, caressed her belly, and pressed soft kisses upon her forehead while he talked to her softly. He shared stories of his youth, told her of his mother and father, and remembered her early days within his kingdom. Through it all she relaxed even more until the pains just caused her to grimace and grip his hand tightly.

Matilda kept Blanche away, yet they all watched for the time when the pains would come closer together, as that would signal the imminent birth.

"Where is Dafydd?" Marged asked after the pain subsided again.

"He is in the hall, mayhaps pacing a hole in the floor by now," Christopher said with a chuckle. "I would not offend Blanche's sensibilities further by bringing him hither."

"Nay," Marged said. "I would not mind as he would be a comfort to you, and yet I fear Blanche's sensibilities are already sorely offended." She wrinkled her nose and cuddled closer against him. "I would that he sees the babe first. 'Tis my wish that you and he have a private moment with your son."

"Aye," Christopher said. He traced a finger over her cheek. "Art special to both of us, bechan."

Her face clouded with pain and she gripped his arm tightly. "I believe," she gasped, "the pains worsen."

"Mayhaps 'tis time," he said.

Blanche moved closer as Christopher shifted Marged so that her feet were on the floor. He cradled her back against his body. The pains did seem to come closer together.

"You must not push, my lady," Blanche said. "Tis not time yet."

Marged moaned, and twisted her head back against Christopher. He whispered, "'Tis not time to push yet, bechan. I will tell you when 'tis time."

"She listens to his voice," Matilda said. "Tis likely it is the only she can hear."

Blanche knelt in front of them and spread the soft cloths upon the floor. "Bring the water," she barked at Anne, "and the oils you have prepared." She steadied Marged's knees against the king's and lifted the light shift she wore. "Hold her, your majesty. Hold her tightly."

Christopher clamped a strong arm around her torso, held her firmly against him, and threaded his fingers through hers. "Be brave," he whispered against her ear.

A bowl of heated water was set beside Blanche. "Tell her that once the pain eases 'tis time to push."

"When the pain passes 'tis time to push, Marged," Christopher whispered against her ear. "Breathe deeply; hold my hand."

"Yes, my lady, that's the way," Blanche said. "The head is crowning."

"The child comes, bechan," Christopher said.

Matilda, Anne, and Alyce clustered behind Blanche, ready to catch the child when it came. Dafydd had prepared a special cream to rub on Marged's belly after the child was born, and Agnes had pressed oil from olives with which to bathe mother and child.

"Just a few more," Christopher urged Marged.

Indeed, with just a few more pushes and a loud wail, Marged pushed the child from her body into Blanche's waiting hands.

"Tis a boy!" Blanche proclaimed, and she wrapped the child in cloths after severing the cord. She handed the bundle to Alyce, and reached up to push upon Marged's belly. "You must needs push again, my lady."

Christopher tightened his hold on Marged and buried his face against her neck. "Tis a boy, bechan." His voice broke with emotion.

"Ah, Christopher," she moaned, and tightened her hand on his as another pain passed through her. "I am glad."

"Push, my lady," Blanche said.

Christopher continued to hold her as the afterbirth was expelled, and she was cleaned up. He held out his hand for the cream, and rubbed her belly himself. She slumped against him in fatigue. He pulled her up against him again.

"She must have her bed," he said. "Bring the babe that we might see it."

Rosy-cheeked and glowing, Anne carried the babe toward them. Marged reached up and Anne put the babe into her arms. He slept peacefully after the ordeal of birth, and both Christopher and Marged gazed upon him, tears on their cheeks.

"He is beautiful," Marged said softly.

"Aye," Christopher whispered. "He is the image of you."

"And of you," she said. She turned shyly and pressed a kiss upon his neck. "And even," she paused and looked up to meet his gaze, "he looks a little like Dafydd." A soft smile touched her lips, and pride filled her voice, "He has the look of the Welsh."

"Mayhaps," Christopher said, and he reached up to caress the downy hair of the infant. He murmured so softly that Marged hardly heard him, "Tis well."

