



PERFECT OBEDIENCE

By

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978-1-60394-254-6
New Concepts Publishing
Lake Park, GA 31636
www.newconceptspublishing.com

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Chapter One

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“My lord is waiting for you.” The young guard opened the door to the tower chamber. Fern hesitated on the threshold, her arms laden with soap and drying cloths. She didn’t want to enter alone. The young man smiled at her and crowded her in as if she were a reluctant filly. She stumbled inside to escape his touch. He shut the door behind her and latched it. She could hear him denying entrance to the women who followed her up the stairs.

Fern hoped the stranger in the bathtub stayed seated. She’d never seen a man entirely naked and didn’t want to start now. “Sir, I am not the one who does this.”

He sat with his back to her, gilded by the logs burning in the hearth. He gave a long sigh with an echo of humor in the sad sound. “If you’d wash me, I’d be eternally grateful.”

“I don’t know how, sir.” Fern had never washed a lord.

“I am easy to please and must insist because I fear if I sit here any longer the water wrinkles might eventually be fatal.” A low rumble of laughter came from as him as he pleaded, “Take pity on me, little one, and just get it done or I’ll be late for the wedding. Wash my hair and leave the soap on while you scrub my back. If it makes you feel any safer, I promise not to ask you to wash my dangerous parts.”

If she hadn’t been locked in with him, she might have laughed at his words. The easy warmth of his voice soothed her fear.

Fern approached the man cautiously. She knelt behind him and gave him a cloth to hold over his eyes, before wetting his hair with a dipper full of warm water from one of the buckets.

She rubbed in circles on his scalp, spreading her fingers through his hair, rubbing slowly upwards, while the man relaxed under her hands to give a contented sigh.

“That feels good,” he murmured. “You have the hands of an angel.”

Fern warmed at his praise. She wondered who he was.

He couldn’t be Lord Jarrad. She’d just spent two months embroidering a surcoat for the bridegroom that this man could never wear. He must be one of Lord Jarrad’s brothers, because no one else would dare use the bridal chamber.

“Scrub harder, little one,” the man said in a low voice. He dropped the cloth into the water and leaned back into her hands. The fire in the hearth crackled as the half-charred logs shifted.

Fear of him vanished. He seemed so contented, so relaxed, even his slow breathing soothed her.

Fern admired the view of his chest that she glimpsed. She warned herself that all lords were dangerous. They lived to make war, to fight in tourneys, and to wed brides that brought them riches. Lords rarely felt the need to moderate their appetites, and yet she felt safe with him. Safe from his *dangerous parts*.

His eyes were closed when Fern moved to see his face. He had faint scars from old injuries on one side of his face from his jaw to his eyes. They had healed well and left only a few thin white lines that didn't detract from the fine planes of his face. She even liked the length of his long nose.

He had just the face she'd been searching for. Not that she dared use it without his permission.

The man's shoulders were wide and muscular. His belly was flat and the cloth he had dropped into the water covered his dangerous parts. Not that she intended to look there. She gripped him by the shoulders, and squeezed gently to get his attention.

His eyes opened. They were gray with a thin circle of gold around the pupil. Fern leaned closer to study his face. This du Terrenord brother had kind eyes.

"What's wrong, chérie?" he asked softly, not moving. "I warn you, when you look at me like that, I feel as if I am some great treasure you have found, and I sadly fear your eyesight is not good."

Fern let go of him to sit back on her heels. She suppressed the urge to laugh at his words. "Sir, if it pleases you, may I use your face as a model for the Lord Jesus? I am sewing a piece for the Abbess of Fountains Abbey, and you are the answer to a prayer, for I have not been able to finish because I was not inspired. But yours is truly the face I need."

The man flicked some of his cooling bathwater at her.

She gave a squeak of laughter and wiped her cheek with the edge of her wimple.

He gave a sigh so deep and sad that she hoped he joked. "I knew there'd be some sting to your words. So, little one, I'm happy for your sight, but not flattered by your question."

"I meant no sting, none at all, sir." She patted his shoulder to comfort him in case she'd hurt his feelings. "May I use you as a model?"

"If it pleases you," he said, mournfully. It was all she could do not to kiss his scarred cheek and tell him how handsome he looked.

She measured his face with her fingers, making mental note of the lengths and widths. He closed his eyes and this gave her time to really look at him. She used only the softest touch of her fingertips over his scars.

He sighed and gave a low rumble of contentment that sounded very much like a noise from the baron's stallion. She laughed under her breath, but she didn't stop measuring the length of his nose, and where his ears met his head.

"I'm glad to be useful," he said. "It's far better to be useful than frightening to look at. Though I have to warn you, I think your taste is lacking. Are you sure you aren't blind?"

She laughed and measured his shoulders, "Do you mind if I use your body as well, it seems a shame to separate your head from the rest. I mean, may I measure you, sir?"

He lifted one long leg out of the water, taking care not to splash her, and stretched it out to rest his calf on the rim. "You may use me in any way that pleases you, little one, even though your pleasures seem strange to me."

His invitation warmed Fern's blood. She was sure it was the reason virgins were not allowed to wash men. Wicked thoughts rose at his invitation. She reminded herself sternly that she wanted to be a nun.

Fern measured the length of his limbs with a hurried touch, not venturing near the parts of him hidden by water or cloth.

A sudden movement took Fern by surprise. She rushed to hold him in his bath by pressing down hard on one of his shoulders. "Don't stand up!"

He shifted his leg to put his foot back into the water. "My apologies for startling you. My toes were getting cold." He waited until she let go of him. "Could you wash my back? If you've no objection to it?"

Fern took a thankful breath. "You are very tall, sir," she gabbled, "only some of the Danes from York might equal you in height."

"Do you dislike the Danes?" The man looked sideways at her. "They seem quiet enough. Did you guess that I have Norse blood? The *terre nord* in my name implies it. Were you trying to drown me for it just now?"

Fern choked back nervous laughter. "There is not enough water for you to drown." She lathered her hands and ran her fingers up and down his back.

When she stopped soaping him, he asked, "What is your name, little one?"

Kind he might be, amusing to talk to as well, but that didn't mean he had to know her name. Not that she mistrusted him, but others might discover who she was if he called her by name.

The man raised his voice carefully, as if trying not to startle her. "Your name is?" "Matilda, sir."

She poured the dipper of water over his head. He flinched and groaned a protest as the cold water hit him.

Goodness! What had she done?

"I'm truly sorry, sir." Fern kept her voice soft and soothing. She prayed he didn't have a hasty temper. "I forgot to warm the water."

His hand brushed her wimple aside. She froze and closed her eyes.

"It's nothing, Matilda. Will you scrub my chest for me?"

She released her breath. He was the kindest man she'd ever met. If she'd

managed to wash his back, what more trouble was it to wash his front? Except for his dangerous parts.

With one hand she steadied herself on his shoulder, so close to him that she must bend over his arm to wash him. Her breast touched him once or twice, until she shivered at the contact.

She rubbed the hard muscles of his shoulders while she worked up courage to venture further down. Her hand seemed to know what to do, how to find every hollow and curve. Even her fingertips wanted to play over him, to feel the change as she stroked down to the bands of muscle on his belly. Soap frothed between her fingers. His nipple grazed her palm.

Afraid to stop, afraid to continue. She was so close to him, she felt his breath waft over her cheek. His warmth seeped into her through her fingertips, sending tingles towards her heart.

“Ah, little one, stop,” he murmured. “Stop now and rinse me, Matilda. You did very well, thank you.”

After a moment to compose herself and get her legs to obey her, Fern rose and went to the fireplace for the kettle of hot water to warm the water in the pail. She returned determined to be calm.

She decided to memorize his body as this would be her only opportunity to see him and use him as her model. She poured from the dipper and stroked over him with terrible concentration as she tried to fix in her mind the muscles of his chest.

Even rinsing him seemed a licentious act.

Thank goodness his eyes were closed, for everything she did made her ache in her wicked parts like a wanton woman. Her hand played about his chest as if it had a life of its own, not daring to rest anywhere but wanting to.

He sighed when she stopped. “If only you belonged to me, I’d call you Angel, for you are very like one. I think the bride must take comfort in your presence. Could I tempt you to come with us, to make your home at Hollingham?”

She’d like nothing better than to go with him, to go south to safety. Away from the border and the raiding Scots bent on murdering her. To live with him, to bathe him again, to hear him speak, all those things promised pleasure. She’d soon learn how to school her body not to respond to him.

Before she could answer, the chamber door opened.

Cold air swept the chamber, bringing the scent of the bridal feast.

A tall, thin man stepped inside and closed the door to survey her with a disdainful expression on his long face. His tunic was finely made, cut from a rich black fabric shot through with silver thread. His chemise was black, a most unusual choice.

He walked proudly, but in a ridiculous way, so high and mighty he looked as if he’d burst from it. He had black hair and eyes, and swooping eyebrows, which seemed to sit too high on his brow. His mouth curved downwards as his eyebrows slanted upwards.

Deep lines joined his nostrils to his mouth, he did not look at all like a kind and gentle man. He was tall and lean, with narrow shoulders and narrower hips.

Lord Jarrad had sent his tunic to be measured for the surcoat she'd made, one of the baron's gifts to the bridegroom. Fern had never seen such a long, narrow garment. The whole castle had wondered and whistled over it.

Fern stared in amazement. The tall, thin man looked exactly like a walking beanpole. She bit back a nervous laugh. It would never do, not when such an aura of cold displeasure clung to him. And yet there was something ridiculous about him, something odd that invited laughter.

It took all her concentration to lower her head respectfully and not stare at him. He had the longest, narrowest feet she'd ever seen.

He strode to the hearth. Fern was glad the bathtub was between them.

The naked man put his arm around her as she knelt beside him. "Did you invite him in, little angel? Shall I turn him out for you?"

She shook her head.

The beanpole warmed his backside at the fire, as he stared at her. "Rise, Lady Fern," he ordered.

"This is Matilda," said the man in the bath. He stopped her from rising.

"Lady Fern, explain what you are doing letting that fellow take my bath water," said the beanpole in a cold voice. "I have searched the castle over to thank you for the beautiful surcoat you made for me, only to find you here bathing him."

Fern didn't answer. She was so very relieved to find out that the lord had only sought her out to thank her.

"Tell this knave your name, Lady Fern," the beanpole invited, "I warn you, do not to lie to me."

"My lord," she said, turning to the man in the bath. "I beg your pardon. My name is Fern."

The man in the bathtub made a low comforting sound. "The little one was so swept away by my beauty that she forgot her name—it's an effect I have on many women.

We were getting on very well before you intruded."

The beanpole leaned down from his great height, his long head waggled at her as she knelt by the tub. "I don't like liars, Lady Fern. Do not think of lying again."

Fern shot a wary look towards the door and wondered if she should make a dash for it. She had seen as much of Lord Jarrad as she cared to. Her hand crept to the embroidered rose at her breast to calm herself.

The beanpole raised an astonishingly high eyebrow. "Lady Fern," he asked, "why did you lie? Is it your habit to tell lies? Are you a liar through and through?"

Fern bowed her head. "I am sorry I lied, my lord. My name is unusual and I don't invite questions about it."

The beanpole crouched on the opposite side of the bathtub. "Tell me, Lady Fern, how did you get your name?"

"I was named so by my mother because I had been conceived under forest ferns."

The man in the bathtub gently touched her fingers where they gripped the bathtub rim. "Poor little one, don't be afraid, there is more than one liar here," he whispered in her ear. "Go and join your sisters. It was a pleasure to meet you."

"Lady Fern," said the beanpole, leaning over the water to bring his long face closer to hers. "I have a mind to tan your arse, but as you did not lie to me, I'll let this knave do it for me." A black clad arm snaked over towards her.

"Don't frighten her, or be warned that I will frighten you," said the man in the bathtub. He rose with a great slosh of water to stop the beanpole from touching her.

Fern found herself dragged upwards with him.

She was astonished to hear the powerful Lord Jarrad threatened. Her feet stumbled beneath her as she tried to stand upright. Her knees hit the side of the bathtub. The naked man caught her, to hold her upright dangling in his grasp. Her shoes fell off with a splash. Her toes dipped in the bathwater.

The beanpole thrust his face close to hers and smiled the most awful smile.

Fern could stand it no longer. She struggled to be free. She tried to protest. Only a croaking sound came out of her throat. The naked man winced. He lifted her over the side of the bath to release her onto the slate floor.

She fled towards the door.

"There is nothing to fear. No one will touch you, Fern."

She knew better than to trust his soothing voice.

How could she believe him when his body betrayed his licentious intentions? Now she knew why virgins were never allowed to see men below the waist. They'd never consent to a bedding if they'd seen a man's weapon at the ready.

"Forgive me, Fern." He looked around for something to cover himself with.

"Men are untidy creatures, little one. Don't hate me for it."

He shouted, "Alaric! Open the door!"

She ducked under the young guard's arm when he peered inside.

Fern flew down the steps as if the devil himself were after her.

In the chamber, Jarrad stepped out of the bath. His friend fell to his knees before him, mimicking a distressed lady abashed by the view of his rod, which was fast losing interest now that poor Fern had fled.

"Oh, my lord, do not use your lance on me," sobbed Owen in a high falsetto voice. "Poor me! Alas! Alack! Woe is me, my *belle chose* will not be able to take it in, so great is your girth, so enormous is your length. Don't hurt me, I beg you, noble lord. I will expire of fright if you use that," he pointed upwards with a trembling finger, "scary thing on me."

Jarrad tried to bring Owen to his senses. "Can you give me one good reason why

I shouldn't beat you within an inch of your life? I knew who she was. Did you really think I'd not recognize Morag's daughter when I met her?"

His fool leapt to his feet with a sly grin. "I wasn't sure. I thought you might need rescuing, in case the lady had found out who you are and why you are here."

"Is everything ready? How long does the tide allow us?"

"Three hours at the most, less if the wind turns," said Owen. "The lady cannot cry out, my lord. Did you notice she couldn't scream? That might be useful. At least we don't have to worry she'll burst our eardrums with her protests when we take her home."

"It won't be a safe home for any of us if she is unhappy with the marriage," warned Jarrad. "They'll look for any excuse to cut my throat and marry her to one of their own choosing. Her terror will have to be eased quickly lest they think she'd plot with them to take the Isle."

"But if the lady is sure every Celt plots her capture and death, she'd never trust them enough to conspire with them, would she?"

Jarrad took the cloth from Owen to dry his hair. "Wouldn't you sell your soul to the devil to get what you want? Don't annoy her, Owen, she needs a friend and I doubt I can play that role."

"Don't be angry, my lord. It was done only to make your task simpler, I swear it. The lady will be so relieved she doesn't wed me, she'll sit beside you and lean on you, and be so glad I'm not you that all you'll have to do is smile at her and she'll spread her legs for you and gladly welcome you in."

"She is Morag's daughter and a virgin. Don't raise my hopes."

His fool grinned and passed him a hairbrush.

"She thought me amusing," said Jarrad. "Let's hope she never changes her mind."

Owen gave a start of surprise. "Amusing? You?" He gave a mocking, mournful sigh.

Jarrad swatted him with the hairbrush. "What did you find out?"

"By all reports she is not docile and meek, I warn you, though neither is she cruel and vicious." Owen danced away to bring him clothes. "They like her here. She is loved and returns their love. She doesn't intend to marry because she wants to be a nun. The lady thinks that will save her from the Scots. No one has ever managed to convince her that the Scots are attacking England, not her."

"Poor Fern. No wonder she dresses like a servant. Not that it can hide her identity from anyone familiar with the Isle of Demons." He grabbed Owen by the arm to keep him still. "Once she is in the great hall, make friends with her. I want you to give her a gift, something to make yourself useful to her."

"The gift of truth, my lord?"

"Use it well. I want her to make a friend of you. Don't frighten her any more. Have some sympathy. We are her nightmares come to life."

A bell tolled, calling them down to dine.

“Sweet Fern,” mused Jarrad, “I swear she shall have the gentlest bedding I can manage.”

His fool muffled a snort of laughter. “Then you should pray for a smaller lance to prick her with, my lord.”

Chapter Two

Fern fled down the stone stairs on hose-clad feet. She turned past the doorway to the great hall and descended beneath it. With one hand she guided herself around the newel post at the center of the spiral steps, the other hand she pressed against the embroidered rose on her breast. Her lucky talisman.

Fern reached the bottom of the stairs and found herself in the small barracks next to the storeroom. It was deserted except for two bedridden men who stared at her in surprise.

"Excuse me, good sirs, I just wanted to make sure you lacked for nothing in the excitement of the day," she said, trying to look as if nothing were wrong.

This was not a part of the castle she usually frequented. The narrow loopholes did not let in enough light for sewing wounds.

Old Tom answered for them both. "Nay, we are not forgotten. Ale, pies and puddings have been brought for us. 'Tis kind of you to visit, Fern." He smiled at her, showing his few remaining teeth.

He waved a shaky, dismissive hand at the younger man whose pallet lay deeper in the chamber. "Boone has been asking for you again. Morris gave him a kick to quiet him down. Don't you fret, it didn't hurt him much."

Fern gathered her skirts and her wits. She wished she wore shoes as she tiptoed towards the young man. The rushes underfoot offered some protection from the cold damp floor, but they hid many an unwelcome object.

Boone raised himself on his elbows at her approach. His blanket fell to his waist, displaying his body. He was much thinner than when she had seen him last. His muscles stood out in relief in the dim light and she hoped he was not clenching them in pain.

He had not been lying quietly, resting and healing. His black hair curled and fell in sweat-drenched strands to his shoulders. He glared ferociously at Old Tom with bright blue eyes that glowed like turquoise jewels.

"Lady Fern, is Jarrad here?" His voice had a faint musical lilt to it.

Fern was careful not to get too close to him. She'd seen him fight and had no wish to provoke an attack.

"Lord Jarrad arrived today, Sir Boone. He has come to choose a wife."

"He cannot have you." His eyes fixed on hers, silently beseeching her, then suddenly tendon and sinew flexed across his abdomen as he began to weep.

Old Tom gave a bark of laughter, "Give him a swat with the broom, Fern. It's the only way to get him to close his mouth on the subject."

“You must not hit him, Tom. He is confused and cannot help it. If you had been dropped from a great height onto a stone floor you might not think so clearly yourself. He is only grateful I set his legs for him.”

She smiled kindly at the young man. “Don’t be afraid, Sir Boone. Will you show me your limbs so I may judge how you are healing?”

Boone uncovered his legs. The splints had rubbed him raw, another sign he had not stayed confined to his pallet. His legs looked straight, the swellings gone, though bruises covered him.

Fern knelt beside the dark knight. His tears stopped as swiftly as they had begun.

“If you let me, I will remove the splints, Sir Boone. Do you promise not to touch me?” she asked. She hoped old Tom had breath enough to call for help if she needed it.

The young man nodded and lay back. “I hate Scots, my lady. I’d kill them for you, if there are any you want killing. I’d kill anyone for you.”

“There aren’t any here. Keep still.” She quickly went to work cutting away the linen strips with the small scissors she always kept on her belt.

When his legs were freed, Fern felt for the breaks in the bones. As far as she could tell he had healed.

She patted his knee.

He twitched like a dog with fleas. His fierce, adoring eyes never left her face.

“There, you will be much more comfortable. Later, you can try out some crutches. Maybe old Tom will lend you his, until yours are ready. I’ll tell the carpenter to make some for you. Now, Sir Boone, you have something else to think about, you can go home soon.”

She doubted he knew how to get there.

It was his accent that had caused the upset in the first place. Some had thought he sounded his words with a Scottish burr. He had sworn he was Irish, but it had not stopped them from tossing him to the ceiling to see what language he spoke when he knocked about the rafters.

Only her intervention had saved him.

He had been injured fighting against the raiding Scots with the Deanhaven knights. Not that any of them knew who he was. He had appeared from nowhere and turned the tide of the skirmish. They’d forded the river and brought him to her to sew his arm. Even his name was not his own. He’d been dubbed Sir Boone from the war-cry he gave while fighting.

The young warrior turned in his bed to bend his legs. He groaned. The muscles in his back bunched, then splayed. Fern moved quietly away from him.