Anne reached down for the babe again. "Bring her to her bed, your majesty. A cradle awaits for the bairn, and I will sit beside them this night."

Carefully, Christopher handed the child up to her waiting arms. "Hold him here a moment whilst I carry Marged to her much-needed rest. I will bring Dafydd that he might see the babe."

"Your majesty," Blanche started, and before she could finish Matilda laid a hand on her arm. She fell silent and watched as Christopher gathered Marged up in his arms and carried her from the room.

When she was settled in her bed, he sat on the edge and held her hand. "I shall bring him to you when Dafydd has seen him. You must rest, bechan. You have made me very happy this morn."

"You must choose his name, Christopher," she said sleepily, a small smile on her lips.

"I shall let Dafydd choose the name," he whispered as he bent to press his lips against her brow. "And you shall know it when you wake again."

"Aye." And with a smile on her lips, she drifted to sleep.

In the time since they had returned from the cottage, Dafydd had remained in the great hall with the other men. As time passed, more and more joined their group before the hearth. For the most part they were quiet, speaking aloud only to wonder how things fared within the birthing chamber.

Once dawn broke, John brought forth ale and breads that the men might break their fast.

"I wonder if 'twill be a boy or a girl," Sir Cuthbert said at last.

"I hope 'tis a strong lad," Sir Walter said.

"Aye," Father Geoffrey said. "A strong lad as can be blessed to rule after his father."

"I hope 'tis a strong child," Dafydd said softly. "'Tis no matter to me if 'tis boy or girl as long as 'tis healthy."

"Aye," said Sir William, "but if 'tis a girl child then the king must needs lie with Marged again until he brings forth a boy." He stuffed a piece of bread into his mouth. "Methinks you'd wish for a boy to keep the king from her bed and in your own."

There was a shocked silence as all turned to gaze at Sir William. Dafydd finished his heel of bread and reached for his goblet.

"I worry not for that," he said, then took a long swallow of ale. "Were he to bring forth a string of children from Marged, or any other, I know there is much to bring him back to my bed." He set his tankard down. "You will be well served, Sir William, to keep such inappropriate speculations to yourself."

All smiled save Father Geoffrey, and the tension eased. Soon after, Matilda emerged into the hall. All the men rose from their seats and watched as she approached Dafydd.

"The king wishes you join him in the sewing chamber," she said, and she stood back to allow Dafydd to walk before her.

"What news?" asked Sir Walter.

She smiled demurely. "In good time, Sir Walter, all in good time."

Dafydd hurried across the hall, and found Christopher seated before the fire. He knelt down beside him and looked at the infant resting in his arms. "He is born," he said softly.

"Aye, and you had the right of it, Dafydd. 'Tis a wee boy child." Carefully he held the bundle out to Dafydd. "Our son, cariad."

As if he were used to such things, Dafydd took the babe and cradled it against his chest, supported his back with a large hand. He gazed down, and at that moment the babe opened his eyes.

"He is magnificent," Dafydd said, his voice cracking with the emotion he felt.

"I would that you name him, Dafydd," Christopher said softly, his hand on Dafydd's shoulder.

"Anwyll," Dafydd said. "And if you agree Edward as his second name. I know you wished to not name him for your father, but it would please me."

"Anwyll," Christopher said. "Tis a strong name." He squeezed gently. "Does it have special meaning to you?"

"The meaning is the same as my own name, my king," Dafydd said softly, and

he raised his head that he might look into the king's eyes. "It means beloved. And he will be greatly beloved."

Tears welled in Christopher's eyes, and he said, "Aye, cariad, he will be beloved by me, you, his mother, and all who dwell in Lysnowydh." He bent forward and pressed his lips against Dafydd's brow. "And if it pleases you to name him for my father, then it pleases me as well."

Anne came forward to take the babe, and Christopher rose to pull Dafydd into his arms. The room had been set to rights again, and the women retreated.

"Come," Christopher said. "We must needs tell the men."

AFTER the announcement had been made, and congratulations were offered all around, the castlefolk set into preparations that the heir would be welcomed with great celebration. A holiday was declared, yet all pitched in to prepare for the feasting that would come in the evening.

Christopher and Dafydd retired to their chambers to bathe and take a short nap. They arose to dress for the feast and descended as the sun began to sink to find that the hall had been decked with lilacs and hawthorn branches. The floors had been swept clean and laid with new rushes. A linen cloth covered the high board and a fire roared in the hearth.

Agnes had outdone herself in preparing the food. There were bowls of cress, trays of clams and oysters packed on ice, a haunch of boar, roasted chickens, and whole fish swimming in sauces. A cask of wine that Christopher had been storing from one of his many trips overseas to France was breached, and many toasts were drunk to the king, his heir, Marged, and even Dafydd. The feast ended with a fluffy cake flavored with apples and clotted cream.

Minstrels entertained once the food had been cleared. Marged did not make an appearance, as she kept to her room along with Anwyll. Christopher promised that within a few days he would present his heir to the people.

At last, Christopher and Dafydd found their way upstairs to Dafydd's room, where they undressed and fell into bed. Their bodies wound together beneath the furs, Christopher whispered, "I must needs give you a few days before we take from one another again." He cupped Dafydd's hip and pressed his lips against his chest. "I would not hurt you."

"Ah, fy llew," Dafydd said. "You do not hurt me."

"You promised you would not lie to me, cariad," Christopher said.

"Tis not a lie," Dafydd said. "Or not a big one in any case. Aye, there is pain, but it is pain I welcome. 'Tis pain that does not hurt."

"You make no sense," Christopher said, "and yet it makes perfect sense."

They were quiet then until Dafydd said, "'Twas not until I saw the hawthorn that I made the connection to what I knew in my heart, my king. Tomorrow, in fact likely now as I am sure it is past midnight, is Beltane."

"In truth?" Christopher rose up that he might gaze down and find Dafydd's eyes through the darkness. "Our son was born on the eve of Beltane?"

"Aye, and I believe 'twas fate, 'twas providence that our love has come full circle in this one year."

"Dafydd," Christopher breathed, "I pledged my heart to you one year ago today, and I have pledged my heart, my soul, and my love to you every day since then. Nothing will ever tear us asunder. Nothing."

"I know," Dafydd said. "I feel these things in my heart. Beunydd."

Christopher bent down and touched his lips to Dafydd's, and the kiss deepened between them.

"I love you, cariad," Christopher murmured as he eased down against Dafydd's side again.

"Rwy'n dy garu."



EVEN though they had only slept for a handful of hours, Christopher and Dafydd rose early the next morning that they might attend the Beltane bonfire festivities. As was custom the herds were driven out from winter pens to spring pastures alongside the bonfire. The heartiest of the shepherds leaped the fire to bring good luck for the herds in the year to come.

Afterward, the assembled masses returned up the hill toward the castle. Food had been set out upon trestle tables in the practice yard. It was rare for the castle to enjoy two holidays together, but Christopher deemed they all deserved it. He mingled freely with them as they broke their fast, soaked in their congratulations.

Once the meal was finished, Father Geoffrey called them to chapel. Christopher and Dafydd took their places in the family pew at the front of the congregation. The knights and their families filled in the rows behind them. The servants and folk from the villages stood outside, craning their necks to hear the words of the mass.

When the service was finished, Christopher remained within the chapel with Dafydd. They sat in companionable silence, breathed in the scent of lilacs, watched the candles shiver in the invisible drafts. At last, Christopher reached over and laid his hand atop Dafydd's.

"Art the ruler of my heart, cariad," he said. "I vowed that you would be my mate through all my days: sickness, health, richer, poorer, until death." He turned and waited for Dafydd to look up and meet his gaze. "When we made those promises, we knew not what lay ahead of us." He tightened his hand upon Dafydd's. "Were I to have lost you, my life would have been naught. Mayhaps I have learned just how precious you are to me, and breezy words spoken a year ago today indeed had deeper meaning than I realized."