Old Tom spat on the floor. “If he has a home, he will want to take you there. Have a care when he is recovered, Fern. Heed a warning from an old man. He’ll try to make off with you, for he speaks of nothing else but you.” A blast of noise echoed down the stairs. “Oh, there are the trumpets sounding dinner, you had better run or you’ll be

late.”

Fern rushed up the stairs.

Boone rolled off his pallet onto his hands and knees.

“Have a care, lad, where do you think you’re going?” called Old Tom. They were the last words he said as life was silently strangled out of him.

Chapter Three

Fern stared, along with everyone else in the great hall.

The broad-shouldered man she'd bathed was Lord Jarrad! He walked with the baron down the length of the hall and gave a slight tilt of his head when he recognized her as she stood at the side of the dais. He gave the slightest of shrugs, and smiled just for her. She warmed under his gaze and felt as if they shared a secret joke.

Her mind instantly saw him standing naked. His voice lingered in her ears and her body hummed in wicked places.

Suddenly a drum banged.

Over the heads of Baron Welford and Lord Jarrad sprang a tall, lean, beanpole of a man, clad in a fool's costume of white skeletal bones painted on black.

Such a leap was not possible. Fern was sure he'd had help to get so high.

The fool's feet missed the men by many inches, his long legs twirled in the air, spinning an entire circle before his feet touched the stone floor. Down the length of the great hall he bounced in a dizzying display that ended with him leaping the board and bridal chair to disappear out of sight.

Baron Welford escorted his guest towards the dais, leaving Lady Matilda to support his daughter, Joan, down the length of the great hall. That Joan was distressed was plain to see. Surely, she should be happy? A kinder, gentler man didn't exist—even a shower of cold water hadn't made him angry.

When Lady Matilda and Joan reached the center of the great hall, the fool came flying over Fern's head. She ducked, certain he meant to kick her. He sailed effortlessly into the air to tumble into the knights who followed the ladies in the procession.

Everyone laughed and cheered.

One of Lord Jarrad's young men threw the fool a long cane. Fastened on the end was a pig's bladder painted to look like a skull. With this he tapped lightly on Joan's head, beating time to the music from the minstrel gallery.

Fern wanted to tie his long limbs in knots and kick him around the great hall. He'd taken great delight in scaring the wits out of her and now he tormented poor Joan.

Why, she had wasted weeks sewing for him! He had substituted his own tunic for his lord's and sent it on to be measured.

Lord Jarrad reached out to pluck the slapstick from his fool's hand. He gave it to the bride. Joan held it but dared not do anything with it. Lord Jarrad took it back and hit his fool over the head. Again the great lord passed the slapstick to Joan. The fool fell to his knees to kiss the hem of Joan's skirt. He wagged his thin behind in the air, inviting

her to strike him there. Joan could not resist so enticing a target, she let him have blow after blow until her arm tired.

The great hall erupted with laughter.

Exercising her arm had helped Joan's mood. She threw the slapstick to the floor and walked towards the dais with her head held high.

Fern laughed and applauded with the others.

The fool scampered after Joan and pretended to cower from her. He turned suddenly to blow a kiss to Fern before he disappeared to stand behind his master.

Two of Lord Jarrad's knights approached her. The young one who had guarded the door, Alaric, bowed to her. "My lord sends his apologies for Owen's conduct, my lady. He said to tell you he is keeping your shoes in the hopes you will come to Hollingham to claim them."

"Tell your lord I need my only pair of shoes." Did Lord Jarrad hope to lure her to his home with wet shoes? There was no denying his joke flattered her. As if she were born to please him.

"My lady, we are to guard you against a repeat of Owen's bad behavior. Lord Jarrad said to tell you that the only way to claim your shoes is in person at his home."

She looked over at Lord Jarrad to see him watching her. He gave a slight tilt of his head as if in mock apology.

She shook her head.

He shrugged gracefully.

Baron Welford introduced Lord Jarrad to Joan. Her foster-sister flinched when Lord Jarrad spoke to her. Silly Joan saw either a man's beauty or his defects. Scars to her were gross faults. Fern saw him look over at her, as if he compared them. As well he might, Joan had a rare beauty. Not that she showed it off today, cowering as she did and hanging her head.

Lord Jarrad talked to the baron. Joan slumped in the bridal chair she shared with him. She looked as if she wanted to vomit. Behind her, the slapstick slowly rose to tap her on the top of the head. Joan made a grab for it, but the fool tapped Lord Jarrad on the head and it was he who wrestled it from Owen's grip to give it to Joan.

Joan held the slapstick while Lord Jarrad listened to the baron.

Then slowly, from behind the bridal chair, rose another slapstick.

Elbows nudged elbows. Gradually the noise fell to whispers as everyone watched.

The slapstick rose high to smack down hard on Lord Jarrad's head.

Joan gave a scream and clutched her slapstick to her breast.

She swore that she had not struck him, but the lord only laughed and pointed a hand behind him with a sorry shake of his head. Joan actually laughed with him. She laughed with relief, but she laughed and dared look at him.

Fern thought it cleverly done. Joan had forgotten all about Lord Jarrad's scarred

face. He spoke to her and winced when he patted the top of his head. Joan nodded eagerly and answered him with a smile.

The people below the dais began to feel at ease, to talk in normal tones. Servants hurried about, serving food and drink. The great hall soon rang with laughter, gossip, and lewd jokes about brides and bridegrooms.

During the last remove, the baron rose to announce, "Lord Jarrad has come here today to marry one of my daughters. Come on all of you, line up and let him see you. You too, Fern." He turned to his guest and said in a voice loud enough to be heard in the harbor, "Fern is a pretty girl. Take no notice of how she is dressed. It's a whim of hers to dress like a servant. She thinks it will hide her from the Scots."

Fern lined up last, next to the smallest child. The fool rushed by to tap them all on the head. He took the place next to her to preen and adjust his 'apple' breasts in an effort to make them stay at an equal height on his chest.

The children laughed at him until Lord Jarrad came over to meet them. They stared at his face with open curiosity.

Had he not noticed that Joan was the only one old enough to be wed? Obviously not. Jarrad du Terrenord dismissed Joan from the line. He sent terrified Anne away with the gift of a slapstick. The great lord knelt down in front of Elizabeth and Meg. "Hello, littlest ones, can you help me choose my bride?"

"Why do you have lines on your face?" asked Elizabeth. She reached out one fat finger to touch him on his scarred cheek.

"My dragon kissed me," he answered with a smile. His scarred cheek didn't respond to match the unmarked side of his face. It gave him a quizzical air, as if he questioned as he smiled.

"Why did she do that?" asked Meg, who clutched Elizabeth's hand.

Jarrad gave a long, soulful sigh. "She's a sweet, pretty dragon. It's a pity about her teeth. All dragons have sharp teeth sticking out of their mouths." He used his fingers like dragon's teeth to gently nip Meg's nose. "It was a gentle kiss by dragon standards, but it cut my face. She was very sorry for it and has promised never to kiss me again."

Elizabeth, who was braver than her sister Meg, asked, "Why didn't you kill her for it? Kill her and roast her, then you could eat her."

"But I love the dragon." He rose to stand in front of Fern. "Now the dragon flies free during the day and returns to roost at night. She lives off mutton, for I have forbidden her to eat virgins."

The low roll of the word *virgins* made Fern laugh.

The fool smirked, "I don't think my lord has any virgins left. Perhaps the dragon ate them, or perhaps not." He squeezed Fern out of the way to sit on the dais next to Elizabeth.

"Have you seen the dragon?" asked the little girl, eyeing the fool with awe. "Does she bite?"

“Only a little,” replied the fool, holding up a hand, pretending he lacked a finger. “My lord thinks she might have followed him here.” He lifted an edge of the tablecloth to peer under it. “What’s that? Do you see her tail?” As quick as lightening his other hand snaked round to grab the child by her ankle.

Elizabeth howled and hit the fool hard on his head with her fist. Meg cried and the baron dismissed his youngest daughters, leaving Fern alone in front of Lord Jarrad.

A hush fell in the great hall. Everyone waited to see what would happen next.

“Lady Fern, will you marry me?” The great lord’s voice swirled around her, warm and low. “You should not have admired my face, little one. How can I resist choosing you to be my bride?”

Fern couldn’t believe her ears. He wanted to marry her. A great lord, a kind and gentle man who made her laugh, who lived in the south of England. He wanted to marry her. The idea tingled and sang in her head until she was drunk with it.

Lord Jarrad put his arm around her. “Father Rab, come and marry us now, for time and tide wait for no man.”

Fern shook her head. All pleasure drained away. Rab was a Scottish name. Lord Jarrad had a Scot with him.

Every sense warned her not to trust strangers in the castle. Did this stranger evil have intentions toward her? Was it all just a clever trick to get her out of the castle?

An old, white-haired priest rose from the head table. He growled in a Scottish way and limped towards them.

Fern shook off Lord Jarrad’s restraining arm and took several steps away from him.

Lord Jarrad let her go. He gave a mock sigh, “Father Rab is old and creaky. Surely you don’t fear him? You could kill him by sitting on him—not that I want you to try.”

“Do you go to Hollingham, my lord?” she asked. “Will Hollingham be my home?”

“Hollingham will always be yours. You’ve nothing to fear while you are with me.” He spoke in a way that made her want to believe him, while her fear of Scots sounded a warning. Her heart beat with slow, heavy thuds.

“My lord Jarrad,” she said, doubting him still. “I cannot marry without the king’s permission.”

“But I have it, little one, or at least the choice of all the good baron’s daughters, including you. Are you unhappy to be chosen? How can I resist choosing you? You are the only lady who has ever admired my face.”

“If that is the only reason you choose me, then I’ll marry you and gladly. If we go to Hollingham, I’ll go with you and think myself fortunate, my lord.”

She was so busy thinking of the revenge she’d take, if she lived long enough, that she let Lord Jarrad take her hand and make his vows. She didn’t need to hear them.

Seven of the baron's daughters had married before. It was only when the old priest turned to her, that she noticed something odd.

He'd changed the words! The Scot didn't ask her simply to obey her husband, he wanted her to vow perfect obedience. She'd never heard of such a vow. How could anyone be perfectly obedient?

She dared not refuse to swear it, not with the baron urging her to speak and the whole company waiting for her to do it.

Perfect obedience.

No complaint could pass her lips. No matter what he willed, she must obey him. Instantly. Perfectly. It was a dreadful fate. Even if he wanted to remove her head, she must let him. Was this what Scottish brides promised on their wedding day?

Fern believed a vow was sacred, yet this terrible vow would be impossible to keep. Yet not to keep it meant she'd burn in hell for eternity.

Perfect obedience!

If he wanted to kill her slowly, she had to be perfectly obedient and let him, or she'd suffer a fiery eternity for breaking her vow. The only way out was to add a few words of her own to it. Once said they couldn't be removed, and she'd have freedom near the end of her life to do as she wished.

Lord Jarrad's hand rubbed her back in a gentle caress. "Little angel, say the words. You'll soon find them easy to ignore. Isn't that the way of wives?"

Fern pushed away his arm. Her last act of free will.

"I vow to Almighty God perfect obedience to your will, my lord Jarrad, *from this moment on until the end of my life.*"

The priest declared her married to Lord Jarrad and did not comment on her added words. No doubt the Scot thought it bound her more, not less. But the instant she felt her life to be in danger, she was freed from her vow. For all she knew, it was the end of her life now. The thought comforted her. Far worse to think she'd burn in hell for disobeying him, if she saved herself from whatever death he had planned for her.

Lord Jarrad murmured to her, "Very clever, little one. I'll not expect you to obey me if you fear your end has come. You're not nervous at the moment, are you?"

Under the fanfare and the cheers, one of the young knights voiced his triumph at the marriage in incomprehensible Gaelic. Fern had heard enough of the language, from men who'd tried to kill her, to recognize it. The noise from the crowd drowned the young man's words from everyone but the tight group around her.

Lord Jarrad gave a quick retort in the same language. It rolled out of his mouth as if it were his mother tongue, and he knew his mistake the instant he spoke.

Fern tried to get away. He hauled her towards him.

She froze, certain her last moment had come.

The stranger she'd married felt her take a breath to warn the others. He lifted her off her feet to kiss her hard.

The cheers intensified as Lord Jarrad swept her into his arms, prolonging the kiss. He was crushing her, deliberately not letting her take a breath to sound the alarm. The kiss went on and on, until Owen rushed to assist his wicked master.

“This way, my lord. Let me carry her feet for you. The only thing better than a wedding is a bedding. A bedding! A bedding!” Owen cried, as he steered them through the great hall towards the stairs to the tower and its bridal chamber.

Fern struggled with all her might, but Lord Jarrad was crushing her, not letting her take a breath. His arms were so tight about her, she could not get air.

He meant to kill her.

Her head tilted back until she thought her neck would break from the force of his kiss. She struggled to sound the alarm until her ribs squeaked and her mind darkened.

Chapter Four

Fern awoke to consciousness ready to fight for her life with all the cunning she possessed. She kept her eyes closed and felt around the bed.

She was alone.

Her wimple had been removed. Someone had spread her hair out over the pillow. Her shoulders were naked. Her clothes had been pulled down to the top of her breasts.

The low hum of voices surfaced once the worst of her fears muted.

She opened her eyes. The chamber was full of men. At a small table by the window, the baron read a long document. "It is a generous settlement."

He looked over at her. "Fern, have you recovered from your fright? Your husband has given you the great gift of his estate at Hollingham."

"My lord father, he speaks Gaelic. He is a Scot in disguise and means to kill me as soon as he has taken me from your care." Fern pulled her clothes up over her shoulders and disappeared under the sheets to fasten them. Beside her, she saw dark spots of blood. She tensed her wanton parts and decided that the blood could not be hers. That awful man would have left a lingering pain after tearing her open. She felt untouched, unmolested, and unmarried.

It wasn't the bedding she was worried about—it was being thrown to murderous Scots, to die a slow and bloody death.

Men who married always consummated it. Seven of her foster sisters had married men eager to make the marriage legal. Did Lord Jarrad mean to sell her virgin body to the Scots?

She scrambled off the bed.

The men crowded around to look at the sheets.

She ran to kneel in front of the baron, who had treated her like a daughter all her life. "My lord father! Help me! He means to take me to Scotland or to kill me!"

The baron laughed. "Nonsense, child! You always think that Scots are after you when they only want to push the border south. Their raids have nothing to do with you." He lifted the scrolls to show her the signatures. "Jarrad has given Hollingham to you and your children. I keep a copy of the deeds, one goes to the king, the other is yours."

The baron leaned over to kiss her forehead. "Be brave, as you always are, my sweet. I wish my daughters were more like you. Don't forget us when you are lady of the manor."

The baron led the men from the chamber.

Lord Jarrad closed the door behind them. "Hush—we have to whisper. They are

listening.”

He approached the bed. “Poor Owen tripped on the stairs and bled on the sheets more by accident than design. Forgive me for undressing you but when you didn’t recover from your swoon, I thought you’d breathe better with nothing tight around your neck.”

“Don’t come near me.” Fern hid behind the bed curtains. That did no good. If she couldn’t see him, she couldn’t watch what he did. She fumbled for her scissors, they had disappeared.

He wore no knife at his belt and did not move from his position near the bed. He seemed to have no interest in approaching her.

“Are you a pirate?” she asked. “What are they paying you to take me from the castle?”

“Fern, this is no way to begin a marriage, with accusations of piracy and kidnapping. I have a brother who speaks the Saracen tongue. He learned it at my father’s command, as I was ordered to learn Gaelic.” He gave a rueful shrug, “My father lives to trade from one end of the world to the other. He bought a title for me and a position with King Henry because he thought it useful.”

“Then you do mean to sell me! Was that why you didn’t consummate our marriage?”

“But, little one, when you bathed me I told you I wanted you to live with me at Hollingham. How many women do you think have admired my face?” At his mock sorrowful expression, she laughed half hysterically. His voice with its gentle tones asked, “Tell me what it is you fear. Surely not words spoken in a foreign tongue?”

“The Scots killed my mother when I was only a few months old. Her torn and bloody clothes were found, and a trail of blood leading down to the sea.” Fern touched the embroidered rose on her breast. “They return often to try to kill me. They search for me in the night. Always in the night. Once, they caught me but I was rescued before being strangled to death. My throat was damaged. It’s why I cannot scream or shout.”

“What do they want with you, little one? Do you know?”

“To end my mother’s line. To kill me. Why do you have Scots with you?”

“I have some Celts under my command, little one, but they have never been to Scotland and I’d never take you there.”

She wanted to believe him. She reminded herself that she had been alone with him and had found him pleasant enough. He’d seemed so far from a murdering Scot that she had found him amusing and, to her shame, arousing.

Now, she feared him.

Fern knew she must give him her perfect obedience until their destination became clear. It was very simple. If they traveled south he was telling the truth, if they went north to Scotland then he was a lying, murderous knave and it was the end of her life.

“Poor, little one, there is no use trying to think of a way out of our marriage, not

when Owen has bled on the sheets.”

When she didn’t answer, he shrugged. “Mayhap I should have married Elizabeth. I am beginning to think that even Meg might have been a better bargain than you, Fern, though she is afraid of dragons.”

“What do you want of me?” she asked.

“Nothing you won’t willingly give. I’ll not take an unwilling bride. The idea terrifies me.”

“Terrifies you?” She looked at him carefully. “In my judgment, you are not terrified at all—far from it.”

“How do you know that?”

“I am called if anyone is injured. Men have been afraid, and worse, of what I must do to them. Some have a reaction for a while afterwards. They avoid me and if they meet me by chance, they sweat and shake. You don’t look terrified to me.”

“But I haven’t spoken of it yet, so you can’t see my fear. Do you want to?”

“No. Do we go to Scotland? Tell me the truth.”

“No.” He raised his right hand. “I swear by Almighty God that I’d never take you to Scotland and that if anyone tries to take you there, I’d rescue you or die in the attempt.”

Fern stopped hugging her knees. “Truly?”

He smiled down at her. “Am I so terrible a husband, Fern? You know, even while you fear my intentions, I’m still glad you don’t find me hideously ugly.”

Fern shook her head, “If I can trust you, then I am pleased to be your wife.”

“Which leads me back to where we began.” He took a deep breath. “I shall try to be brave, though, I’d be braver if I could hold your hands.” He didn’t look the least bit scared or nervous.

Fern couldn’t tell if he mocked her or not. She held out her hands.

He didn’t approach her. “We cannot fight while we hold hands, can we? Do you want to fight me? You look reluctant. I’ll not hold unwilling hands.”

“I don’t want to touch you. I only want to keep my vow of perfect obedience.”

“You cannot break your vow if I ask nothing of you. Just let me say what I must say or you’ll never understand my fear of brides.” He gave a slight shrug. “Forgive me, little one. My scars ... it happened at a bedding. The bride disliked her marriage bed and, mistaking me for her husband, she slashed my face.” He ran a hand over his cheek. His fingers shook slightly. “It has given me a dislike of beddings, and if the truth be known, of brides.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So was I ... The wounds were—” he paused and closed his mouth. He shook his head. “My brother’s surgeon reopened the wounds to make the edges neater.”

It cost him dearly to tell her. “He did a fine job but I’d rather have died at the time. Not that the opinion of a boy was of any interest to either of them.” He stopped to

control himself, to sit on the edge of the bed.

Fern reached out to pat his knee. "I'm sorry."

"It gave me a dislike of force, among other things. Not a useful attribute in a knight." He gave a slight smile and covered her hand with his. "You can feel my pulse if you like, little one, just don't make any fast movements or I might faint dead away." He raised her hand to kiss her fingers.

She shook her head at his jest.

"You're right, little angel, I don't faint easily. I wish I did. I apologize for what happened in the hall. I didn't want a fight. Not one between us, not one between our friends. It is my firm opinion that no one should die over a wedding or a bedding." He took a deep breath. "Do you fear what I must do to make you mine, as much as I fear having to do it?" He held her nestled by his side. "Not that we have anything to worry about now that Owen has already bled on the sheets for your honor and mine."

There was a sharp rap on the door and the fool's voice called out, "We will miss the tide, my lord. The wind veers slightly, we must be gone from here or we will never clear the bay."

Fern touched the embroidered rose at her breast. She gave a silent prayer. This was either the end of her nightmares about Scots or the beginning of a real nightmare ending in her death.

"My apologies," said Lord Jarrad, "I get cold hands whenever I talk of it."