Dafydd slid closer, picked Christopher's hand up in his, and cradled it against his chest. The air was charged between them, and he sensed that Christopher had more to say.

"Life is precious," Christopher said. "I will honor, cherish, and love you all the rest of my days on this earth. You said once that our fate was destined, and as such all that has passed between us was also destined." His voice was firm as he continued. "Art mine, Dafydd."

"Dwi eiddoch, beunydd," Dafydd murmured. "What passes between us makes us whole. Troubles bond us more tightly, and new life is the cement that will make us strong. On that breezy day I told you that you art the king of my heart, my soul, and all of my world. If aught has changed betwixt us, 'tis that the love I feel for you is more all encompassing now than it ever has been." He raised Christopher's hand and pressed his lips against the back. "Go now. See your son; begin to endow upon him the love that you have infused into me."

Christopher rose then, and pulled Dafydd close against him. No further words were spoken as the feelings they had for each other communicated through the depth of the contact between them. When at last they did break apart, they continued to hold hands, and walked from the chapel together, parting at the door of the castle.

Dafydd watched as Christopher went off to check in on Marged and Anwyll. He met briefly with Agnes and instructed that the small family dining room beside the king's council chamber be cleared and cleaned.

"Feast the people as you can. I know the majority of the Beltane provisions were used last night for Anwyll's birth celebration. Serve a lighter meal in the king's dining room, something tempting for Marged, heartier fare for his majesty and I."

"Aye," Agnes said, her eyes twinkling "Twill be a pleasure."

He turned and made his way across the hall, stopped several times in short conversation with those who had daily business with the king. At last he headed up the stairs to the sanctuary of his still room. Quiet meditation amongst the dried herbs did wonders to help him keep the day in perspective.

In the end he crushed dried rose petals together with lavender buds, infused them in a light olive oil, and carefully poured them into a small bottle. When mixed with bathwater, the pleasing aroma would give Marged pleasant dreams.

When that was done he went in to sit before his fire. This day was a day for introspection, and he did not wish to share his thoughts with others.

CHRISTOPHER gathered an armful of lilac and hawthorn branches as he made his way toward Marged's chamber. Thankfully, now that the babe was safely born, Blanche had retreated and given up the iron fist of control. Alain's wife Alyce saw to Marged, and Anwyll was given solely to Anne.

Marged was dozing peacefully when Christopher entered the chamber. Alyce hurried forward to take his bounty and Anne looked up from the cradle.

"He wakens, your majesty," she said softly. "Mayhaps he knows his da has come."

Christopher smiled as he stepped forward and took the infant in his arms. He nuzzled against his tiny head. "So you know me already, little one," he said softly. "Tis well." He sat in the chair pulled up beside Marged's bed and set Anwyll carefully in his lap. "I would see him."

"Aye," Anne said, and she carefully removed the swaddling cloths.

"He is well formed," Christopher said as he gazed in wonder at his son. Anwyll stood the inspection well, yawning once and settling down to be looked at. Christopher examined each tiny hand, each foot, and pulled back the cloths to examine the rest of his tiny body. "Tis a wonder."

Marged stirred in the bed behind him. "A small wonder."

Christopher rewrapped his tiny son and rose to join Marged. He perched on the edge of the bed and handed her the bundle. "Methinks I did not wrap him right," he said with a smile.

Anwyll whimpered as Marged adjusted his wraps and placed him at her breast. "There is no wrong way to wrap him, your majesty," she said softly as she guided Anwyll's open mouth.

"We must needs find a wet nurse," Christopher murmured, fascinated as he watched his son eat.

"Nay," Marged said, and she held him closer. "I would feed him myself, your majesty. I know he will not always be mine, and I would extend this time as long as I may."

"He will be yours," Christopher said, and he shifted his gaze from the baby to her face. "Tis my intention that you raise him until such time as he is old enough to become a page, then squire, and e'en after that he shall always know his mam."

Marged's eyes filled with ready tears. "Christopher," she said softly, "I do not wish that I be a burden on you. 'Twas my belief that once Anwyll was weaned there would be no longer use for me."

"Nay," Christopher said in a firm voice. Anwyll stopped his feeding, startled by the loud noise. Marged held him tighter, and waited for the king to continue. Christopher reached out and laid a soothing hand upon Anwyll's back until he began to suckle again. "I will always have use for you, Marged," he said in a softer voice. "Twas my intention that once you were healed from childbirth you would be married, and remain within my protection for as long as you desired."

"Married?" she said, her eyes round.

"Aye," Christopher said. "I do not mean to guide your life, but you were not just to be a vessel that was cast aside once it had served its purpose. 'Tis my desire that you wed with Sir Patrick, mayhaps as soon as Lammas-tide if it pleases you."

Color crept across her cheeks, and she was silent as she transferred Anwyll to her other breast. When he was settled again, she whispered, "It pleases me."

Christopher moved from the edge of the bed to the chair, and pulled it up close to the bed that he might continue to watch his son's meal. "I shall speak with him, but 'tis my belief that it will please him as well."

Anne crept forward to take Anwyll from Marged once the meal was finished. She deftly removed his breeks and changed him, rewrapped him in the swaddling cloths, and laid him within his cradle. Then she and Alyce retreated.

"The flowers are beautiful," Marged said softly.

"Tis Beltane," he responded.

"Beltane," she said. "I had lost track of the days." She looked up at him. "You must needs go, your majesty. 'Tis a day you should spend with Dafydd."

Christopher smiled and settled in his chair. "Dafydd and I went to the bonfire this morn, and renewed our vows to one another in chapel. He shall be mine for all time, but these early days with you and my son I cannot replace. I would spend them with you if you would have me."

This time the tears overflowed, and she nodded, too overcome to speak.

Christopher rose from the chair and perched on the edge of the bed again. He reached out and pressed the tears away with his thumb. "Know that I love you, Marged," he said softly. "Not just for the gift you have given me, but for your sweetness and light. I shall love you always."

Marged turned into his touch and murmured, "And I love you, Christopher."

The afternoon was spent in cozy companionship until again Marged wished to sleep. Only then did Christopher take his leave. He strode straight to his council chamber and called for Patrick to join him.

He lounged back in his chair as he waited, and was pleased to observe that Patrick came forward and bowed with formality when he entered the room. He gave the appearance of a knight ever on guard, and had not succumbed to the revelry of the day.

"Arise," Christopher said. "Please sit with me."

"As you wish, your majesty," Patrick said, and he sat in a chair at the table, holding himself erect.

"You have served me long, young Patrick," Christopher said, "from the days when you were a mischievous page, through your training as a squire, to your indispensable service that brought about your knighthood these months past."

"Aye," Patrick said softly. "'Tis been a pleasure and an honor to serve with you, sire."

"I would ask, although I am certain I know your answer as you carried her favor with you into battle, what feelings you have about the lady Marged."

Color washed across Patrick's face. "The lady Marged is the mother of your heir, sire. What feelings would I have for her beyond respect?"

"Love mayhaps?" Christopher drawled.

Patrick rose to his feet. "Sire, I have offered my apologies for any untoward congress I may have had with the lady Marged—"

"Nay, Patrick," Christopher said softly. "Take your seat and hear me well."

Confusion clear on his features, Patrick took his seat again.

"Tis my desire that the lady Marged wed with one who can protect both her and Anwyll, one who can guide Anwyll's early steps and prepare him to come through the ranks as page, squire, and knight of my realm. Aye, one day he will be heir to my kingdom, but 'twas never my intention that he be given over to foster care, and I do not wish that he not know the day-to-day love of a father and mother." Christopher straightened in his chair and leaned forward. "Tis my belief that you have a care for Marged, and I know she has a care for you." He waited while the words sank in. "Twould honor me if you would take Lady Marged as your wife, and Anwyll as your foster son."

Patrick slid from the chair and knelt before Christopher. "Your majesty," he said, his voice hushed with emotion, "'Tis an honor that you trust me with that which is most important to you." He drew a deep breath. "'Twould be an answer to my fondest desire to have Lady Marged to wife."