That was the truth. His hands were colder than hers.

Lord Jarrad called Owen into the chamber. The fool looked at them seated together on the edge of the bed. He gave a snort of disgust. "Has my lord been playing on your sympathies, my lady? He's had lots of practice at that. Don't make it easy for him. Tell him he's ugly and get it over with."

Lord Jarrad pretended to hit his fool, who ducked out of the way and pranced around the chamber collecting anything that took his fancy. Her deed to Hollingham was carefully rolled and wrapped. Two fine candles and a bottle of wine also went into her sewing bag.

At her look of surprise, he opened the bag to show her the surcoat she'd made to fit him. "My thanks for your gift, my lady, it's very beautiful."

As the fool ushered them out, he whispered to her, "My gift to you on your wedding day is to always tell you the truth, my lady. Is there anything you want to know?"

Fern shook her head. The truth? From that liar?

"Here is one truth for you, my lady. Your husband finds it easy to win women's sympathy, but does he want it and can he keep it? Here is another truth. If you kill my master, I'll kill you."

She returned his cold gaze. "What if he kills me? What will you do then?"

"I'd die of surprise, my lady."

Chapter Five

Fern felt the wind buffet them when they cleared the bay. The men stopped rowing, stowed the oars, and swarmed about to raise the sail. The boat heeled over with the sail eager to fly before the wind, while the hull dragged in the water. They gathered speed. The sea hissed along the sides like ripping cloth.

The men raised leather skins, sewn together, to cover the top of the boat, leaving only space for the man who steered. The noise of the wind lessened. The smell of wet leather, rubbed with sheep grease, almost masked the odor of the dozen men who faced her in the gloom.

The bright glow of the setting sun glinted through the lacing where the leather was lashed together.

They were going north.

Fern held tightly to Lord Jarrad, both her hands gripping his belt, her arms wrapped tightly around him. If she held on, it helped her believe he meant her no harm.

He couldn't kill her with both his arms trapped under hers.

If only it were possible to squeeze a man to death.

He signaled for Owen to place a cloak over them both. The crew faced them, staring at her from their benches. One of the older men wore a strange helmet of horn and brass. Tufts of red hair stuck out from behind his ears. He'd not been at the wedding—he looked too much a Scot. His nose looked familiar. She'd seen it on the Scot who'd tried to kill her, only that man had died in the attempt and he'd black hair like hers.

The red-haired man reached over to hit the young man who'd spoken Gaelic and betrayed them. "Hang your head before your lady, you dog. It was not your place to frighten the bride on her wedding day." He raised his fist again.

Fern let go of Lord Jarrad. "Stop hitting him!" she cried in her loudest voice.

A moment after she spoke, her husband roared, "Hold!"

The noise he made was deafening. Must he shout so loudly? She reached up to pat his cheek gently to soothe him, and then she rubbed her tingling ear. Not that dead people needed ears but she'd rather not have it damaged while she still lived. Just in case she survived, and they were lost and really did mean to go to Hollingham.

The crew stared at her with a strange expression on their faces. Alaric leaned forward to say in a calm voice, as if he were commenting on the weather, "My lord, you have blood on your face, and so does your lady."

Lord Jarrad didn't react. He didn't reach for her, or try to restrain her.

She looked up at him. His cheek was smeared with blood but it didn't drip. She peered up above his head to see if anything had dripped on them. She said in a soothing voice. "I don't think it's your blood, but may I see if it is?"

"If it pleases you," he said lightly. He let her turn to face him and touch his face. Fresh blood flowed on the surface of his skin. She could hear Owen the fool move closer to her, ready to save his master from her touch.

She looked at her hand. "It's my blood. Forgive me, my lord, I didn't know I had injured myself." A puncture wound on her fingertip bled profusely. She pressed her thumb against the wound to stem the flow. "I must have caught my finger on your belt."

The fool unlashed the hides closest to them to wet a cloth with seawater.

She took it and wiped her husband's face. Then she checked the position of the sun. They were still going north.

God help her!

The fool helped bind her finger. Through it all the crew sat silent and watchful, as if they were afraid to breathe.

Father Rab prayed to himself with his eyes tightly closed.

At last, Lord Jarrad spoke to the man with the helmet. "Duncan, if you are hinting it's my place to frighten the bride, I must disagree. My wife and I have a dislike of violence and we both ask you to forgive your son his error."

Duncan bowed his head. "Aye, the young idiot is forgiven, my lord. My apologies for scaring both of you by cuffing the lad."

The men laughed at his joke.

With a smile, Lord Jarrad said, "A bride must be won, not frightened. It does no good to scare the bridegroom, either. We are timid beasts."

The men laughed and slapped one another.

Young Robert yelled out, "Lord of a Thousand Tricks!" and laughed so hard he fell into a coughing spasm.

Fern anxiously scanned them all until she was certain she'd not seen them during a raid on Baron Welford's castle. Only Duncan looked familiar with his Scottish nose, the smile lines on his cheeks, and the frown creases between his eyebrows.

Owen slumped by the open space in the leather. "Shall you introduce her to the men, my lord? Whether it please you or not, oh great lord of the sea, I shall soon be of no use to you at all."

Fern felt Jarrad shift beside her. "Do you want to know their names, little one? It seems they can't keep quiet to save their lives." He gave a mournful sigh. "Remember, I have scars enough and take pity on me. You have met Alaric. It is he we have to thank for introducing us."

The young knight grinned at her. "My lady, under my command are Henry and Matthew. Good stout Englishmen."

The two youths bowed their heads.

Fern gave a formal nod to acknowledge them.

Lord Jarrad spoke again, "The rest of them are not Scots. They are Celts. Don't think they are Scots because they speak Gaelic. They are not from Scotland and we do not go there." He put his arm round her. "It might comfort you to know that they'd be no safer in Scotland than you would."

Fern knew he lied. The boat sailed north. Like it or not, she was going to Scotland. No idiot wanted to go to the Western Isles owned by fierce Norsemen.

He was a lying, murderous pirate, and she was going to have to swim back to England. Fern leaped for the gap in the hides covering the boat. The fool lay in it with his head and shoulders out as if waiting to vomit. She launched herself from his skinny bottom—careful not to break his back or his neck—even though he deserved it.

She sailed through the air thinking how easy it was, until a large hand caught her belt. Lord Jarrad held on. She kicked him and wriggled out of it. He grabbed her by the ankle.

A roar came for the men. The boat slewed and wallowed, as if they all leapt after her. A wave hit the leather roof with a loud thud.

She dove into the water head first. It was surprisingly warm, much warmer than the air. She was sure, if she could get free, she'd be able to swim home with ease.

The fool caught her by leaping on her back, sinking her deeper into the dark sea. He held on while the rushing sea tried to drag her out of his grip.

Lord Jarrad hauled Owen back on board, with him clinging to her like limpet. The other men didn't touch her. They just watched her being wrestled into submission.

She kicked and fought with all her strength for the few moments it took that wicked pirate to force her to sit on his knee. The fool held her ankles on his lap to lash them together with scrap of material from her sewing bag. He dried her feet with another scrap while they both dripped seawater.

"What use is that, fool?" she asked. "You may as well kill me now. I'll be dead of cold long before we get there."

Lord Jarrad wrung the water out of her skirts as best he could. Duncan passed over a dry cloak large enough to envelope all three of them.

Lord Jarrad gently traced the vein on her forehead that always showed when she battled her emotions. The sympathetic gesture almost made her weep.

Father Rab called out sharply, "'Tis a mortal sin to kill yourself, lassie. You'll have to be punished for sure. When we get home, I'll have to give you a penance."

Duncan scowled at him. "Maybe the lady thinks it penance enough to be married."

His son called out, "Why did you jump, my lady? Do you prefer death to marriage?"

Lord Jarrad answered for her when she ignored them. "My wife has no liking for those who speak Gaelic, young Robert. We shall all have to mind our manners and speak

English. She fears we are taking her to Scotland, but we are not, are we?"

The chorus of nays startled her into answering, "Then you had better turn around, for you are lost," she said haughtily. "England is back there, Scotland is ahead, or do you think me as daft as you? And I was not trying to kill myself. I was trying to swim home.

The men farther away needed to have her words repeated to them by the ones nearer.

Young Robert spoke up again. "You must be a good swimmer, my lady, but there was no need. We are bound for the Isle of Demons. It's not Scotland."

Fern shivered with cold and fright, "You cannot go to there! No one who goes there ever returns. It is populated by the fiercest Scots. Even the Danes couldn't take the Isle of Demons."

They all grinned at her words.

Her shivering got worse.

Lord Jarrad wrapped the cloak tighter about her. "Don't praise them, little one, they are proud enough."

Fern eyed the Scots disdainfully but the effect was quite spoiled by her chattering teeth, "S-S-So you would have me believe you are all K-K-King Henry's men and are loyal to England?"

Duncan answered for them all, "We are Lord Jarrad's men and bow to whomever he pledges his allegiance, my lady. 'Tis a better bargain to take England than to have bloody eagles carved in our backs, with our lungs torn out to be offered to the Norsemen's God."

"Enough, Duncan! My lady wife shivers with fright and cold. We shall guard you well, my wife, for you are the Lady of the Isle."

Chapter Six

Fern woke up to the sound of a man's labored breathing. She lifted her head from his shoulder when Lord Jarrad stopped to catch his breath.

"We are almost there, little one. If my heart gives out before we get to the top ..."
He gasped for air. "Remember, you own Hollingham and can live there without me."

Her chattering teeth made an answer impossible. Her body shivered so hard that he almost dropped her.

He tightened his grip on her and carried her up the last turn of the stairs. "This is what happens when you try to swim in the Irish Sea in winter."

An iron-clad door opened into a round chamber. An ornately carved screen hid the fire, though Fern could hear it burn with a crackling sound. The two tall, narrow windows were paned with colored glass that was fit for a king. The morning sun streaked the dark wooden floor with rainbow colors.

The walls were freshly plastered but not painted, unrelieved by any tapestry or frieze. A huge bed stood in the shadow of the screen.

He set her down on her feet but kept his arm around her waist. She couldn't feel her feet or her hands. The violent shivering increased without him holding her. She gripped his belt and for a moment laid her head on his chest, for his strength alone kept her upright.

A woman emerged from behind the fire screen. She was tall and graceful, her hair the same dark brown as Lord Jarrad's, and most of it was hidden under her cap.

Shrieks and shouts echoed under the floor. Fern clapped a hand to her breast, but the lady didn't seem the least frightened by the sound.

The wild cries of Scots muted when Owen closed the door.

The fool went behind the screen to warm himself.

"Did she give you any trouble on the journey?" the lady asked.

Lord Jarrad beckoned for her to come to him.

The lady approached. She curtsied, but kept some yards between them.

"Fern, this is my sister, Marie. You must excuse my wife, Marie. Fern cannot speak for shivering. She was not happy with our destination and tried to swim back to England."

The tall, imperious lady bowed her lovely head graciously as she spoke.

"Welcome to your new home, Fern. Will you bathe first, Jarrad?"

Fern looked around for the bath. It was then she noticed the cloud of steam rising from behind the screen.

“Fern, you will bathe first, unless I can tempt you to share. Owen,” he called, “go and change your clothes. Marie, will you help me undress my wife? My hands are so cold I cannot manage her laces.”

The air swirled about when Owen opened the door to leave. Smoke mingled with the steam.

At least it was warmer behind the screen. The fire mesmerized her. She tried to step closer and only succeeded in tripping over Lord Jarrad’s feet.

“You are lucky I cannot feel that, little one. If you’re standing on me on purpose, you’d better wait until I have sensation there.”

He began to peel the wet clothes from her with his sister’s aid. “You are so small. I fear I’ll not be able to see you when you are naked.”

She patted his hand and found she could just make the contact if she tried between shivers. What did nakedness matter when she was about to shiver her teeth out of her head? She pressed her face against his chest in an effort to stop the motion.

Marie spoke softly under her breath. “Fern is not very like you, is she? I’m sure that pleases you.”

He whispered back, “I find her kind and gentle, like an angel. She didn’t even try to strike Owen when he gave her good cause.” He gave Fern a hug while his sister unfastened her clothes. “She told Duncan not to hit young Robert. You should have seen his face. There she was, scared to death of Scots one second, and the next telling him off. I did explain that he was a Celt not a Scot but that is a distinction Fern has not grasped yet. We got a lecture on treating family and friends in a civilized way. She made us all promise not to kill each other. Didn’t you, little one?” He laughed low under his breath. “I had to promise, too.”

Fern raised her head to let them remove her tunic and chemise, but the motion made her head spin and she let it drop back on Jarrad’s broad chest. She unclenched her teeth to say, “Not-t-t if you are at-t-ttacked!”

Marie stripped Fern’s hose from her legs until she stood naked between them. The lady stepped away. “You should have taken her to the other side. Get rid of the dragon before Xavier gets here. There are spies here. I fear we are all doomed.”

Fern locked her knees and shook her head. Pins and needles began to signal the return of blood to her hands and feet.

“No one is going to kill you, little angel. Marie, you must take care what you say in front of my wife. She has suffered at the hands of Celts.” His kind words meant nothing when he lifted her up to put her in the bath.

Anguish turned to pain as her frigid skin touched hot water. They were going to boil her alive! With a croak from a throat useless for screaming, Fern leapt out, using her husband as a ladder. She climbed his thighs with her toes to wrap her arms around his neck. Her hands were too numb to be of any use. One of her frozen feet slipped. She hooked her leg around his waist, clinging to him with all her strength. Her toes found

purchase on his belt.

His sister screamed, "Stop her, Jarrad! Oh, saints preserve us. I cannot watch you do this. Stop her! Strike her down!"

Fern climbed higher and higher. Her breasts brushed his jaw and his bristles scratched her. Her cold fingers curled around his face. If he thought she meant to tear his face with her nails, he'd kill her. She patted his cheek to reassure him as she tried to get out of the way of his fists by going over his shoulder.

He didn't move. Didn't try to stop her. He just let her climb over him, moving only to make sure she could not fall. "Where are you going, Fern? May I help you get there? Perhaps there is an easier way around me than going over my shoulders. Not that I object, if it pleases you."

Marie screamed and fled, crying, "Why must you have her here? Surely you cannot mean to actually live with her? Remember who she is? Why on earth you want this God forsaken place is beyond me. I wish she'd died, and then you'd not be here."

The door opened. Marie cried, "Get out of my way, fool!"

The sound of Owen's feet echoed in the chamber. He called over the screen, "Do you need assistance, my lord?"

"No, Owen, which way did my sister go?"

"Up toward the roof."

Lord Jarrad peeled Fern from his shoulder and placed her on the floor. He threw a cloth over her naked body. It fell off with her shivers. "Guard Fern, watch out for the fire, don't let her near it."

Fern could hear him racing up the stairs.

"My lady." Owen poked his head over the screen. "Oh, let me help you."

He reached for the cloth. "I've got my eyes closed, my lady. Let me cover you and help you sit up." He gave a wicked chortle. "Get your wits together, I have a truth to tell you that you need to know."

Fern leaned against the bathtub. She didn't care what he looked at. He'd not closed his eyes. They held no lust or interest in her body. She was almost sure he wasn't whole.

He pulled the drying cloth over her shoulders and sat beside her. He'd changed his clothes and looked warmer than before.

She shivered. Her clacking teeth faded to an occasional tremor.

"Can you understand me?" he asked.

She nodded.

"All Terrenords believe that every person has their price. Do you know what yours is?"

Fern put her hand in the water. She couldn't keep it there for long. "Hollingham-m-m."

"Yes, my lady, but you haven't earned it yet. It is a worthless plot of land with a

manor house, a stream, and little else. It is far from the sea or a navigable river. No Terrenord would ever covet it.”

She shivered a shrug. “I’ll n-never live to see it.”

“All Terrenords believe that death is a waste. They rarely kill.”

“Not like Scots!” She managed to get both hands in the water. The cloth slid off her shoulders.

The fool caught it to replace it. “Another truth is, to my lord it doesn’t matter if he has your body or not. He is used to whores from the Orient who know a thousand tricks to please a man. You are not necessary to his pleasure nor able to please him. And know this, he’d never take you by force, but that puts you in danger, my lady. If the men find out you are a virgin still, and not enamored of him, they’ll kill him and marry you to claim the Isle.”

“I’m ... m ... a bastard.”

“Don’t be a fool, my lady, that’s my job. Earn Hollingham and you might survive long enough to live there. Encourage him. He has a liking for whores and a fear of brides.”

“Easy to say, Owen, but I d-don’t know any tricks to please a man. Not one, n-never m-mind a thousand!” She paused to think about it. “I don’t believe there are a thousand ways.”

“My lady, you must know of one. The usual, ordinary, boring one.”

“Men do that without help from females.” She stopped to think. “I don’t even know how to help him do that one. I’m d-doomed, Owen. Not that I believe you for an instant. A thousand tricks! Most men need only a warm body—and some n-not even that.”

“I know the thousand. Pick a number and I’ll tell you how to do it,” he urged.

“You are a such a liar.” She called his bluff, “What is number two hundred and three?”

The sound of footsteps coming down the stairs made Owen lean closer to whisper in her ear.

Chapter Seven

“Owen, follow my sister and make sure she gets to Duncan.” Lord Jarrad stumbled into the chamber with great shudders in his body and voice.

Fern lifted her hands from the warm water in the bathtub. She covered her face and sank to the floor to hide her laughter. Her whole body shook with giggles.

No woman had ever done that to a man. Surely it would hurt him? The vision of her easing strange, foreign love toys into Lord Jarrad’s ears, in an effort to interest him in consummating the marriage, sent her into gales of laughter.

The fool nudged her with his foot to make her stop.

“Owen, stay out of Marie’s way, watch from a distance. She is scared to death and dangerous to you.” Lord Jarrad stood in front of the fire.

The fool went to undress him.

“There is a wind howling off the water that has frozen those things I hold most dear. Alas, Fern, I can only hope to thaw before we go to bed or you’ll have something else to complain about.” He paused as if he looked for her. “Where is my wife, Owen?”

“Your lady is laughing, my lord. She is hiding on the other side of the bathtub, hoping you won’t notice and ask why she laughs.”

Fern knelt up with a straight face. Hysterical laughter always gave way to tears. She wiped her cheeks and warmed her hands in the bath. Sudden snorts of laughter sent her giggling into tears again.

The fool threw his lord’s damp clothes on top of hers before he raced from the chamber with a sly wink at her.

Lord Jarrad knelt beside her, naked, to plunge his arms into the warm water next to hers.

Fern could feel the chill from his body. “Get in, my lord, before you die from cold,” she managed to say without laughing.

He obeyed her.

Fern looked away. The water rose up her arms and his thighs brushed against her. She moved away, not wanting to see or touch any part of him. If she looked at him, she might not be able to think.

Tempted, she looked. The water left most of his chest naked to her gaze. It was a dangerous part of him. His chest seduced her, beckoned her to stroke it. It had made her witless when she’d bathed him, and aided him to kidnap her.

She never intended to touch it or look at it again.

He sank deeper into the bathtub, his knees rose from the water for he was too tall

to fit in it lying down. “Fern, I know you’re angry with me and if I could have done it any other way I’d not have come for you, but Duncan found out the Celts were planning another raid to capture you. I thought perhaps you’d prefer to be my bride rather than be their prisoner. They’d never have agreed which one of them should marry you. I doubt you’d have enjoyed their quarrels or their rough courtship.”

She went to sit in front of the fire with her back to him. Owen was right. Those wild Scots would kill him to get the Isle. She had to make them believe she loved him and wanted to share his bed. But how to make him consummate the marriage was beyond her.

A draft swept over the floorboards to feed the flames that rose in a hollow in the stone wall. If he locked her in and the fire died down, she might be able to climb out that way. If she could escape, there’d be no reason for them to kill him in the hope of marrying her. She leaned closer to the fire to see how wide the opening was to the roof.

“Little one, there are iron bars to let the smoke out and to keep anyone from climbing in through the chimney. Just in case you are curious.”

A sudden silence made her turn to see what he was doing. Only the top of his head was visible in the water. She watched and waited. He lay as one dead in the water, his dark hair drifting, his hands still.

“Stop it!” Fern slapped at the closest of his knees. “If you die, I’ll be forced to marry one of them!”