Christopher smiled and laid his hand on Patrick's shoulder. "Tis well. I would set the wedding to be celebrated at Lammas-tide. I would desire to keep Anwyll close until he reaches a year, but when that time passes I will seek for a keep that you might establish as your own."

"My thanks, your majesty," Patrick said, and he raised his head. "Art more than kind; 'tis more than I deserve."

"Nay, 'tis what you deserve," Christopher said. "'Tis a debt I cannot repay easily, what you have done for me, and my kingdom."

Patrick rose from his knees and stood at attention again. "Any would have done the same, sire."

"Go now," Christopher said. "This night I shall dine with Marged and Anwyll, and I shall give her the good tidings. On the morrow you shall see her, that you both might share your joy."

With another bow, Patrick turned and walked from the chamber, a spring in his step.

THAT night Christopher and Dafydd opened the Beltane feast, wished the people well, and then took themselves off to the family dining chamber to share the meal with Marged and Anwyll. Agnes had sent along a haunch of lamb for the men, and sole cooked in wine for Marged, soft bread, and new spring greens. Apples in clotted cream completed the meal.

Anwyll slept peacefully while the adults ate, and then allowed each in turn to hold him. He gazed up at Dafydd with round eyes, thus capturing his heart completely. When he began to whimper to be fed, the men arose. Dafydd pressed the small bottle of bath oil on Marged as they left, and she smiled her thanks.

"Would you join the revelers?" Christopher asked as they walked across the empty hall.

"I would rather seek our bed," Dafydd said.

Christopher smiled up at him, and directed him toward the stairway. "As would I, cariad."

Alain and John had been given leave to join the Beltane festivities. Dafydd helped Christopher disrobe and then undressed himself. As always, they preferred the intimacy of Dafydd's chamber.

"My king," Dafydd said as he reached for Christopher's hand and stopped him from climbing up into the bed. "You said you must give me several days to rest, yet this night I wish not to wait. I wish for you to claim me with all the fervor within you, as it was before. I will not break, Christopher, and I yearn to feel what once you made me feel."

Christopher pulled Dafydd close and wrapped his arms tightly about him. Though 'twas dark in the room he met his gaze steadily. "Art strong, Dafydd, and you enflame my passions like none other. I cannot make you feel what once you felt as each day brings us higher, closer. What I feel for you now goes well beyond what I felt for you last year." His eyes were fierce. "I burn for you, cariad."

Dafydd released his hold and stepped back. Keeping his eyes locked upon the king's, he climbed up on the bed and sprawled back against the furs. "I cannot put out the fire, Christopher. All I can do is make it burn hotter."

Stifling a small groan, Christopher climbed up and settled atop Dafydd. He caressed Dafydd's cheek, and kissed him. Their bodies swelled against each other as the kiss deepened. Dafydd cupped Christopher's ass and pushed up against him. He widened his legs and held Christopher close.

Christopher broke the kiss and nuzzled down the column of Dafydd's neck, kept him pinned to the bed as his moans increased. With strong teeth he nipped lower, and did not hold back.

Dafydd tightened his hold and arched up. "'Tis what I wanted, my king, to feel

you thus again."

This time Christopher did not stifle the groans of pleasure. His soft hair fanned over Dafydd's chest as he made his way lower. Open-mouthed kisses touched everywhere until at last he reached his goal and closed his mouth over Dafydd's throbbing length. He groaned again as he swallowed him down and grazed with his teeth on the way up.

"Always, Dafydd, always art mine," he gasped, and reached for the pot of cream.

Dafydd writhed against the furs, and cried out when the king's fingers invaded him. He tightened his fists in the fur and pushed up as Christopher pushed inside. He murmured under his breath in Welsh, mostly of how good it felt.

"Brace yourself, cariad," Christopher moaned at last. "I can hold back no longer."

"Don't hold back, anwylyd," Dafydd moaned. "I need...."