Like a sea monster, he rose to grab her. Her wrists were caught in one fist, with the other hand he dragged her into the bath with him. “Don’t struggle, little one, you are cold and so am I. Let’s get warm together. You can wear the cloth, if you are shy.”

Fern refrained from telling him she was not shy. Suddenly, it seemed like the truth.

She let him drape her over his body, even let him trap her legs between his knees so she couldn’t kick him. Did he really think himself in danger from her? He was twice her size, a warrior, for all he said about disliking violence. His shoulders told her he practiced with sword and lance—he didn’t get those muscles working in the fields. She refused to think of his chest, but he had not developed such interesting ripples by devoting himself to whores of a thousand tricks.

She crossed her arms over her breasts to protect herself from his cold hands, pushing him away. He rested his hands above her heart. The rest of his body felt warm and wicked in the lapping water. As far as she could tell he hadn’t frozen any part of him. She moved slightly to dip her hair, to rinse the salt from it. He aided her by sinking lower.

“Your heart is beating too fast.” His voice warmed her ear.

Perhaps ears *were* sexual places.

His voice rumbled round her heart until she could feel it skipping beats.

Wild cries echoed up from the floor. She started at the noise.

He caught her wrists. "Don't be afraid, Fern. We are not in danger. They're celebrating in the hall beneath us because it's too cold outside. A winter storm has begun. We made it here just in time. When the tide is high, you'll hear the waves crashing against rocks at the base of the tower." He lowered her hands into the water.

"Who am I?" The words slipped out of her mouth. "Am I base born?"

"No, you have your father's forehead with the same vein that forks across it when you are roused to strong emotion." He scooped water to trickle warmth over her breasts. Only their frozen state made her able to endure the sensation.

"Who was he?" She talked to distance herself from what he was doing.

"Graeme ruled the English part of the Isle."

"Who was my mother?" Fern covered her breasts with her hands. All her life, she'd wanted to know about her mother. She was not going to be distracted now.

He gave a low laugh. "She was not a mute, little one. The baron told me your mother never uttered a word, but that must have been to avoid betraying her accent because she spoke English well. I'd like to have seen her mime how you were conceived under forest ferns."

"Who was she?"

"Her brother, Black Angus, ruled the Scottish half of the Isle. He married my sister, Marie, and when he died without children, your mother inherited it. You own the Isle. One side from each of your parents, whether it pleases you or not." He raised her hand to kiss her fingers.

She pulled her hand away. "Let go of me. I don't want it. Let me go back to live in England. Bringing me here puts us both in danger. Let me go to live at Hollingham, please, I beg you. It's the only way to keep us both safe."

He helped her to her feet. "Forgive me, little one. You are safer with me, and I must be here."

Fern flung the wet cloth on the floor. She marched naked to the hearth. Before she reached it, his arms restrained her. "Don't step nearer the fire, little one. It makes me nervous."

She tried to push him away, taking care not to look at him in case it stole her wits. "The drying cloths are here. I have tended burns, believe me, I don't want to die that way. You can stop worrying about me trying to burn myself to death."

"Good." He knelt to reach for the cloths. "That only leaves me to worry about you trying to burn me."

"I'd never do that. I've never killed anyone on purpose."

His body stilled. "You've killed men by accident? Are you a careless angel?"

"Not every injury can be mended. Trying to help is worth the risk, if death is the only alternative. There are men alive because I helped them and some men are dead because I tried to." Fern took a drying cloth from him.

An awful thought coursed through her mind. She had to ask him. She wanted to

be wrong. "Did my mother mark your face?"

"Yes, she slashed me with a broken glass bowl, but she was very sorry for it."

"Did she try to burn my father to death?"

"Yes."

Fern patted his shoulder. "No wonder Owen says you need a whore of a thousand tricks."

His shoulders shook with laughter. She was glad he found her amusing. There was no use worrying how she was going to get him to consummate their marriage. Those wicked men were going to race up the stairs to kill him long before she gathered courage to do the deed.

Unless she hurried.

Chapter Eight

He dressed her in a warm dressing gown of quilted silk—silk both inside and out with goose down in between. Fern had never worn silk before. At first, it felt cool and slippery but soon it warmed and every movement was a revelation of luxury. It was Lord Jarrad's garment and was far too big. Her hands disappeared into the sleeves and she turned the material at the wrists until she could use her fingers.

He wore a drying cloth tied around his waist as if he were loathe to stop the heat from the hearth warming his naked body.

Fern could scarcely keep her gaze from his chest or the length of his thighs.

Owen raced into the chamber, "They have finished the dancing, my lord."

Silence prevailed in the great hall below. It was as if the castle held its breath, then shouts, war cries, fierce screams rent the air, growing louder and louder.

Alaric pounded up the stairs, "Duncan asks permission to enter, my lord."

"Delay for as long as you can, then let them up," answered the idiot lord.

Noise echoed up the stairs. Fern froze in terror. She needed more time.

Owen rushed to her side to whisper, "Unless you want a Celtic husband, show them your pleasure in this marriage."

She ran, away from Owen, away from Lord Jarrad. Down the length of the chamber she fled, holding the hem of her dressing gown up off the floor. A curtained opening in the wall proved to be a garderobe with a wooden seat and a tiny barred window. She climbed onto the seat, taking care not to let a foot slide into the hole, to tug on the iron bars.

Owen pried her fingers open, grabbed her around the waist and ran back with her. She pinched him hard to make him let go until he threw her onto the high bed. Fern scrambled to escape from the opposite side but her husband was there.

He had not dressed. There was no time. Instead, he pulled back the covers and pinned her to the bed with his body. His weight centered on top of her. Grasping her wrists, he slid her hands beneath the pillows to hide his restraining grip.

"Don't be afraid, they mean you no harm. There is a tradition here of annoying the bridal couple by visiting them to stop them from enjoying the pleasures of the marriage bed. Do you think you can pretend to want me, little one?"

At her nod, he stretched her arms out towards the bedposts. "Cover me, Owen, I'd prefer not to show my naked backside to everyone."

Owen obeyed, though he winked at Fern. "It's not the scariest side of you, as your wife will attest on the morrow."

"I don't have a scary side. I've already confessed to dangerous parts, haven't I, little one? At the moment, they're still frozen and that worries only me. Get the ribbons and wrap them around my lady's wrists and ankles. Let's play a trick on them, little one. Pretend that I have bound you to make love to you. While they watch, release yourself by unwinding the ribbons."

The fool reached for scarlet ribbons, already tied to the bed posts. Her husband either planned his jokes carefully or he intended to make love to her bound. It cheered her to think he meant to consummate the marriage, even if he needed to tie her up to get enough courage to do the deed.

Fern let her wrists be bound. "What if they kill us both?"

He didn't crush her with his weight, only his hips rested heavily on hers. "Then they die or they are sold into slavery. It won't be our decision, alas."

"Who decides it?" One of her ankles was drawn out from under him and tied to the post. He shifted to lie between her legs. She felt exposed to him, her wanton place open to his dangerous part. "Who decides?"

He moved her free leg to make more room for his hips. "My brother, Xavier. They know him here and fear him."

The fool reached for her other ankle, to spread her wide.

"Don't! I don't want my ankles tied."

"Just one, Owen, leave my lady's other ankle free."

The fool gave a snort and tickled the sole of her foot. "Anyone who doesn't fear Xavier has not met him yet."

Fern asked her husband, "Do they fear you?" She hoped the answer was yes.

"No, little one, they hope that I can save them. Are you going to lie quietly under me while drunken Celts visit or will you join in the game? I want you to persuade them you are in love with me. Unless you'd prefer one of them?"

"They tried to kill me!"

"If the Celts wanted you dead, we'd not be talking."

"Then you have signed your own death warrant! What use have they for you, now they have me here? We must run away!" She struggled to free herself. The ribbons tightened on her flesh.

"To save me?" He smiled down at her. "I'm flattered, but you forget that if I die, Xavier scourges the Isle."

"Does he love you so much?"

Fern felt his belly contract as if he laughed.

"He is my older brother, be polite when you meet him." He stroked her cheek. "I can almost see your thoughts. No, Xavier will not save you from your fate. You are the Lady of the Isle."

A warning cry came from the door, "They come, my lord."

Pounding footsteps echoed up the stairwell. Duncan appeared, looking wild, his

red hair slicked back with sweat. Young Robert staggered in after his father, drunk, his sword drawn.

Fern pointed a finger at the young man. The scarlet ribbon grew taut between her wrist and the bedpost. "N-n-no weapons in here!"

He put the sword behind his back, but could not leave for the mass of people pushing through the door.

"Do you still live, Jarrad?" asked Duncan. Whisky-laden breath blasted from him. "Has she bewitched or maimed you yet?"

His men roared with laughter. They pushed Duncan nearer the bed as the chamber filled.

Fern had seen enough of the baron's daughters the morning after the bedding, when they were besotted with their husbands, to know what it looked like. She raised her head to kiss the pulse in her husband's neck, desperate to make them believe she was happily married.

It silenced the crowd.

A few of the women screamed a warning. Did they really believe she'd rip his throat with her teeth? What kind of people were they?

"You're making them nervous, little one, but I enjoyed it," whispered Lord Jarrad. He stroked her lower lip to stop it from twitching.

Fern smiled up at him as if insane with love. Her free ankle snaked about his leg as if to hold him in place above her. She ran her foot over the back of his knee and sighed like a wanton woman.

"Should I pay them to go, little one? I am yours to command."

She silenced his lies with a kiss, but could not hold it long. Not when he gently bit her lips.

The fierce red-haired warrior cheered. His men cheered with him.

Fern unwound the ribbon to free her hand.

It was as if they all held their breath. She rubbed her hand on the small of Lord Jarrad's back. That wicked part of him moved against her leg.

She jabbed a finger towards Duncan. "Go," she commanded. It was the most she could get out before her jaw clenched shut and a shudder swept her.

To her astonishment, Duncan bowed his head and obeyed her, moving backward until he was swallowed by the crowd.

None of the others dared approach as closely. For a frantic howling mob, the Scots now watched her silently.

She saw Marie with her women by the door. They stared at her with cold faces. Except one of them, young and blond, who looked envious.

Fern closed her eyes, determined to act her part. She sighed wantonly. It was a shame she could only get one leg free to wrap around his but it would have to do. She could not unwind the ribbon fastening her other foot to the post.

Someone took hold of her toe. She knew it was Owen. He was trying to unhook her from his lord.

Fern raised her head with her eyes still closed. "Cease, fool," she commanded, "I know it's you."

She opened her eyes to see if she had convinced any of them yet.

The Scots were clad in their best clothes. Plaid was popular, but not the only choice. They wore silks, fine wool and linens in every color and clashing combination. They were tall and short, many black-haired. The red-haired ones ranged from bleached gold to dark auburn with every color possible in between. They all stared at her in wonderment, as if she were some strange creature they had dredged up from the bottom of the sea.

Her husband spoke in Gaelic.

He whispered his translation in her ear, "Good people, I want to you meet my wife, Lady Fern. Guard her well, for she is ours."

She rubbed her ear on his shoulder to stop it from tingling. Ears *were* sensitive places.

Cheers sounded and young Robert was pushed forward. He kept one hand hidden behind his back to hold his sword out of her sight. "My lady, I have been asked to speak for the women," he said shyly. His bruises faded into his blushes. "They want to know if you need tending to."

Before Fern could answer, Owen simpered and sat coyly on the edge of the bed as if he were somewhat tender in his nether parts. He moaned and squeaked slightly as he lowered himself down.

"I do not think I need tending," Owen said, imitating her voice. "My lord husband made me shed but a little of my blood on the sheets in my foster-father's home. It was just surprise that made me cry out so loudly that I lost my voice, for I knew not what shape a man was, nor where his staff must go." He gingerly patted his hair as if it hurt. "I think I have a bump on the top of my head from the length of it."

His words were hurriedly translated for those who could not understand him.

Ribald laughter echoed off the ceiling.

Owen shrieked and scrambled backwards over the bed. His head sank to rest near her foot, a trembling smile on his lips, his whole body shuddering with pleasure. With each spasm, the fool lifted his legs higher and higher until they were wrapped around the back of his neck, leaving his hips rocking in time to his broken screeches.

The people laughed at him until they bent double. Some of them fell in a heap on the floor. Fern was sure they laughed until they wet themselves.

Owen sat up to untwine his limbs. "And thus was my lady lain upon her marriage bed. See how her leg binds my lord to her. I think she means not to let him go. Are you happy with your lord husband, my lady?"

Before she could answer, a roar came from the doorway. It was the priest, Father

Rab, as drunk as any of them.

"A penance, she shall have a penance. Put it there, lads, not too close to the fire. Not there, are you all drunken idiots? There, put the iron ring there," shouted Father Rab.

A loud banging noise rang through the chamber. Fern hid her face against Lord Jarrad's neck. He kindly held her ears for her so she was not deafened by the noise.

What were they doing? It was loud enough to make the windows rattle, a devil's anvil of a sound.

When it ceased, the priest staggered towards the bed, the crowd parting before him. "Better to use it, Jarrad, chain her to it, so the lady knows her sins and learns from them. There is no surer way to keep her safe and teach her right from wrong." He limped toward the bed. "Tis wicked to try to take your life, Lady Fern," thundered Father Rab in a voice surprisingly loud for one so old and frail looking. "You'd have roasted in hellfire for eternity. Fear the flames for it's a terrible torment."

The old priest gestured at a huge man with a hammer. "Angus has put it in and no feeble woman can shift it. Get me another drop of whisky, young Robert, for I've a terrible thirst." The old man stopped when he saw her under Lord Jarrad. He blinked as if to clear his sight. "Now might not be a good time. Use it if she sins." He pointed a crooked finger at her. "Perfect obedience! God heard you say it!"

Fern felt the shivers start.

"Don't move, little one," said her husband in soothing tones. "It will soon be over."

She didn't trust his voice. What would soon be over? Her life? Fern struggled against him. He was too heavy, she couldn't breathe, still she tried to explain, "I did not try to take my life, I swear it."

She could feel the vein pulsing in her forehead.

Others saw it and they pointed at her and began to chatter and crow, smiting one another on the back, laughing at her in their heathen tongue.

"I tried to swim home." They couldn't hear her.

Her husband's chest weighed heavy. She stroked his cheek to remind him to let her breathe beneath him.

The crowd made a sudden roar. Touching Lord Jarrad's face had set them off.

She winced and tried to free her other hand. The ribbon twisted tighter about her wrist.

Large hands covered her ears. "Don't struggle, little one."

Several of the fiercest warriors stepped towards the bed for a closer look. Owen laughed merrily as if Fern jested with him, "Which one would you prefer, my lady?" he whispered, the taut undertone of his voice warning her despite his laughter.

Lord Jarrad reared up on his arms, giving Fern a fine view of his chest. "Be gone, my friends. My wife needs me to comfort her. Unless you want to rule her?"

The horror his words spawned was plain on every drunken face. They retreated

as quickly as they had arrived. They fled the chamber, tripping over one another in their haste to be gone.

Owen raced after them. He took a bag of coins from a chest against the wall. “Wait, I have to pay you to leave the bridal couple in peace. Better still, you should be paying us for saving your miserable lives. Is this the reward we get for all our trouble?”

Lord Jarrad called to Alaric to lock the door and stand guard. Fern could feel his heart pounding in his chest as he looked down at her.

Trick number two hundred and three was going to be no use at all.

Chapter Nine

"You have to be brave, my lord." Fern followed her husband to the fire.

"Call me Jarrad. I claim no lordship over you." He warmed himself, painted by the flames.

She tried not to look at him, though he wore a cloth around his hips to hide his dangerous parts. "Jarrad, you must consummate our marriage."

"Why?"

"Because I cannot lie."

"*Matilda*, your words surprise me."

"Lying about my name is different. What right had you to know it? Do you know how many times strangers searched for me? Lots of times. And you discovered who I was and married me because you wanted the Isle of Demons. I wish you'd never found out who I was."

"I don't want the Isle, Fern. Memories lurk here in the dark to haunt me. King Henry wants the Isle and I am his liege man, sworn to obey him. You, I wanted. I confess I wanted you with your gentle voice, your skillful hands and your sense of humor. I wanted you, my angel, even though I knew who you were from the start."

"Then you must make love to me, so I can swear I am your wife and I won't have to act the part of love-struck bride. Not that I don't know what it looks like." She had to stop babbling with fright.

"What does it look like?"

When she hesitated, he put his arm around her. "I've always avoided brides." He gave a rueful shrug. "Show me what a bride looks like the day after the bedding, if it pleases you to show me."

She sighed and leaned against him. Brides always did that.

"If you'd rather not," he said, "I understand. It might be too frightening for me."

Fern stroked her hand over his chest. It was no use denying the pleasure, and it might give him courage. "I *am* showing you. Brides always say something like this the next morning." In her best imitation of a lovesick bride, she lisped, "Oh Jarrad, I wish it were night and we were alone again." She looked up at him adoringly. Her hand refused to stop exploring the texture of his skin and the swelling of the muscles over his ribcage. It was as if her hand had a life of its own and was taking every opportunity to touch him. She thrust it behind her back, letting her breasts brush him while she sighed lustfully.

It awoke an answering sound, a low laughter from deep in his chest.

She frowned at him. "Jarrad, you aren't supposed to laugh at your bride the next

day.” She stopped leaning on him and put some space between them so she could think. “I told you no one would believe me. I’ve seen it seven times, with my foster sisters, and I thought it the silliest sight, and can’t do it even if I try. Besides, if I am asked to swear if we are truly married, I cannot lie and say you’ve bedded me when you have not.”

“No one will ask you.”

“They’d suspect it, knowing my mother marked your face. What did your sister say? She wished me dead and said you couldn’t want to live with me. Won’t others think that?”

“I hope not by tomorrow.”

“Can you make me look and sound as love-struck as my foster sisters?” she asked hopefully.

“I’ll try, little angel.”

“Even though I don’t know any of the thousand tricks? Except for two hundred and three.”

“I know them all.”

She laughed and her hand crept back to feel laughter rumbling in his chest.

“Doesn’t it just mean lots and lots, not actually a thousand?”

“A thousand, I swear it.” He held her in his arms. “Afterwards, I’ll be exhausted.”

“You can rest then.” She shivered at the thought of what came next. Her lust vanished with her bravery.

“Fern, the door is locked from the outside.” He lifted her chin with a cold hand. “You can’t escape.”

She gazed up at him and found his intense expression unnerving. It froze her tongue.

He smiled at her, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “If this is all a clever trick, tell me now and I won’t take you.”

“Tie me up, if you must. Just do it and get it over with.” The thought of his weapon at the ready kept nudging a warning, a reminder that men were dangerous beasts when roused.

She led him slowly back to the bed, not wanting to frighten him by any sudden movements. He lifted her up onto it, but did not join her. Fern sighed and tied one of her ankles to the bed post. She smiled at him soothingly and hoped he didn’t notice she’d tied it with a bow.

He didn’t move.

She managed to wrap the ribbons from one wrist around the post at the headboard. It was too ridiculous. Impossible to tie all her limbs to the posts. She sank into nervous giggles, but it seemed to please him.

“Why are you laughing, little angel?” he asked, as he sat beside her waist.

At least he was on the bed, not hiding in the garderobe. She draped the ribbon

from her free wrist over his hand. "I feel ridiculous."

For an answer he placed a cold hand on her cheek. "Forgive me."

"Please do it, Jarrad. Do it and get it over with."

"To get the proper reaction from you in the morning, I must bring you to pleasure. Have you any objection to it?"

"If you ask me to feel pleasure, I might burn in Hell for eternity if I can't. Please don't ask it of me." She sat up as far as her bonds would allow and said, "I fear you might be too big to for pleasure."

He smiled at her. "I ask nothing of you, except your willing presence in our bed. If you are not willing, tell me now and I won't take you."

Fern growled a protest. "Don't keep asking me to save you from consummating the marriage. Can you do it quickly, so it won't hurt too much?"

"A timid bridegroom cannot be rushed. He must build his passion with a multitude of caresses."

A scream came up through the floorboards, followed by hoots of demonic laughter. In an instant, her bridegroom fled from the bed towards the door. He covered the distance in the time it took her to unfasten herself from the bed. She leapt after him to stop him from opening the door.

He knocked and was answered by Alaric before she reached him. She bumped into his back with a thud that almost stunned her. She put both arms around his waist and held on with all her strength. The cloth around his waist was dislodged by her grip. It dropped towards the floor until it caught on her hips, where they pressed against his body. His nakedness didn't bother her at all. Not when Scots might be waiting their turn to do their worst.

Her husband stilled, and then called through the door to Alaric, "Tell Owen to lead them out. He is to return and wait below. Go and warm yourself by the fire. I want you all sober tonight. Let someone always keep watch. Only Duncan and Marie are allowed inside the broch."

Alaric's footsteps faded as he went to do his lord's bidding.

Fern released her grip. "I'm sorry, Jarrad. I thought you were leaving me." She stepped away from him. The cloth crumpled onto the floor between them. Resolutely, she kept her gaze on his face.

He held her by the upper arms. "Were you hoping to escape when I opened the door?"

"No. I was trying to stop you from fleeing."

He smiled at her. "I have no liking for screams, either."

"I'll try to be quiet." She smiled back at him. Even though she knew his quizzical smile was caused by his scarred cheek, she felt comforted by it.

She waited until he led her back to the bed. There was no use rushing him. Even though a glimpse lower down showed her he was more than ready to invade her body.

She could not suppress a shudder when he lifted her onto the bed.

He tied her feet loosely together.

Men were odd creatures. She had no intention of kicking him.

He covered her with his body and wrapped the ribbons, tied to her wrists, around his hands. Anything to make him feel safe enough to do the deed was fine with her. She tried to slow her breathing.

He carefully did not crush her, though that might have been to protect that part of him pressing against her belly. His kiss lasted until she broke it to take a breath of air.

“You can breathe and kiss, little angel. You don’t have to hold your breath.”

It was true, she could. Fern returned his kisses cautiously, so as not to frighten him. She let him kiss her cheeks, her eyelids and her brow. Ears were surprisingly sensitive, so was her neck. Her mouth welcomed him back and even opened for him as if it had no will but his. Her tongue took him by surprise, even though it was just the littlest lick. She returned his kiss. His body tensed in a strange way.

He moved lower, away from her kisses. She held her breath.

His hands were warm when he bared her breasts. It encouraged her to stroke his hair. In an instant the ribbons tightened hard on her wrists. She froze in place. Better if she lay like a log. Her participation was obviously detrimental to his pleasure.

“Forgive me, Fern.” He let go of her ribbons and brought her wrists to his mouth to soothe the sting. Of their own accord, her hands covered her breasts.

He moved to tie each ribbon to a bed post. It discouraged her to think he didn’t want her to touch him. For the first time she turned her head away to refuse his kiss. Not that he noticed. His mouth at her breasts made her gasp for air. She writhed under him as her body grew warmer and warmer. No longer only just willing, but wanton. Heat pulsed with the touch of his tongue, his lips, the gentle rake of his teeth over flesh so delicate that she trembled at the sensations.

He drove her mindless until he stopped. He kissed his way downwards. Fern gave a moan of protest.

He lifted his head from her belly. “What is amiss, little angel?”

“My breasts are lonely.”

“I leave them with regret. Forgive me.” He untied the ribbons binding her ankles together.

She closed her eyes. His kisses grew more dangerous.

Fern gave a squeak of protest. If his mouth at her breasts drove her to passion, his mouth at her wicked wanton place was not to be borne. She tried to wriggle away, and then she remembered her vow. Perfect obedience meant she had to let him do as he wished with her body.

She couldn’t think, she could only feel the swirl of his tongue as he licked what it pleased him to lick, and tasted what it pleased him to taste. His sighs of pleasure gave her hope he might soon make love to her as he should. Passion burned within her. It

made her lift her hips in an unspoken invitation. She wanted to free her wrists and touch him. The ribbons twisted tighter when she tried to reach him.

He stopped his teasing caresses to free her from the bedposts. She noticed he didn't untie the ribbons from her wrists.

Her heart thudded when he suddenly knelt between her legs to look at her. He sat back on his heels to stroke her inner thighs. He'd never fit inside her. There was no place. Women should never marry giants.

She sighed to think his dangerous part wanted her, even if his mind loathed the idea.

Minutes later Fern stopping writhing and tried to catch her breath. Her breasts raised towards him, as if begging for his mouth. Her arms tugged at the red ribbons wrapped about his wrists. Her thighs tried to squeeze his waist, only to be met with strong hands holding them apart.

He waited until she stopped moving. She dared not say a word. Dared not look him in the eyes in case he took fright and called a halt. She stared at his chest and wished she could stroke it.

A pressure began between her legs.

She peeped to see if he had entered her. Only his fingers caressed her. Not that she minded. She gave a sudden gasp. No, she could not stand that, whatever he did he had to stop before she melted into a foolish, brazen hussy who begged for more. She closed her eyes and pushed against his hand.

It didn't help. She spread her knees wide and nudged him with her ankles, not daring to say a word in case he stopped.

"Now, little angel?" he asked in a low voice, not out of his mind with lust. Not like her.

Fern nodded. She risked speaking to him. "Yes."

She closed her eyes, letting him stroke her thighs wider apart. He pressed into her and her body welcomed him. He held her down while he thrust slowly into her. She tore with a little flash of sweet pain. It made her gasp for an instant.

The ribbons no longer bound her. She curled around him and held on in case he took fright.

He stilled within her. "Forgive me." He gently bit her lips. "You're a perfect virgin bride, I must go slowly."

She hoped the word bride wasn't going to stop him now.

Chapter Ten

Owen pulled a face. "Who will guard you while you sleep, my lord? I don't trust her. Let me stay in front of the fire, lest you are found dead in the morning."

Jarrad laughed softly. "I doubt you will mourn me tomorrow. Go and get some rest. She fell asleep exhausted in my arms, to dream of home, and to hope when she awoke it would all be a dream. Don't we both know how that feels? You can't really think poor Fern will kill me."

Jarrad put an arm around Owen's thin shoulders. "Be gentle with my wife. She needs a friend."

"I think she has friends enough. Did you notice, my lord, how she is always touching the embroidered rose on her tunic. I wonder if something lies under it, some token of affection from a lovesick youth."

Jarrad reached for the tunic's rose to slit it open with Owen's knife. He pulled out a lock of straight dark hair as coarse as a horse's tail. "Damn!" He flung the tunic and hair into the fire.

"Do you know whose it was, Owen?" He watched the wool smolder.

"Nay, my lord, but perhaps the lady will be upset you have destroyed it. May I be the one who takes the blame? Better she hates me than you."

"No, leave us. If I am dead in the morning, get out of here as fast as you can." It was only half a joke.

His fool went reluctantly to the door. "Do I lock you in with her?"

"Yes. If I'm to get any rest at all, I must know she can't escape."

"I shall sleep outside your door," grumbled Owen "but it would be warmer by the fire." The door closed behind him.

His wife stretched like a waking cat. "What's burning?" She sat up abruptly.

Jarrad threw her underskirt into the fire. "Your clothes, little one. They are not fit for you to wear again."

She scrambled off the bed, naked. The red ribbons tied to her ankles trailed along the floor, the ones on her wrists fluttered in the air, caressing him.

"Don't trip over the iron ring, Fern, you might hurt yourself."

"What have you done? Let me take them out!"

"Why do you need your old clothes?" he asked.

"You've burned my only treasure. There's a lock of hair I want!" The words came out as a sob.

"Was it valuable this lock of hair? Was it saint's hair? Or was it a token from a

mortal man?" He let her ribbons trail through his hand to disguise his intent to hold her with them.

"No one can give me another!" Her voice wavered. She looked as if she'd been struck a mortal blow. "It's lost forever."

"Saint or sinner?" he asked. "Tell me, Fern."

"You must hate me because of what my mother did to you." Her sobs started. She sank to her knees to grip the ring hammered into the floor.

Jarrad knelt beside her. He let her lean against his chest, while he stroked a hand over her back. Poor little one. Not that his sympathy changed anything. "Tell me about your treasure, Fern."

"No! I'm one of those awful brides now. The ones you hate. That's why you burnt my clothes."

"Don't cry, chérie, tell me." He pulled the dressing gown off the chair to drape it over her shoulders.

She shrugged it off. "You don't even want to see me naked. It's probably all you can do not to vomit when you look at me." She turned her face away.

"Don't hold the ring so tightly, you'll hurt your fingers." He let go of the ribbons to stroke her cheek. "Tell me, Fern," he urged, "whose hair burns in the fire? Don't risk eternal damnation. No man is worth it. Tell me and keep your vow of perfect obedience."

She looked up at him. "It was my mother's." She curled up on the floor next to the ring and sobbed.

Relief made him laugh. He couldn't stop himself. Poor Fern wanted to know her mother. He had told her enough to make her understand.

Fern heard him laughing. He laughed at her grief! It stopped her sobs. She sat up. It was the first true emotion he'd shown, she was sure of it. She wrapped her trailing ribbons round his wrists.

It startled him. He could have stopped her, but he let her tie him to the ring.

She'd tied them both to it. The knots were too complicated to free herself.

"What are you going to do to me, little one?"

He wasn't laughing anymore. He sat back on his heels, his hands covering hers on the ring.

His torso gleamed golden in the firelight. His scarred face hid his emotions from her. Let him hide them. She intended to make her pain clear to him.

She bit him hard on the muscle that ran across his shoulder. Her teeth raked his skin. She tasted the scent of him, male and dangerous. She ran her tongue over the clenching muscle she held between her teeth.

Quickly, she drew away from him, not able to move far from the ring.

Every muscle of his torso flexed and stood out, Fern could have traced them all. She had seen men like that when they fought and when they writhed in agony.

The bite had not broken his skin, so it was not agony.

She saw him look down at the marks she'd made. She swallowed a sob, muffling it down to only fractured breath. He'd kill her when he got free.

"What did you do to me, little one?"

"Why don't you kill me and get it over with. I don't have to obey you—it's the end of my life!"

He towered over her, even kneeling back on his heels. "I won't ask anything more of you, if it hurts you so much to confide in me." He lifted his hands to touch his shoulder and found he couldn't reach that far tied to the ring. "Why didn't you draw blood?"

"I'm not like you. I don't kill and destroy." Fern wiped with her arm the tears that dripped from her chin. "You won't even bear a bruise, Jarrad du Terrenord." Her stupid voice wavered with emotion. "I should have bitten you harder."

At her words he freed himself, even unfastening the ribbons from her wrists. "Do it again. Bite me, if it pleases you to bite me."

Fern leaned close to him to place her hand over his heart to steady herself. She bit him on the curved muscle on his chest. His heart gave a sudden thud that she could feel and almost hear.

He never moved.

Her teeth chattered so much she lost her grip on him. What use was there in biting a statue? She wiped her cheeks and sniffed.

"Don't cry, little one. I thought the token was from a man and I was jealous. Don't weep, chérie, I'll get you another token." He picked her up as if she weighed nothing. "There are lots of things that belonged to your mother on the English side of the Isle. Just don't ask me to bring a lock of her hair for you."

Jarrad carried his bride back to their bed. He chose his words with care, wanting to tell her as much of the truth as he could. "Let me tell you about your treasure—it wasn't your mother's hair. I was there when your father brought her back from England, almost a year after she'd run away."

Fern moved with him on the bed until he rested his back against the headboard. She sat close to him to listen.

"Your father, Graeme, had cut off her hair on their wedding night, to punish her. It had grown only a hand-span long when he sent me to bring Morag out of the baron's castle. That long tress was not hers."

He stretched out his long legs and began to tell his story. "It was midsummer. Even the wind was lazy with heat, blowing in warm surges like dragon's breath. Your father sent me into the baron's castle to fetch Morag. She had run away from her husband on their wedding night, after an unfortunate accident." He touched his cheek. "He'd go no nearer that fateful night when he was injured."

Fern understood him. She patted his chest to encourage him to continue.

“Graeme’s first inclination had been to leave her in England, but when he found out she’d born a child, he had to claim her. She was too valuable and her child could be used to claim the Isle.

“He sent me, a boy of ten, to bring her out of the castle. She cared for me. I think she liked my adoration of her. Imagine how she felt when she saw my face. She wept and you felt her fear, for you cried with her. A little mite wrapped in her arms.

“It was as if you knew Graeme had sworn to kill you. I warned Morag what her husband intended, and I suggested she take a doll with her instead of you. It was my fault you were left in the baron’s care.”

“I’m glad for it,” said Fern. She nestled by his side. “Apart from the raiding Celts, I enjoyed my life there. What happened? Why did she go with you?”

“The message I carried was short. Come out or he’d kill me. I believed he’d do it and didn’t much care if he did. Morag wanted to save you from him. She had a plan to save you.

On board, when Graeme demanded to hold you, Morag jumped from the boat with the doll clasped to her breast. Graeme dived in after you both. He rescued Morag and then tried in vain to find you. When at last he was pulled on board, gasping and half drowned, Morag spat on him and cursed him for murdering you.” Jarrad shrugged and sighed. “I must confess, I never thought he’d try to save you.”

“Didn’t you fear his anger when he discovered what you’d done?”

He spoke carefully, making light of what had happened. “His anger terrified me, but Morag was my ideal of courtly love. In my dreams, I was a man come to save her, and I lived or died by her smile alone. I knew she’d meant to kill Graeme on her wedding night, and she’d attacked me in error. It was a mistake that made both of us shed bitter tears.”

“How can you be so forgiving, Jarrad? By rights you should hate her for what she did.”

He stroked her face. “How could I hate her? And as for her wishing Graeme dead, there were times when I wished it too with all my heart and soul. When we returned to the English side of the Isle, Morag tried to hurl herself from the roof. Graeme had her shackled and chained in his solar until she was reconciled to her fate. It was only when her next child, a son, began to walk that Graeme relented and freed her.”

“I have a brother?” She thought for a moment. “No, he didn’t survive, did he? Or I’d be worthless and happy in England.”

Jarrad replied with a smile, “You are priceless.”

She growled at him. “Very clever, but priceless is the same as worthless. I wish my brother had lived.”

“Then we might never have met, little one. When we met in England, I enjoyed your admiration of my face—for the few moments you allowed me to bask in your words.” He mimicked her growl. “Model for the Saviour? After He’d been scourged

and was near death?”

“I didn’t mean to insult you.” She patted his chest. “Tell me what happened next.”

“My father heard what had happened and he came to bring me home.” He paused as if he wanted to say something. He shook his head. “After Morag’s son was born, Graeme had no need of me. His hold over Morag was her love for her child.”

“Did my father find out I lived?”

“Graeme found out when Morag taunted him with my betrayal.”

“Why?” Fern asked, her voice a whisper.

“He’d praised me for some small task, and Morag decided I was his loyal vassal and could no longer be hers. She was big with child and driven insane, I think, by having to submit to him. When he’d raged at finding out he’d been tricked, she’d laughed, but then he flogged me until she wept. I remember wishing she’d wept sooner or not at all, because after that he made me her whipping boy. I realize now how carefully he beat me. He didn’t dare maim me for fear of my father’s revenge.”

Fern put her head on his shoulder. He could feel her tears roll down his chest. “Don’t weep over me, Fern, it was long ago. My father wreaked his vengeance on the Isle and I was taken away by Xavier to be healed.” He lifted her to sit on his knee.

Jarrad watched the dying embers in the hearth with Morag’s daughter kissing his chest and weeping over his fate. Not that he expected her sympathy to last.

Chapter Eleven

“Where is Lord Jarrad?” asked Fern.

“Gone, early this morning, to the English side to boast of his wedding, my lady. He must rule both halves of the Isle.” The fool threw a bundle of clothes on the bed near her. “You were sleeping like the dead. Do you know you snore? My lord was afraid to wake you, in case you lashed out at him.” He gave a sly grin.

“When is he coming back?”

“When he is ready, my lady.” He pushed the heap of old clothes closer to her. “As he left me here to guard you, his absence shouldn’t worry you. He’ll come back for me, but I’m not sure about you.” The fool pulled a mocking, mournful face. “My lord said that you are to make yourself some clothes fit for a lady. He wants none of your wimples and drab servant’s attire. He can’t take you on a tour of the Isle naked, can he?” He stretched and hopped merrily about.

“What can I do to amuse you while you sew?” asked Owen. “Can I help you in any way? Shall I tell you a funny story or shall I sing a merry song. Or, maybe, my lady, before the others arrive, you’d like me to tell you a truth?”

Fern closed the bed curtains to dress in private. “Why did he leave me among the Scots, with his sister who wishes me dead, and her men who’d kill me at her command? I feel like a prisoner here.”

“Celts, my lady. Do try to remember to call them Celts. We wouldn’t want them running to Scotland to swear allegiance, would we?” he asked. “Besides, wife or prisoner, it’s one and the same thing. Lady Marie was married and it was much worse for her. You are lucky. You married a man who is never cruel. She was younger than you when she married Black Angus. Now he was man who could inspire terror.”

“What happened to him?” asked Fern.

“He died, my lady. With an arrow in his neck, while he held you by the throat, according to the good baron. Duncan is his half-brother, born on the wrong side of the blanket. They look somewhat alike, but for the color.”

Fern pulled on the hose, the frayed chemise and an old bliaud. She threw the curtains back and went to sit at the foot of the bed. “Did Black Angus chain Marie to a ring?”

“No, my lady, he’d no need. His wife was too terrified of him to disobey him and Black Angus had sense enough not to offend the Terrenord family.”

Fern slid off the bed.

Owen retreated warily, pretending to be afraid of her.

She sat in the big chair and stared into the flames.

The fool retrieved his cushion from a chest and placed it on the hearth near the fire. Soon he comfortably stretched out his long legs, with his back against the warm stones.

“Shall I tell you something amusing, my lady? These Celts are more afraid of you than you are of them. That is not exactly true for all of them, my lady, but most would rather swim in the loch and risk being eaten by the skelpie, than converse with you.” He laughed at the disbelief on her face. “My lady doubts me? I will prove it the first time you are allowed into the hall.”

“What’s a skelpie?” asked Fern. She didn’t believe a word he said.

“A creature that lives in the loch, something like a dragon only it breathes water. Some say it’s more like a unicorn, while others say it’s like a giant toad.”

“Has it ever eaten anyone?”

“Don’t be foolish, my lady, it’s a story that folk tell their children to stop them from playing in the water. Twenty paces from the shore, the loch is bottomless.” He jumped up to mime wading happily in the water, to suddenly being drowned. “I’ve never seen the monster and I’ve been thrown in on several occasions in the hope of tempting it to the surface.”

“That’s horrible, Owen, but I’m sure you deserved it. Were you frightened?”

“I screamed, so as not to disappoint them. I suggest you do the same if they toss you in. It’s freezing cold all year round, like this godforsaken Isle.” He sat on his cushion to warm his feet by the fire.”

“Why does the king want this awful place? Doesn’t he have lands that go on forever?”

“That’s easy to answer, my lady. He wants to use it as stepping stone on his way to invade Ireland.”

“Shouldn’t he stop the Scots from invading England first?”

“Kings plan ahead, my lady. Peace first, war later. Or is it taxes first, war second, then peace? Your mistake was thinking the Celts from the Isle were from Scotland. Then when the Scots raided, you thought they came for you. So much guilt, my lady, so little reason for it. Only Black Angus went to England to kill you. Probably to stop his enemies from going there to kidnap you with a view to marriage.”

Footsteps echoed up the stairs.

Matthew opened the door to smile at her and greet her. He tried not to seem curious, but all men wanted to know how a virgin looked the morning after her bedding.

Fern blushed at his gaze. She felt like a bedded bride and had no need to pretend.

Lady Marie entered and her women followed her.

Henry helped Matthew carry in a trestle table to set up near a window.

Owen helped young Robert bring in rolls of cloth. Two of Duncan’s men carried in braziers to warm the depths of the chamber. The coals glowed bright in the draught

from the open door.

Duncan stayed to guard Marie and her ladies. The iron shears were clenched in his fist, the sharp pointed ends hidden in the palm of his hand. If he cut himself, she was not going to be the one to stitch him. He was going to have to be brave and give them to her soon.

Blue fabric in varied hues predominated. All the cloth was of the very best quality, some of it threaded through with silver and gold. There was even a generous amount of cloth of gold.

She lifted the linen onto the table to spread it out to be cut. Owen came to help her. He stroked it flat with a practiced hand. The pretty blonde sauntered over to watch.