Christopher pulled up, and gently withdrew his fingers. He cupped the back of Dafydd's neck with one hand, and guided himself with the other, slowly at first, and then one mighty thrust seated himself inside. After a moment to adjust, Christopher curled his fist around Dafydd and began to stroke while rocking his hips gently.

"Art fire," Dafydd whispered.

"Art love," Christopher said. Gradually he increased the pace until he felt Dafydd stiffen beneath him, and then heard his howl of release. The very force of it drew forth his own release.

"May it always be thus between us," Dafydd said as he tightened his arms around Christopher's back and held him close.

"Aye, cariad," Christopher whispered. "Beunydd."

Below in the castle courtyard the people of Lysnowydh had much to celebrate, and it continued long into the night. Above in Dafydd's chamber neither looked for sleep too soon, both content to touch each other, and whisper.

'Twas the dawn of much joy within the kingdom.



THREE months after Beltane came Lammas-tide, the celebration of the sun god Lugh. It was a time when the crops were harvested as summer was waning and autumn was coming on. The castle celebrated with a grand feast, and many loaves of bread. Traditionally it was a time when young couples pledged handfast to one another.

This year in Lysnowydh it was the celebration of marriage between the Lady Marged and the king's favorite knight, Sir Patrick. It was deemed they would not handfast but pledge to each other in marriage, as it was certain their love was strong, and it was known that Marged was fertile.

As with every other feast day celebration, a bonfire was lit at dawn. 'Twas too early to drive the herds in from summer pasture so the celebrations were centered solely on the harvest, and the richness of the bounty the summer had brought. Soon after the bonfire the crowd migrated toward the chapel where the wedding ceremony took place.

Christopher stood for Marged, placing her hand in Patrick's to signify that he gave her in marriage. Sir Richard stood for Patrick, although in reality both Sir Cuthbert and Dafydd were equally revered and honored by all the squires and the young knights. Both of them stood beside Sir Richard in spirit. The people cheered as the newly married couple leapt over the broom. Both of them were well liked, and it was more than a joyous occasion. After the ceremony came the feast, and once again Agnes had done them all proud. When the feasting was done, the people moved about on the lawn, broke into small groups to doze away the excess of food consumed.

The king's party, consisting of Christopher, Dafydd, and Anwyll, sat on a blanket stretched against the wall in the shadow. Patrick and Marged had been a part of their group, but they had wandered off and now stood beneath the shade of a rowan tree, their fingers twined together as they gazed into each other's eyes.

"Tis well they have found one another," Christopher murmured, a long stalk of wheat clenched between his teeth. "Their love is apparent to all who gaze upon

them."

Dafydd sat with his back against the wall, his knees drawn up and Anwyll cradled between his legs. He held a dolly made from corn husks just in the babe's range of vision and smiled as he watched Anwyll reach for it. When he pulled it away Anwyll gurgled and kicked his legs, reached for it again. Once Christopher had spoken Dafydd looked up and Anwyll at last pulled the dolly from his hands. He cooed and stuck it in his mouth, chewing happily on its head.

"Theirs is a love match," Dafydd said softly. "I am glad that fate brought them together." He lifted Anwyll in his arms and cradled him closer, watched as he chewed on the dolly that he would not try to swallow it, and lowered his legs down flat against the blanket.

Christopher turned and lowered down to sit beside Dafydd. He reached out and laid his hand upon Dafydd's knee. "I would wish that all those who are close to me be as wildly in love as I am." He smiled. "Tis a heady feeling, and a wonder to me still."

Anwyll craned his head around at the sound of Christopher's voice. He held the dolly out toward him. With a chuckle Christopher moved closer. "Nay, wee bairn," he said. "Keep your soggy dolly for yourself." He dipped his head and placed a kiss upon his brow.

Dafydd took the dolly and set it on the blanket beside them. He hoisted Anwyll up against his shoulder and rocked him gently. "The young master is tired and he will not admit it," he said quietly. "Sit beside me, Christopher, that he might settle and sleep."