“Jenny,” called Marie, “leave her alone.”

Fern crossed the chamber towards Marie, who held her ground, though her ladies scattered like startled sparrows. “If I cut the cloth, would your ladies sew it for me, Marie?”

“No, they have better things to do.” Marie’s dark eyes flashed wrathfully. “I hear you are skilled with a needle, get on with it yourself.”

Fern went to Duncan and held out her hand. With reluctance, he gave her the large shears.

She smiled at him. “First, I will make something for you, Duncan. There is a green to suit you. It’s my favorite color.”

The Celt shifted uneasily in the doorway. He let her take the shears to the table. She unrolled a bolt of green wool.

“Marie, will you measure Duncan?” asked Fern, “or would you prefer me to do it?”

Marie wavered, tempted.

Fern ran her hand over the cloth rolls. “Ladies, I am in desperate need of a few chemises. If I cut them, I do hope you will oblige me by sewing them. There’s some very pretty cloth here. Enough to make something beautiful for all of us. Why don’t you choose some?”

Only Owen rushed to do her bidding, his eyes dancing at the thought of new clothes.

No one else moved.

Marie and Duncan stood together in whispered conversation. The man was deep in love, it was plain for all to see.

The ladies cast sideways glances at Fern, wanting to look at the cloth but fearing to do it without Marie’s permission.

Fern lifted a roll of sky-blue cloth and held it in front of Jenny. “This color would suit you. Everyone will get new clothes. There is enough here to clothe us all.” The temptation she offered brought the ladies a little closer to the table.

Marie called out, “Come, let us leave Fern to her task.”

“Marie!” protested Duncan. “You are meant to help Lady Fern. She can’t sew all she needs by herself.”

He blocked the door. “Think how it will look to Lord Jarrad when he returns and she has nothing ready.”

Marie pushed against Duncan’s chest, her hands clenching, her voice low. “I cannot do it. He should never have brought her here. She is born of a cursed woman from an evil line. I pray she is barren. I wish she were dead. Dead and rotting.”

Duncan answered in a torrent of Gaelic, his words drowned by Marie’s sobs. At last he gave way and allowed the lady to leave. The sound of her retching on the stairs induced the other women to follow, only Jenny lingered until Duncan spoke to her sharply. He closed the door behind her.

Fern put down the roll of cloth. May heaven preserve her! Marie had just signed her death warrant by wishing her dead in front of Duncan. His fierce scowl made Fern retreat until she bumped into Owen.

“It would seem, my lady, that the only woman willing to bear you company was the one who wanted to be my lord’s whore. No doubt, she wants to be your friend to have another chance at him.” Owen danced about like a child promised a treat. “A word of warning, Duncan, you had better smile at our lady. She is taking your frown amiss.”

Her elbow in his stomach closed the fool’s mouth.

There was only one chance—the shears on the table. The fool knocked them onto the floor before she could grab them. They landed handles down to bounce under the bed. Fern threw herself to the floor to slither after them.

Owen knelt down to peer under the bed.

“My lady, come out. I swear you are in more danger from the draught that sweeps this floor with its icy breath, than from the Duncan.”

The fool bent lower, and gave a sudden shriek. He shouted in a nasal voice, “Help, Duncan, she has me by the nose. Mother of God, protect me! Pull me back! Pull me back, before she tears it off.”

Fern glanced round the curtains. When Duncan strode away from the door to aid the fool, she ran quickly as fast as her feet could carry her towards the door.

It was locked. Duncan had locked it.

Fern swung around, the shears open at the ready, pointed end out, ready to strike. Duncan skidded to a halt, scant feet from her, when he saw what she held in her hand.

Let him beware. She’d stab him if she had to.

“Open the door, Duncan,” she ordered.

“Where are you going, my lady? Give me the shears or I’ll have to take them from you.”

The fool stepped closer. “Who is going to win this battle? Think well, good combatants, for whoever wins this fray loses the war. If you try to take my lady’s weapon away, she’ll never forgive you, Duncan. If you make the smallest cut into her

skin, you'll have to answer to my lord. My lady, if you stab Duncan, you'll burn in hell for eternity.

"God will not punish me for saving myself," she said in her quiet voice, brandishing the shears with a hand going numb from her tight grip on them.

The fool simpered and pouted. He mimicked her voice. "I am so afraid, and yet I cannot bring myself to raise my voice. Woe is me. Alas! Alack! I am so meek and mild."

"I am not meek or mild, I just can't shout. I've not been able to raise my voice since Black Angus strangled me in a raid. Duncan is going to kill me, isn't he? So he can rule the Isle of Demons with Marie."

"Then stab him and get it over with, my lady. I apologize for my lack of tact and will hold him down for you to show my good will. Cut quickly and get it over with."

A swift blow to the back of Duncan's knees sent him sprawling to the floor. Fern pressed her back against the door to escape, but the Celt's face brushed her skirt as he fell. Owen leapt gracefully on Duncan's back to bend his head painfully upwards.

Strange how easily Owen won the fight. His long legs and arms clasped the Celt in an embrace he couldn't break, try as he might.

She must cut Duncan's throat, now, while he couldn't move. Duncan's red, contorted features filled her with dismay, his panting breath resounded in her ears. She had to kill him before he killed her.

Her hand trembled. She couldn't do it. She could not kill.

"Don't let go of him, Owen. Hold him tight." Fern twisted the blades towards her heart. She was going to have to explain to God in person.

She closed her eyes. A terrible pain burned her wrist. It snaked up her arm to sting her shoulder, almost wrenching it from its socket. With a strangled, terrible screech, Fern opened her eyes to see Owen standing before her, holding the shears.

Duncan rose to his feet, so close to her she could smell the damp wool of his garments, wet with his sweat.

He stumbled backwards, never taking his eyes from her. "My lady, I would never kill you. Never. You are Lord Jarrad's wife, and I have sworn to be his loyal vassal. Even if you were not his wife, I could never kill a woman. Lady Fern, pray calm yourself, you've naught to fear from me." The Celt wiped his face. "Good God, Owen! The lass preferred to die rather than kill me!" He rubbed his neck.

Fern prayed her inability to speak was not permanent. She leaned against the door to catch her breath.

Owen led Duncan away from her. "My lady, if you want Duncan killed, I'll do the deed for you, but if you kill yourself—" Owen waggled his head in mock sorrow. "Well, I've no wish to find out how many pieces Lord Jarrad might chop me into."

There came the sound of hurried footsteps outside the door. Marie's voice called, "Open the door, Duncan. What is going on in there? I heard someone fighting. Open

the door.”

Owen flew over to the door on his long legs, mischief writ on every line of his face. He swung Fern away and hunkered down to speak through the keyhole.

“My lady, forgive poor Duncan for he cannot open the door. My lady Fern found a weapon under the bed when she was hiding there from Duncan. Now she has it at poor Duncan’s throat and I fear, if I try to stop her, she’ll slash him most horribly. Should I try to stop her, my lady?”

“Do not touch her! I knew this would happen!”

Duncan called out. “No one has a knife at my throat, Marie. Calm yourself, I’ll open the door.”

Fern stepped in the way, she held out her hand, palm up.

Did the man think she’d let him open the door to a woman who wished her dead? Not a chance. The three of them were going to stay in the solar until Lord Jarrad returned. If he ever returned.

The Celt looked at her nervously. Let him be nervous, she hoped she terrified him. Fern stepped in his way again when he tried to go around her. She gestured with her hand.

“What do you want, Lady Fern?” he asked.

Owen answered for her, grinning from ear to ear. “My lady wants the key, good Duncan. If you want to please her, give it to her.”

Duncan took the key from his belt and handed it over. Fern haughtily stalked towards the big bed. She hoped she got there before her legs gave way and dropped her to the floor.

The fool called out piteously, “Lady Fern has the key now and won’t give it back, my lady. What should I do?”

Fern pulled the bed curtains closed on the side facing the door. She stepped out of sight to scramble up to lie on the bedcover. Her head was swimming and her throat felt as if she had drunk lye. It took all her strength to release the curtains. She rested her head on the pillows, out of sight.

What if she’d torn something in her throat and she never spoke again?

What did it matter? As soon as the door was opened, Marie and her army of Celts intended to kill her. They were as bad as Scots! Celts were Scots, Scots were Celts. It made her head spin.

Marie shouted through the door, “Don’t touch her. I’m going to send for Jarrad. He cannot leave her here. Warn her that if she touches Duncan, I’ll have her torn limb from limb.”

“A most reassuring sentiment,” mocked the fool. “A threat that is sure to make my lady feel quite at home, and safe enough to take the knife from Duncan’s neck.”

The Celt called to Marie, “For the last time, no one has a knife at my neck. Are you mad to make such threats? Don’t send for Jarrad. If you’d just sewn the lass some

clothes like he asked you, we'd not be in this mess. If anyone cuts my throat, it'll be him."

The door thumped as if the lady pounded her fists on it in a fury. "I will not have her here. When Xavier arrives, I'll give her to him. I hope he drowns her. Let them both die by his hand."

Both? Did Marie mean to have Owen killed, too?

"Silence!" thundered Duncan. "One more word and I warn you, Marie, when I get out of here I'm going to put you over my knee and tan your backside! What a thing to say!"

"I mean it!"

A clanking sound grew louder and louder, rattling up the stairs until metal thudded against the door.

Duncan gave a heartfelt sigh. "If that is you, Father Rab, you can take the chains away for the lass has done nothing wrong."

A high, reedy voice answered from the other side of the door. "She needs a penance, so she does. A day or two to save her soul. If she apologizes, maybe less time."

Fern covered her eyes with her arm. They were all mad. Only Duncan was trying to protect her. Duncan the Celt. It made her head spin.

Chapter Twelve

Jarrad gazed at Morag, searching her face for some resemblance to Fern. There was none, except the curve of her cheek. At thirty-four, she looked as beautiful as ever, her black hair swept up and bound with golden clasps. She was paler, but that was not unusual since she had not ventured outside these last few months.

“You look well, Morag.”

“How fared the bedding, my sweet Jarrad. How fared my daughter? Did she weep or rage? Did she bleed much?”

If the lady’s tone had been solicitous, Jarrad might have answered her, but the disdainful amusement rife on her face didn’t move him to answer.

“Damn you, Jarrad!” She gave a little laugh. “Do you think I don’t care for her welfare?”

The lady’s mood changed like quicksilver. He knew better than to react to her barbs. Anger and laughter were the two sides of her fear.

He shrugged. “You didn’t care enough to fetch her in all these years.”

“Ha! Do you think me hardhearted? They are like wild dogs these Englishmen. If I’d brought her to live with me, they’d have used her to claim the Isle and wage war on me. I had enough trouble with your delightful sister and dear Duncan.”

He smiled at that. “My sister sends her greetings and good wishes for your health.”

“Oh, do give her my love, when you see her next. Tell her it glows green in the night and has the power to summon boggarts to dance on her eyelids while she sleeps.”

“It’s over. Stop warring with words.”

“I know what they call me. I wish I was a witch.” Morag clasped her hands together. “Is he here? Has your brother arrived to take me away?”

“No, we expect him soon. Don’t worry, Morag, it’s safer this way. He has sworn to take you to safety, far from the Isle of Demons.”

“But he trades with infidels, Jarrad. A convent in Scotland is all I have need of.”

“You must go with him. The king does not suffer rebellion in his realm, yet rebellion seethes beneath the surface. It’s not safe. I won’t have you die a traitor’s death because some idiots decide to challenge Henry.”

“May I at least meet my daughter? Please, Jarrad. I have not begged a man for ought for a very long time, and then it was for your life. Forgive me, if I am ill used to it. Let me see her once, please. You owe me this much, do you not, Lord of the Isle?”

“I owe you safety, as much as I can give you, but I can’t let you advise your

daughter on anything concerning me or the Isle of Demons. You must trust that I will do my best for her and for you.”

“I want only to bestow a mother’s love on my daughter. Doesn’t she wonder about me? Have you told her I exist?”

“Xavier will be here soon, Morag. You can take nothing with you of value. No rings, or trinkets, or tokens. Nothing that can say where you are from.”

“I doubt many infidels have heard of the Isle of Demons,” she sneered. “Does he mean to sell me? What price would I fetch?”

“Xavier has sworn an oath to take you to safety. He cannot sell you, or injure you, or punish you. Trust me, Morag, I paid him a high price for your safety. Xavier is proud of his reputation for finding the right slave girl for his clients. With you, he must find the right man to keep you safe and give you a chance for happiness.”

Morag stared up at him as if she couldn’t believe him. “Happiness! You are mad! I’d rather die!” She tried to hide the shiver of fright in her voice. “Xavier means to kill me, and you are a fool if you believe his lies. I only ask one thing, let me say goodbye to her, Jarrad. I beg you, on my knees.”

Jarrad caught her arms to stop her from kneeling. “Don’t beg, Morag. Go from here as you lived, with bravery and cunning. You have a chance for happiness, take it.” He touched her forehead and whispered, “You are not thinking. I am giving you a chance to learn all you wish to know.”

In his usual voice, he said, “Only a man can protect you and keep you safe. If a rumor is spread that you are dead by Xavier’s hand, he’d not correct it and neither will I. You must disappear.”

“He means to kill me.”

“No, he plans another fate. He won’t be kind, but you will escape with your skin intact if you offer no violence to his feelings. I wish the same could be said of me. Be polite to him, Morag. Beware of him. Don’t make him insist on your good behavior.”

Jarrad kissed the lady’s hand. “I have paid him to do this for me. If it buys you a chance at life, I’ll think it worth the price.”

He left the solar only half convinced he’d persuaded her to do his bidding.

Morag waited until Jarrad’s footsteps faded away. She locked the door.

A man stepped from behind the hanging tapestry. He limped to the fire to warm himself.

“You should have let me kill him, Morag. He means to be the death of you, or have you a wish for harem life?”

Morag laughed in a way sure to annoy the man. “My beloved James, I have missed you so much. Your wit, your handsome face, your finesse. Tell me again how my daughter saved your life.”

“Nay, you have heard it often enough. Jarrad will not let you meet her, he’s no fool. Let me bring her to you.”

“Fern is locked in the broch. How do you propose to get her out, my dearest cousin?”

“With a noble rescue. It works every time. And I will throw in the pleasure of meeting you, Morag.” He bowed over her hand to bite it lightly.

She didn’t react to his touch, just removed her hand to wipe it on her skirt. “Take care you don’t harm Marie, or you will have the entire Terrenord family at your throat.”

“I doubt they can take the Isle of Demons.”

“King Henry will do it for them. The rules of the game have changed. Can you fight England, my handsome James? Or fight Normandy, or Anjou, or Aquitaine. Look after your estates in Ireland. Henry plans an invasion with the pope’s blessing. The Isle is only a stepping stone.”

Chapter Thirteen

Fern slept until the scent of the midday meal wafted up through the floorboards. She peeked through the curtains at the men.

"Do we starve here like the cowards we are?" asked Owen. He rubbed his stomach and shifted his long legs to ease the ache in his buttocks from sitting on the hearth.

"Nay. Let the lass sleep. I've no wish to find myself between warring women again. That wee lassie hasn't a hope in hell of winning. She's such a quiet, timid, little person. She'll never manage to take precedence over Marie without Jarrad by her side."

"I'd wager you are wrong, Duncan." The fool cracked his fingers gleefully.

"You're on, lad. A barrel of whisky says Marie will conquer, and make the little lass wilt faster than a rose out of water." The Scot stood up to rub the back of his neck. "What will Jarrad do when he returns and finds me here? I have no mind to end up like you--with no balls."

"It's not Jarrad you must watch out for, it's Xavier. God forbid I ever get into his grasp again. If I thought Lady Marie had the power to make Lord Jarrad give me back to him, I'd kill myself first."

"Shush, the lass might hear you. He'd not harm a woman, would he?"

"Harm them? He buys and sells them. He always has a comely slave with him to use as his mistress. When he tires of her, or when she grows big with child, he sells her and buys another."

"I don't believe Jarrad means to use Morag ill. She doesn't deserve such treatment. Many a cruelty was done in her name that she knows nothing about. I have nothing ill to say of her. I know her well, she'll spit fire and brimstone, but she--"

Fern opened the bed curtains. "Do you know my mother, Duncan?"

"Aye, my lady, everyone knows her. Morag was raised here." He stopped, as if he remembered something. "I knew her well," he said with a muttered curse.

The fool slapped him on the back. "Too little, too late. My lady has a fine intelligence." He added in a penetrating whisper, "just like her mother."

"Does my mother live far from here?" asked Fern. She sat on the edge of the bed, her feet dangling.

The fool laughed. "Note, good Duncan, that my lady does not ask if her mother lives, but merely if she resides near or far from here. How do you answer?"

"You must ask Jarrad," muttered the Scot ruefully. "I have said enough, my lady."

“Then I will answer for you. My lady, your mother lives near enough, yet far enough. Somewhat like the moon, which is to say, near enough to see, yet far enough away to make it impossible to set foot there.”

“Does Lord Jarrad visit my mother? Is that where he is now?” Hope rose in Fern’s breast. Jarrad had told her to prepare clothes so he could take her to see the Isle. He’d said she could have something of her mother’s.

He must intend to introduce her to her mother.

Owen shrugged. “I cannot say exactly where Lord Jarrad is, my lady. If word has reached him that you are hiding in here like a frightened mouse, with Duncan to bear you company, then I expect he’s on his way back to grace us with his presence. His mood will not be good. You might see the color of Duncan’s blood without going to the trouble of cutting his throat yourself.”

Fern leapt lightly to the floor. If Jarrad returned and she had clothes, she could go to meet her mother. She tossed the key to the Scot. “Open the door, Duncan. Tell them to wait for me. You must escort me down to dine when I have dressed.” She went to the table to sort through the rolls of cloth.

“My lady, you have no time to make clothes,” said Owen. “Let’s declare victory and send for food, before I starve to death.”

“No one eats until I am ready. Duncan, tell them they wait for me.”

The Scot nodded. “Aye, my lady, a fitting punishment.”

The fool moaned and rubbed his flat stomach. “You are not thinking, my lady. It takes time. We shall not dine this day. A thin man needs to eat, lest he fade away. Maybe Duncan can survive on his fat, but I cannot.”

Fern laughed. “What do you say, Duncan? Will you swear to protect me from my lord’s sister?”

The Scots scowled fiercely, but there was a twinkle in his eyes. “I am yours to command, my lady. Bread and water for any woman who does not treat you with the proper respect due Lord Jarrad’s wife.”

Fern smiled at the Scot. “Tell them to await my arrival for dinner. I’ll not keep them waiting long.”

The fool jumped around with glee. “You cannot make one now, can you? Can you, my lady?”

Fern linked her arm in his. “Good Owen, where is the surcoat? I have need of it.”

Owen’s face dropped. “You cannot wear a surcoat to dinner, no matter how beautifully embroidered.” The fool was reluctant to part with it.

“If I give it sleeves and underskirt of gold cloth, I can. Get it for me! There is no time to waste. At least it will keep me warm.” She stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “I promise not to spill anything on it.”

Fern laid out the cloth of gold. She had no need of patterns for she kept them all

in her head. It was but a few minutes work to cut what she needed. The sewing took no longer as she basted with long stitches. By the time she put the final touches, hot water was being carried up the stairs by the kitchen boys.

She could hear Duncan shouting in the great hall below as she washed. None of the ladies ventured up the stairs to offer help. It didn't matter. Fern dressed, and tied her hair up, weaving strands of cloth of gold in her dark curls.

She was ready.

Owen went to fetch Duncan to escort her down to the great hall. The Scot had washed and brushed his red hair, so it stood straighter on his head. She gripped his arm and held her head high.

He patted her hand. "There is naught to worry you below, Lady Fern, I have put the fear of God in them and reminded them of their manners."

"The women must help me sew, Duncan. If Marie refuses to assist me, then her women must, and I'll not have her sit next to me. She must move down the table." Fern hesitated at the doorway.

Duncan shrugged, he whispered, "Marie refuses to dine with you. She retired with a headache. Can you believe the silly woman actually sent for Jarrad? She might be the death of me yet." His grunt of disgust showed how annoyed he was with Marie's behavior.

He led her to the Lord's chair and pulled it out for her. She sat down. He took the chair next to her, with Owen sitting on her other side.

Soon, everyone was busy eating silently. There seemed no safe topic of conversation. Fern enquired how far away the English town was on the Isle of Demons.

"Far, my lady," said Duncan, "twenty-three miles away at the other end of the island. Many people live there, most of them are Saxons with a few Normans, and a scattering of Irish. There's a sheltered port, much larger than ours. It's a fine place for traders, or it once was."

Owen piped up slyly, "Duncan never goes there, my lady, but I have visited the fair city. It is just as windy, cold and miserable as this place. Its people are equally warlike, for they have been fighting the people here these twenty years or more, until my lord stopped them."

"How did he stop them?"

"I think he promised the men whores from the East, my lady. That and the promise of King Henry's protection from the Norsemen, from Somerled, and from the King of Scotland. The men have already fought off the Irish once or twice, so we may as well add them to the list of enemies who covet the Isle." He grinned at her. "In all honesty, my lady, the men would have no use for whores from the East, if they'd had their lungs plucked out by those savages who rule all the islands north of this one."

The fool lowered his voice to a penetrating whisper. "Duncan has been promised a fine whore. One who knows all the secrets of the harem. My lord has gone to fetch her

for him, but the ship has been delayed by winter storms, or maybe it sank.” Owen glowed with happiness at the thought. “Maybe my lord waits in vain.”

Marie entered the great hall, stepping out from the buttery doorway. “Quiet, fool! Xavier will arrive soon, and you must thank heaven he no longer owns you, for he’d take none of your nonsense, nor indulge you as Jarrad does. I for one will be very glad to see him and to have this over and done with.”

“Over and done with? What will be over and done with?” asked Fern.

How much power did Marie have? Could she persuade her merchant brother to remove a troublesome bride she detested? What was going to be over as soon as Xavier du Terrenord arrived? Did the Terrenords intend to end, once and for all time, her claim to the Isle?

“God help me!” The words rushed from her mouth before she could stop them.

Owen grabbed for her knife and slid it across the table away from her. “My lady, what’s the matter? Why distress yourself over Duncan’s whore? I assure you he doesn’t lie awake at night sighing for a strange, dark eyed beauty.”

Fern was not foolish enough to be distracted by Owen’s comments.

She forced a calm smile. “I am hungry for dessert, has everyone finished?” She looked round to see them all staring at her. “Then let the second course be removed and the next brought in.”

The fool whispered in her ear. “What ails you, my lady? Have you taken my words amiss?”

“’Tis a pang of homesickness, nothing more. Sing me a funny song. Amuse me, Owen.”

Owen rose to sing. He joked and mimed so outrageously that she laughed, and promised to make him a tunic fit for a king.

The dinner drew to a close with Marie standing before the hearth, declining a seat at the table. She ate a piece of bread and looked better for it. If there was one thing a pregnant widow needed, it was a husband. And what better husband than her lover, Duncan?

As the dishes were being removed, a bell began to ring.

Duncan rose to his feet. “What the devil? Excuse me, my lady, I am wanted.”

Fern nodded graciously, not feeling very much like the Lady of the Isle when it was Duncan’s back she nodded to. The pretty blonde woman smothered a giggle, which turned into a shriek when Owen suddenly appeared behind her to tug sharply on her hair.

“What is going on, Jenny?” cried Marie.

“She set the fool on me, my lady,” replied Jenny.

“Ignore them both. They will be dealt with later.”

Owen mocked both the women with quivering legs and lips, mimicking fear at the threat.

Marie grew angrier. “I shall beg Xavier to deal with you, fool. Let me warn you

that if anything happens to Jarrad, I'll see you returned to Xavier permanently. He'll know what to do with you."

Wilder and wilder went Owen's gyrations, until he drew his dagger and stabbed at himself with willing hands at his unwilling flesh.

Fern expected to see his blood run, but each time he struck, his body leaped out the way. He danced with great leaps and grotesque flinches as he stabbed and missed, and stabbed again.

To hide his tears, he laughed and jeered, "You are fools! Fools! Everyone of you!" He fled up the stairwell, muffling his sobs on his sleeve.

Chapter Fourteen

“Xavier won’t give his permission. He’s chosen a husband for her.” Duncan shifted uneasily on the low stool in front of the fire in the hall.

Fern tended his sore neck and encouraged him to confide in her by not pushing him with any questions. “You must gently move your head every now and then, and take care not to lift anything heavy.”

“Marie is afraid to cross Xavier. When she got his letter, she tried to jump from the tower. I stopped her and then we decided to take what happiness we could.” Duncan sighed into his hand. “I’m not sorry for it. Jarrad assures me he can protect her, whatever happens.”

Fern kneaded his shoulders. “Even if Xavier du Terrenord dislikes the marriage, surely it’s better to be married than not?” She felt his muscles tense under her fingers. If he went off to worry and brood, she’d never get Marie the husband she needed. No wonder the lady behaved as she did—she was out of her mind with fear.

The Scot didn’t hear her. He stared across the hall toward the door. He shouted to his men in Gaelic. They hurried to take their posts.

Marie appeared two steps away from them. She caught Fern by the arm. “If you cause Duncan’s death, I shall have you killed.”

Fern shook her off. “Don’t be silly. I was rubbing his neck, not trying to strangle him.” If anyone had given Duncan a death sentence, it was Marie. Refusing to marry him only made the problem worse.

Duncan seemed turned to stone. He again stared toward the door of the great hall as if he had been struck with an apoplexy. Fern turned to see who was there. She prayed it wasn’t Xavier.

Jarrad stood at the far wall of the broch with half a dozen of his men.

Relieved, she ran towards him. “My lord, I hope you haven’t returned because of me?”

“Why wouldn’t I return to be with you? I see that Duncan still lives, did he prove difficult to kill, little one?” He looked around. “Where is Owen?”

“He’s upstairs, drinking and singing sad songs to himself.” Fern gathered her courage. Something had to be done to give Marie’s baby a father.

Jarrad twisted a lock of her hair around his finger. “What were you doing with Duncan?”

She took a deep breath. “I have decided to marry Duncan to M—”

Jarrad gave a roar of anger. He swept her aside to sprawl on the floor. His sword

shrieked from its scabbard, scattering sparks on the rushes.

With one stride he stepped over her legs toward Duncan.

Fern scrambled to her feet. She ran after him to lunge for his arm. His sword wavered in front of her face. She ducked her head and held on to his wrist.

Marie stood in front of Duncan, hindering any defense he might have made. Fern stumbled through the rushes, unable to get to her feet properly under her.

"He is loyal," cried Marie. "I swear it Jarrad! She lies, whatever she said, she lies!"

Fern threw herself in front of Jarrad legs. He stumbled. The sword swung as he braced himself to fall. The edge of it slid across Fern's upper arm in a stinging salute.

They fell, entwined. The sleeve of her dress stained dark with blood. It felt like warm water as it spread. Fern clenched her teeth and hung on to his arm like a terrier when he rose to his feet. She had brought him to a standstill, but that only delayed Duncan's death.

"Forgive me, my lord husband, for I phrased my words amiss. I meant to say that I have decided to marry Marie to Duncan." She let go of him to staunch the flow of blood. "You can't really think I'd want to marry him myself? As Lady of the Isle, I order your sister to marry Duncan. And Duncan to marry her. All you have to do is make Marie agree to take him as her husband."

Duncan's men stepped back at a sign from him.

Fern knew the life she'd saved was not Duncan's. She babbled on, "Did you know, my lord, that Duncan is related to me? He told me most of the Celts here are my relatives. I am happy to have found my family, if it pleases you to let me claim them?"

The tension in the hall eased.

Fern dared not turn to see what Marie was doing, but she hoped the lady was still defending Duncan by shielding him with her body.

"Marie loves Duncan, so, if it pleases you, I want them to wed." She leaned closer to whisper. "Jarrad, she really must marry before the baby begins to show. When your brother arrives, you can blame me for marrying them?"

"You are brave, little one. Marie won't marry Duncan because she fears to cross Xavier." Jarrad gave a mournful sigh. "What were you doing with Duncan?"

"He has a sore neck so I was tending him. Owen wrestled with him to amuse me, so you see it was my fault that he got injured." She backed away as he advanced, still chattering on, "Necks strains can be difficult to treat. Duncan can't lift anything heavy or it might never heal." She bumped into a trestle table. "Why are you following me?"

"Let me see your arm, Fern." He called to the nearest woman. "Jenny, get soap, hot water, needle and thread. Quick as you can."

Fern called out, "Strong lye soap, not scented." She let Jarrad pick her up to sit her on the trestle table. It gave her a good view of Marie weeping on Duncan's chest. Her sobs could be heard echoing off the walls.

“Compose yourself, Marie,” said Jarrad, “If you are too scared to marry Duncan, go and get ready to leave. Tomorrow, you go to Baron Welford.”

With a gulping sob, Marie said, “I take Duncan to be my husband.”

“I take Marie to be my wife,” roared Duncan.

Fern gave a cheer with the rest of them. She noticed that Marie had not been asked to promise any kind of obedience to her husband. That vow was reserved for English brides or daughters of women who slashed men’s faces.

At least the happy couple could live openly as man and wife, without having to hide their love. If she suffered blame for allowing them to wed, she wasn’t going to have sleepless nights over it. Not when there were so many other worries to torment her. She hoped Marie might think twice before complaining about her, or Owen, to Xavier du Terrenord.

Fern let Jarrad remove her sleeve. She intended to be so perfectly obedient to his will, so dutiful a wife, that he’d take her visit her mother. Now was not the time to ask.

Her husband’s hands were cold. Was it her? No, he’d traveled miles on horseback.

She refused to think he feared her, but she insisted on washing the wound herself. The lye soap gave its familiar bite. “I can sew it myself, if you’ll just hold the end of the thread for me.”

“Do you think you are the only one who can sew a wound?” Jarrad washed his hands. He took the needle and thread from Marie’s shaking grasp.

“Hold still, Fern,” he said, “this won’t take long.”

“I’d rather do it myself.” It wasn’t disobedient to explain it to him. “It hurts less, if I do it.”

“You can’t sew your own arm,” he said with his quizzical smile. “Not unless you have another hand hidden somewhere I’ve not noticed.”

A joyful cry came from the stairwell leading to the solar. “My lord has returned.” The fool hiccupped his way into the great hall. “My Lord of the Isle has come back to me.” He fell to his knees in the straw, clutching a flask to his breast.

The fool was so drunk he could scarcely walk.

“Get up, Owen. Explain how my wife came to wander the hall without you by her side. Didn’t I tell you not let her out of your sight?”

Great sobs were his only reply.

“Owen! There is only one threat that makes you witless with fear, so hear this,” Jarrad said patiently, “You are free. No one owns you.”

As if he thought better of it, Jarrad sighed and shrugged.

Fern resisted being forced to lie down on the table. The sight of her husband threading a needle did not inspire confidence.

“Lie down, Fern.”

No one dared make her obey him.

"My lord husband, if I may speak?" she asked, her voice drowned out by the fool's lamentation.

It was on the tip of Fern's tongue to ask if Jenny could set the stitches when the woman deliberately slopped the bowl of water on the table so she sat in a puddle.

Jenny was another Fern would see married off as fast as a husband could be found for her. Perhaps Alaric needed a wife.

"Give me the needle, please, Jarrad." Fern held out her hand. "If I can't do it, then I'll let you do it."

"I can't resist the urge to see you try, little one." He gave her the needle and thread.

Fern swished the needle in the soapy water left in the basin. The edges of a wound were usually numb, the upper arm not sensitive like lips or fingertips. Fern set the first stitch with a practiced hand. "If you'd hold the end of the thread?" she asked politely.

He held it. She wove the needle under and around, then gently pulled to tighten the knot. "If you'd cut the thread? I find separate stitches work better." The rest were done with speed, slowed by his careful cutting of the thread. Only the last one eluded her. She gave him the needle and turned her arm to let him stitch what she couldn't see.

Strange, how much she felt the stitch he set. She always preferred to sew her own wounds. The one of her foot had been the easiest. The one on her thumb the most painful. She'd been unconscious when her head wound had been sewn. Twenty stitches on the back of her head, with the scar hidden by her hair. A gift from Black Angus, like her voice.

She insisted on washing the wound again after he'd finished. His hands were still cold.

Marie brought ointment to smear on the bandage.

"No, thank you, Marie," said Fern, "I prefer to soak it every day in salt water." The bright yellow paste smelled like something from the kitchen. "What's in it?"

"It stops infection," said Marie. "Jarrad, hold her still. She must have it."

"I don't want it. Salt water works very well. I have used it often. Jarrad, please don't make me use it." Why did he have to hold her so tightly?

Even Owen ceased his laments. Let them listen. Everyone stared at her.

"You must let Marie use the balm. It worked on my face, little one. You don't need to fear it will turn you permanently yellow, like I did."

Fern laughed—a sudden gurgle of silly laughter. Jarrad held her away from him, startled by the soft noise.

"I'm glad I amuse you, chérie." he said with a smile.

What a beautiful mouth he had. Fern studied his face, as Marie applied her ointment and bandage. His hand stroked her back.

Marie tied the bandage on. "Is it too tight?"

"No. Don't try to stop me attending your wedding celebration, Marie. I intend to join in."

Jarrad held her on his knee while the table was cleaned. "It will be hours before they are put to bed. Are you strong enough to watch Celts celebrate? Be warned, they love to howl."

"Yes, but I think Marie and Duncan should be put to bed soon." She patted his hand and whispered, "Do you think Xavier will kill me for marrying them?"

"If Marie had written to Xavier to tell him she'd married Duncan, instead of asking his permission, she'd not be so worried now."

"What if he kills Duncan to make her a widow?"

"Xavier is a merchant used to weighing his actions. I doubt he'll find it profitable to kill Marie's husband."

"Will you threaten him, to protect them?"

Jarrad gave a low laugh. "I have already given him something else to occupy his mind." He pressed her closer. "Didn't you tell me that I'm not to fight with family, that we must learn to live in peace?"

Owen sang out, "She knows, my lord. I let it slip by accident. Lady Fern knows her mother lives on the other side of the Isle."

"Nay," said Duncan, "I forgot my tongue and so the lass found out."

The fool smacked him on the back. "It was my fault."

Duncan gave him a great push back. "Nay, it wasn't!"

Fern gave them both a glare. "No fighting!"

For no reason at all, Duncan laughed at her.

Only Jarrad said nothing. He gave a low, mournful sigh. "We'll talk later, Fern. First we celebrate Duncan and Marie's wedding, then you can give me a curtain lecture."

She whispered back, "Perfect obedience won't allow me to nag you in bed. You are safe from me."

"I ask nothing of you, Fern. When I need your perfect obedience, you'll know it." He stroked her cheek. "I shall listen, if it pleases you to nag or rage. I know you cannot shout at me."

* * * *

For the first time Fern left the broch to enter the courtyard, which was filled with the sound of the sea crashing at the base of the cliff. A sheltered walk ran towards the square keep. A curtain wall, with turrets guarding each angle, sheltered buildings along its length.

Fern hurried into the new hall, glad to get away from the broch. It was brightly lit with oil lamps hanging on long chains from the ceiling and with candles on the tables. Tapestries brightened the walls. It felt like a home, not a prison like the broch.

Small folk came to the celebration by the dozens. They swarmed around her in the courtyard, crofters and fishermen with their wives and children. The great hall was

soon filled with noise and the panting breath of racing men.

Fern sat on the dais to watch them run lengths to retrieve favors, then run back to swap them for a kiss. The women hid to make the game last longer, and many a wrong one was kissed in jest, even if it earned the men a slap. Alaric kissed Jenny every time he raced, though the favor was always given by one of the oldest widows. He was a great favorite with them and he always got their biggest cheer.

All the small folk watched Fern out of the corner of their eyes. None of the men or women approached her. Some of the children made a game of racing across the dais to touch her skirts, as if to prove how brave they were.

Jarrad sat with her to dispense prizes with a lavish hand. Glass flasks of perfume, maple bowls filled with dried fruits, lengths of brightly colored ribbons, and bronze bowls fit for a king.

When Owen recovered enough to play along, Jarrad left her with a sigh. "If I don't help him, he'll break his neck. Now you'll find out how foolish I can be. It amused Xavier, for a time, to make me his fool in place of Owen. Let's hope I have not forgotten how."

Sacks of grain were piled higher and higher as the men competed to see who could jump the highest. After young Robert won the prize for height, the sacks were placed side by side to measure the length of the jump. Owen kept adding more until everyone laughed and waited eagerly to see him leap.

With a gesture, the fool invited Jarrad to leap first. Taking a run at it, Jarrad flew into the air, and stayed there, hovering above the sacks, his feet a man's height from the floor. Gasps of fright turned to howls of laughter as the fool tried to pull him down from the dark knotted rope dangling from the beams.

In the end, Owen leapt up to stand on Jarrad's head, to push him slowly backwards and forwards until they swung in a great arc above the sacks. Jarrad jumped clear of the sacks. Now the fool began to twist and turn in the air, to the amazement of all, and it was Jarrad's turn to try to coax his fool to the ground.

Alaric, Matthew and Henry all tried to catch Owen as he swung by them upside down. He knocked them away and the audience waited with baited breath to see what he'd do to their lord. No sooner had Jarrad turned his back than the fool let go to land lightly on his shoulders. Jarrad turned, pretending not to know where Owen had gone.

He appealed to the children to search for his fool. He looked here and there, lifted a sack to peer under it while Owen danced lightly over his back. At last, Jarrad shrugged and offered to jump the sacks again.

Fern cheered with the audience.

Owen balanced carefully on Jarrad's shoulders.

A space was cleared to give the lord a run at the sacks. He loped far too slowly with his fool leaning into the air above him. At the last moment, the fool leapt into the air and disappeared. Jarrad gathered speed. He flew into the air to turn a somersault, and

land on his feet at the far side of the sacks.

But where was the fool?

Behind his lord to tap him on the shoulder.

Fern applauded the clever trick. The sacks were cleared away and the dancing began.

The music whirled in her head. Why had Jarrad not mentioned that her mother lived on the English side of the Isle? Marie and Duncan ruled the Celtic half. Did Morag, a Celt, rule the English? More likely, she was a prisoner. Rescued by Jarrad.

Fern sipped the sweet wine. Then why keep it secret?

* * * *

Fern awoke with a start. She lifted her head from her arm.

Owen paced the great hall, lost in his thoughts. A few men littered the floor, overcome with whisky or ale. The fool stopped every now and then to stretch his muscles. Alaric guarded the buttery door. Matthew and Henry waited at the entrance with the doors ajar, listening to the revelers in the distance.

A voice behind her spoke with a lilt she recognized. "My lady, how may I serve you?"

"How fare you, Boone?" she asked in a quiet voice.

He sat beside her chair, hidden by the tablecloth. "Close to you and happy for it, my lady. I bring you your mother's blessing before she dies. If you can get out of the broch, I'll take you to her."

"Tell my mother that I long to meet her. I'll beg Lord Jarrad to let me go to her." She dared not call attention to Boone's presence. He could best any of the drunken men here, and she'd not risk Owen's life by pitting him against a man who was armed and dangerous.

"Morag knows her fate," said Boone in a low voice. "This is your only chance to speak with her. She is going to be killed for slashing his face when he was a boy."

"That's not true. Jarrad never blamed her for it."

"Terrenords neither forgive nor forget."

"You must leave, Boone. If anyone finds out—"

He interrupted with a sharp tug on her sleeve, "Your mother gave you to me in marriage. Come with me now before she is murdered by the man who rapes you every night."

Fern felt her blood turn to ice. "He does not."

She knew the law. A betrothal was a binding contract. It couldn't be broken, not even by a wedding to another man. If Boone spoke the truth, she was not married to Jarrad.

"Will you consent to be his whore tonight, now you know the truth?" His glittering blue eyes never left her face.

"You don't understand. I have vowed perfect obedience to Lord Jarrad's will. If

I break that vow, I'll burn in hellfire for eternity."

"You'll burn, if you knowingly play the whore for him. Go to the jakes, I'll meet you there. You are not married to him. Your mother betrothed you to me. It's binding. By all the laws of God and man, you are mine."

Fern dared not argue with him. The venom in his voice risked attracting Owen's attention. "Meet me there," she said. "Go quickly before you are found out."