"Aye," Christopher said. He shifted closer and laid his hand alongside Dafydd's on Anwyll's back. He began to croon a soft lullaby until Anwyll slowly gave up his hold on wakefulness. "Art good with him, cariad," he said softly when Dafydd had cradled the sleeping babe again in his lap.

"Tis easy," Dafydd said. He raised his arm and let Christopher settle against him. "He has a sunny disposition like his mam, and when he's riled up he's as fierce as his da. 'Tis fortunate I can deal with both."

"Art wicked," Christopher said as he snuggled against the warm velvet of Dafydd's surcoat. "I think mayhaps Anwyll is the most like you, a mixture of both."

"Mayhaps," Dafydd said. "And yet I believe he will grow into his own, and that one day he will only be like Anwyll."

"I think 'tis the right of it," Christopher said with a yawn.

Across the green most were stretched out in the shade, many to sleep a few hours before the festivities picked up again as night fell. Thus, when a rider appeared on the road, Dafydd's attention was drawn to it quickly. He sat up, strained his eyes across the yard, and watched as the rider stopped, then spurred on toward where they sat.

"What is it?" Christopher asked.

"A messenger," Dafydd said. "He rides hard and looks as though he's come from some distance."

Christopher rose to his feet just as the rider came near enough that they both saw it was Simon. Dafydd rose carefully, keeping Anwyll tucked close against him.

Simon came to a halt and slid from his horse. He dropped the reins and let the tired mount wander off to nip at the tender grass while he came forward and knelt before the king. "Tidings, your majesty," he said breathlessly, "from King Henry."

"Arise," Christopher said. He reached down and gave Simon his hand, pulled him to his feet. "Welcome home."

Even though his face was dirty from the long ride, color stained his cheeks and it was evident that the words had touched him. "My thanks, your majesty." Simon opened a leather pouch at his waist and withdrew a roll of parchment that did indeed bear the seal of England's king.

Christopher took the roll and held it lightly. "Go; find food and drink, and rest after your long ride."

"Aye, your majesty," Simon said, and he bowed again. His eyes shifted to Dafydd and he bowed toward him, turned, and strode away.

Dafydd patted Anwyll's back and he settled back to sleep as Christopher broke the seal and scanned the parchment. A smile broke across his face, and when he had finished he turned to look across the green toward where Patrick and Marged now sat beneath the rowan tree. The smile broadened as he turned to look at Dafydd.

"Warin faces writ of excommunication. His lands are forfeit and they have been granted to Lysnowydh." He stepped closer. "I shall cede them to Patrick to hold until Anwyll gains his majority, and then they will be his. Together we shall strengthen our small kingdom into one of might."

"Has he been found?" Dafydd whispered.

"Nay, Henry thinks 'tis likely he has fled to France, or mayhaps Italy."

Slowly a smile broke over Dafydd's face, and his hand tightened on Anwyll's back. "Tis well," he said. "Tis fitting."

Christopher stepped closer and wrapped his arms about Dafydd, sandwiched Anwyll between them. "Together, cariad, you and I face a bright future."

"Aye," Dafydd said, and he felt Christopher's arms tight about him. "I love you, anwylyd."

"And I you. Beunydd."

As they stood, their son cradled between them, it was true that the future was nothing but bright.

ROWENA SUDBURY was born in Houston, Texas. After living in Ohio and Kentucky, her family settled in California before she turned eight. She now lives in southern California with her husband, son, and their wonderful rescue dog. Shy by nature, Rowena spent most of her youth writing in a journal and reading nearly anything she could get her hands on, particularly fiction with a historical bent. As she got older she discovered historical romance novels and devoured them one after another. In college she studied creative writing, but after being told to "stick with what you know," she gave up sharing her writing with others. Then one afternoon over a glass of wine she showed one of her short pieces of fiction to a neighbor and was roundly encouraged to share it with everyone.

Rowena finds herself thinking through the minds of her characters quite often, to the point that she always has to carry a small journal with her so that she can capture their thoughts and weave them into stories when she gets home.

Visit her blog at http://rowenasudbury.livejournal.com/.