Chapter Fifteen

Fern watched Jarrad shed his clothes. The chamber in the broch felt like a haven now. He had to be her husband, not Boone. She worried and fretted, and quite forgot to admire his chest when he leaned over her.

“Are you asleep, little angel?” he asked.

Fern sighed and drew back the bedcovers to let him join her. “No, I asked Owen to bring me back because I couldn’t stop thinking about my mother. I wanted to weep in private.” She had to tell him about Boone and hoped he would not rush off to do battle, not with most of the men too drunk to aid him.

“And so it begins.” He got into bed to gather her into his arms. “This is my first curtain lecture. Be gentle with me.”

“Are we married? What if my mother had betrothed me to someone else?” She could think of nothing worse.

He thought carefully before he answered.

Fern waited for him to speak. She stroked his chest to encourage him.

“Morag left you in the baron’s care, I saw her give you to him. The baron looked startled. I think she’d avoided him before that day. He accepted her gift of a wailing baby and walked on holding you. Before he had gone many steps, you were soothed, content to be in his care. The baron gave you to me in marriage. Morag cannot rule your life, especially as she never claimed you. Until now, Fern? Has she now, when it suits her purpose? What happened? Did someone approach you tonight?”

“Yes. I don’t know his name. He has Duncan’s blue eyes, they are an unusual color, and he has black hair. He walks with a limp from a tossing he got in my home.” She rubbed her cheek against his chest. “I think he’s a madman. How could my mother have betrothed me to him?”

“Perhaps she had no choice.” He smiled down at her. “Your description fits many of the men here and most of them will limp by morning, if not from the dancing then from the leaping and the wrestling. I want you to stay in the broch. No visitors are allowed here.”

“But how can I point him out? He might kill you. I’ve seen him fight, he scares me.”

“You are safe with me.”

Fern tried to hide her laughter.

“What amuses you?”

“Jarrad, you are safe with me, I am safe with you—it’s everyone else I’m worried

about. I wanted to meet my mother. I needed to see her, to speak to her, but now I am afraid of her, of what she might do.” She laughed and cried at the same time. “Now, I’m as crazed as Boone.”

He wiped away her tears. “He calls out Boone when he fights?”

“Yes, that’s why we called him that. Do you know him?”

“He can only be James MacBoone. He is Morag’s cousin and Duncan’s friend.”

“What are you going to do?”

“What would you have me do? Find him and kill him? Scare him away? Banish him? Send him home to Ireland with his horses? No, don’t answer. I must do what I must do. Boone has his fate, as I have mine. Now is not the time to act, he knows this place far better than I do. Let Duncan and Marie have this night in peace. Tomorrow, I’ll warn Duncan and start a search.”

“I don’t suppose Boone is still waiting by the jakes for me.”

“He won’t trust you again. Stay in the broch, little angel. It may not be luxurious but it’s safe. He’ll guess that you have told me about him and he’ll be miles from here by now.”

Fern raised her head for his kiss. “Don’t worry, I’ll be perfectly obedient.”

She moaned an invitation minutes later, warm and wanton.

“You have a wounded arm, Fern.” He drew away from her. “I have always valued friendship over obedience. My brother’s slaves are obedient. It’s not something I prize.” He moved to sit with his back against the headboard.

Fern followed him to nestle close. She stroked over his body to find him ready to make love.

He moved her hand away. “You must rest.”

“I can’t. I ache and I need you to help me.”

He held her by the waist and brought her straddle his thighs. Fern edged forwards until her breasts brushed against his chest. She kissed his shoulders, his jaw, and gently bit his lips.

He raised her to enter her slowly, letting her slide down on him with gasps and kisses, until he filled her as much as she could take. Her hands roamed over his chest where her lips could not reach. Every curve and hollow delighted her.

Fern rocked back and forth on her knees to ease the ache. She wanted more, yet there was no place inside her to take all of him.

“My husband.” It was barely a breath, but it comforted her to call him that.

He held by the waist. “What did you say, chérie?”

She shook her head. “My husband, I want more not less.”

He moved them so she lay on her back, spread wide by his knees. “Keep your arm away from me. I am only doing this to help you sleep.” He rumbled a laugh at her giggles. “Why am I amusing? Not that I object to laughter in our bed, it’s just not something I ever expected.”

No, because he'd not expect it from Morag's daughter. Fern caressed all the parts of him that she could reach. He responded by gently stroking inside her warmth, deeper and deeper until she writhed about him. "Don't, I can't! No. Don't stop! Why did you stop?" She eagerly welcomed him back. The long thrusts were impossible to endure silently.

She moaned softly and gripped him in a way so sweet and deep that she almost fainted at the sensations. Pleasure, high and piercing, made her tremble with each thrust. She lost herself in his world of passion. One with him, she moved in a dance of love, mindless, heedless. He moaned and held her by the hips to end it with fierce strokes that brought her to ecstasy.

When her breathing eased, he lay down beside her, glistening with perspiration. She kissed and licked along his shoulder. He drew her into his embrace.

"Did I hurt your arm, *chérie*?" His voice tickled her ear. "We have trust between us, don't we, Fern?"

"Yes, my husband," she said, not really knowing what he meant.

"Je t'adore, *chérie*. Je t'adore." When she stirred in his embrace, he moved her to lie on top of him. "I'll never let you go, not while I live. When I thought you had chosen Duncan, it drove me mad, Fern."

She struggled to raise her head, to explain. He loosened his hold to allow her to whisper in his ear.

"Marie *loves* Duncan. I only like him."

He nuzzled her neck. "I love you, Fern."

Jarrad held his wife until she fell asleep. She had not told him she loved him.

A scratching at the door caught his attention. He covered Fern carefully and went to pull on his bed-robe.

Fern rolled onto her wounded arm and woke up.

"Come in, Owen," Jarrad commanded in a low voice. "Fern is sleeping. Be careful not to wake her. How could you let Marie frighten you like that?"

The fool stripped and slunk to the hearth. He sat wrapped in his blanket with his back to the fire. Jarrad went to his chair and stretched his legs out to the warmth.

"It was easy, oh great lord, your lady sister is a woman, and I think her plea will move Xavier du Terrenord more than your edicts. I have no mind to lose more of my body to his knife. She threatened to have him kill me, or worse, part me from what I piss through."

"But you don't belong to me or to Xavier."

Fern listened intently.

"What will he do with Morag, my lord?"

"Take her to a place she can find happiness and comfort. How does it is a puzzle he must solve honorably. He'll not kill her but neither will he be kind. If he takes her where I think he must, then he takes her where I cannot go. I paid a high price to have

his promise.”

The fool bestirred himself to get his bed. He carried it near the hearth. “It does not trouble you, great lord, what he might do to her?”

“What would you have me do, Owen? Give Morag into King Henry’s care? One rebellion in her name and she’d die a traitor’s death. And if I can, by good fortune, keep the King’s peace here, then captivity in a convent, but when she escaped, what then? A dungeon? Chained? A quick death or a slow one? Xavier is the only man I trust to take her away and give her a chance for life. I think he will not be able to resist giving her away as one of his whores.”

Owen shuddered. “It amuses him to give his friends women pregnant with his bastards. Xavier is only interested in turning a profit. I bet she doesn’t clear the harbor alive.”

“He will not kill her.”

“There are worse fates than death,” grumbled the fool. His low bed creaked. He lay wrapped in his blanket staring at the flames.

Jarrad shrugged. “Go to sleep. Tomorrow, you will return with me to Port Creeve. Duncan and Marie can look after Fern. We are lucky the harbor here has silted up. I don’t want Marie to hear what Xavier says when he learns of her marriage. Do you think a reminder to my brother to mind his manners will help?”

Owen laughed and whispered, “I can help you teach him manners, my lord.”

“No, thank you. Keep away from him, you only make him worse.”

“He couldn’t be worse, not even if he were the devil himself.”

“Then remember he’s my brother. I want him alive, not dead. The first of his ships has arrived, he won’t be far behind.”

Chapter Sixteen

“Keep away from him!” Marie pointed a bloody hand at Fern when she entered the broch’s hall to see what all the noise was about. “I shall tend to Hamish’s wounds.”

Fern retreated to the hearth. Father Rab snored in a chair, with a tankard of ale next to him.

She shivered to see Boone beside the youth, with a look of sympathy on his handsome face, as if he had not wounded him to gain entrance to the broch.

Marie returned to washing the blood from the wound.

Boone limped towards the hearth.

Fern looked around for Duncan. He was probably searching for Boone, and had not warned Marie, thinking she was frightened enough.

Boone approached with a strange smirk on his lips ...

Worry for his young companion seemed written on every line of his handsome face, but Fern was sure he was to blame. All the blood was wet and fresh.

The youth opened his eyes. He lifted his head and moved to wipe his eyes free from gore.

“Lady Fern, I must speak with you.” He groaned and squinted at her.

“She is not to speak to anyone,” said Marie, attending to her task. “If you have something to say, tell it now in front of me.” She parted the young man’s hair.

He winced under her examination.

“Ouch, Lady Marie, must you tug so? Lady Fern, I beg you, come to me. I have a message from Lord Jarrad.”

Fern edged around Boone to move closer to Hamish.

Boone followed her to speak the lady. “I found him in Moresby, Lady Marie. Someone had hit him over the head. Lucky for him, I heard him moaning in the ditch.” Boone smiled at Marie.

Fern knew that smile well. She wasn’t surprised to see Marie take a step away from him.

“You can’t stay here without Duncan inviting you, James,” said Marie.

“But I met Duncan this morning, my lady, and he told me to bring the lad here, to you.” He tried to look puzzled at her words.

Marie did not smile back. She stared at him thoughtfully.

“You have the McKay blue eyes.” That fact, so simply stated, sounded as if she damned him for it. “What were you doing in Moresby?”

Fern growled under her breath. What use was there in questioning a madman.

She silently urged Marie to get rid of him before he tried to kill them all.

"I was selling horses, my lady. The Isle is rife with the news of Lord Jarrad's marriage to Lady Morag's daughter. I thought it best to bring Hamish here, as Duncan told me to. It's closer than the English side."

"You must leave now, James. I'm sorry we can't offer you hospitality inside the broch." Marie's voice shakily masked her fear.

Boone bowed, his cheerful civility not lessened at all. He took Marie's fear as a compliment and limped towards the tunnel leading to the doors.

Fern quickly moved across the hall, away from Boone. He veered from his path. She darted back to the youth, hoping to keep the table between them.

Marie cried out, "Fern, get away from him. You must leave, James. Only Jarrad can invite you in here."

Boone bowed low. "I only wanted to greet the Lady of the Isle. I am honored by your hospitality." He smirked and winked at Fern.

She watched him go, uncertain what to do. If she called the alarm with most of the men out of the castle, Boone might slaughter all those remaining.

Guards opened the doors deep in the tunnel under the broch walls. Fern held her breath in case they challenged him and were killed for it. Did no one who remained know this was the man Jarrad and Duncan searched for? She dared not call the alarm, not when she'd seen Boone fight. Let him go to be caught outside the castle. If Marie thought she plotted with him, it might mean her death.

The doors clapped like thunder as they closed.

Hamish sat up. "My lady, Lord Jarrad said he cannot return tonight because his brother has arrived."

Marie ran towards the tunnel. "Lock the doors!" she cried. "That man must not be allowed in here again. One of you go up to the roof and see where he goes." She turned on Fern. "Traitor! Your tricks won't work here. I know James MacBoone plots with you. If Jarrad dies because of you, I'll cut your throat myself."

* * * *

Fern let them argue over her, she knew who'd win.

"Let the lady have a fire, Marie." Father Rab picked up a log to place it on the cold embers in the hearth. "You've no proof she knew James."

"Jarrad said she cannot have a fire, if she is alone." Marie's voice trembled as she spoke. "Xavier is here, Jarrad can't return tonight." She kept her face a haughty mask of pride. "We all stay locked in the broch."

"Then stay with her," grumbled the old man. "It will be a damn cold night without a fire."

"I want her chained to the ring. That way she cannot escape to plot with her mother." She turned to wipe away a tear. "Give her a penance, Father Rab."

Fern flashed a wrathful glance at the old priest. She didn't mind spending the

night alone under the covers by herself, but she'd not be chained if she could help it.

"Nay," said Father Rab, "the lass has done nothing to deserve it."

"Do it," urged Marie. "She plots with her mother. Now that Xavier is here, they must move swiftly to take the Isle."

"Lady Fern is not in need of it," opined the old priest. "She'll be fine here for a night alone."

"No, I order it done," said Marie. "I take responsibility for it."

Fern waited for them to shackle her to the ring and leave her in peace. Only Father Rab looked back with regret when they closed the door to lock her in.

The hours passed slowly.

The Celts below sang, danced, and drank the night away. The sound of them enjoying life was a comfort in the darkness, even the screech of the bagpipes. She made a nest on Owen's bed with the covers from the big bed. At least she'd not die of cold.

The irons around her ankles warmed slowly while she prayed Boone was caught before he killed anyone. She couldn't bear to think of Jarrad's death. He'd wanted trust between them and then told her he loved her. She didn't trust him enough to believe him.

She hoped Duncan lived to enjoy his marriage to Marie. It was all her fault they'd married. She'd forced them into it. But surely it was better to be a pregnant bride than to have no husband and have to explain it to Xavier du Terrenord. Duncan would have died for that sin. At least married they had a chance.

The noise Fern heard was slight, like a rat on the roof, only it came from the wall. Such a strange noise in a solid stone wall. She could hardly hear it above the music and drunken voices raised in song.

Someone was creeping inside the walls.

Boone!

It could only be Boone.

She turned her head to listen as the slight sounds circled the wall toward the garderobe. To call for aid was impossible. Fern couldn't bang on the door. She untangled herself, taking care to not trip over the iron ring or the chain running under it. She lifted up the little bed and flung it as hard as she could against the door. It bounced short to slide across the floor.

No one heard it.

Creaks came from the garderobe, as if something was being pried free. Fern couldn't reach the little bed to try again, not even by stretching her length on the cold floor.

She rose to try to pry the ring from the floor. It resisted her efforts. She stamped until her ankles ached.

No one heard her.

Boone was inside. She knew it. Inside. Behind the curtain.

God help her!

A dark figure emerged from the shadows. Fern's heart thudded in fright.

Boone's face was ghostly in the darkness. He wiped his face with his hand. She could smell blood on him.

He raised a finger to his lips to signify she should not speak. Her stupid voice doomed her to obey him—no one was close enough to hear her.

"Don't scream, Fern, I have come to take you to your mother. Come, wife. Come, quickly," he whispered.

She lifted her feet in turn to show him the shackles and the chain linking them that ran under the ring.

"Pray I can lift it, or you'll lose a foot." Boone laughed at his jest. "Do you have any preference which one?" It was the work of a moment for him to force the ring up with the hilt of his sword.

Fern tried to free herself from his grip. The hand about her wrist tightened.

"I want to dress, Boone. I cannot go like this," she said.

He untied the dressing gown and opened it to look at her body. "I'm glad you are not fat with his child, wife. Your mother will give you a potion to rid you of any brat you carry."

Fern grasped his wrists in an effort to close the bed-robe. He shook her off to whisper fiercely, "Come, Fern, your mother will clothe you."

He gripped her by the upper arm. The stitches pulled out of the wound and soon the only warmth she felt was her blood seeping out.

They escaped through the broch's wall to climb in total darkness down and down, until they came out under the buttery stairs. Boone hissed threats when Fern stumbled over her chains at the sight of a body in a pool of blood.

The castle was riddled with passage ways, some secret, some not. All those in their way were dead asleep, dead drunk, or dead.

* * * *

Fern clung to the horse's mane to avoid being thrown back against Boone. He held her thigh with bruising grip and handled the reins with his free hand. They traveled with a band of men, who whispered among themselves and could not contain their triumphant grins at her capture.

Boone laughed with them. She turned to see his teeth gleaming white in the pre-dawn light. Her shivering increased where the wind blasted from the sea to scour the low hills.

The men stopped just below the crest of a hill, on the lee side, which gave a semblance of shelter.

Boone dismounted to haul her down. Fern stumbled as she trod on the chain connecting her shackles.

The men laughed and their leader, a brawny black-haired menace, rode close enough for his mount to brush against her. "Do it fast, James, it will be dawn soon. Will

you need our assistance to hold her down? We'd not like her to spoil your pretty face." He roared at his own joke, showing teeth black with rot.

Boone cursed him and pulled Fern by the arm down the slope between the stunted trees. The noise of the wind dropped away the lower they went. Water trickled, louder and louder, until it drowned out the clinking of her chains.

Fern tried to wrap the dressing gown tighter around her body. Her blood felt warm where it dripped from the wound on her arm. It was armor she needed and a thick woolen cloak to go with it, not a dressing gown that tripped her with every step if her shackles did not.

"Where is my mother?" asked Fern. "Is she here?"

"If she were here, I'd have to cut her throat," warned Boone. "You can't inherit the Isle until she's dead."

Fern tried another tack. "Are we going to Port Creeve?"

"Aye, after I've had you. This is far enough. Get on your back and spread your legs."

"No, Boone, in the cold night air? It is surely too shriveling to do it in the open. I am a block of ice and any man would wilt at the attempt," she said, hoping to cool his ardor.

The flat of his hand caught her on the side of her face. "On your back, Fern, now!"

He flung her to the ground. Loose peat and old bracken filled her hands. Not a stone within reach.

"Spread your legs, bitch!" He kicked her feet and Fern did as he asked, then she raised her knees holding the chain taut between her ankles. With all the force she could muster she brought the chain down on his knee, hoping to dislodge his kneecap.

Boone leapt back. The chain skinned his shin. He cursed and hopped on one foot.

Fern scrambled to her feet. He caught her easily by standing on the chain. With iron fists he dragged her to a low tree and pulled a branch from it.

Blow after blow rained on her back and buttocks, the first smote her to the ground, the second burned like fire, the third felt as if she had been branded with a fiery iron, but the blows soon faded one into the other as their thuds shook her. She had seen men stand as if a whipping were nothing, and now she knew why. After a dozen strokes her body felt nothing but the dull thud of his blows.

As if he knew she was numbed, he turned her over to strip her naked, though she fought him with all her strength. A blow to her jaw made her see flashes of light.

She fell back, stunned.

He stepped between her legs and knelt, spreading her wide, though he took care to keep the chain trapped under one foot.

Boone fumbled to free himself from his clothes. Her struggles must have excited

him for he sprang forth despite the cool air.

She had only one chance—the branch he had used to beat her.

Slowly she reached out her hand for it, but she could not reach it. The only thing that came to hand was a dead twig, broken off by the force of his blows.

She waited until he looked down to ram himself into her. With a swift motion she plunged the twig into his eye as far as it would go. She twisted it into his brain.

It was the same way Harold the woodsman had died. Fern had tried to save him, but removing the twig had only hastened his death. She had wept for Harold, she'd not weep for Boone.

He knelt between her thighs and stared at her out of his one eye. Fern reached up to topple him sideways. She extricated the chain from the tangle of his legs and tried to stand. Her legs shook. She'd killed a man, a mortal sin, though he deserved it and she was not sorry at all. But she'd burn in hell now, whether she kept her vow or not.

She crawled away, dragging the dressing gown after her, too shaken to walk. If the other men came looking for her and found what she'd done, they'd do their worst. She shuddered to think how long it would take her to die.

From high above her, screams and war cries echoed down the valley.

Chapter Seventeen

Fern lay low in the dead bracken.

She tied the dressing gown closely about her. She'd killed a man. Killed him dead. Not that he wasn't still breathing. She could hear his gasps when the fighting died down. But he was as good as dead. Her mother would never forgive her. Even God might agree that a previous betrothal took precedence.

Fern clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering. She was doomed. She'd killed a man and she wasn't sorry for it. Sinners had to repent their sins to be forgiven. She'd burn in hellfire for murder.

Mist rolled down the hillside to cover her in fine beads of moisture. The dark dressing gown glistened with tiny pearls, which turned lighter and brighter as the sun rose.

Her back ached with tight spasms. Her jaw was swollen. Her forehead had a lump on it. She added them to the list of her injuries.

The battle noises stopped.

No one wanted her, no one cared about her. Even her mother had sent a madman after her. No one in the whole world wanted her. The Isle was what they wanted.

The dogs were the last straw. Their baying grew closer and closer until Fern struggled to her feet. She tried to roll her sleeves around her hands in the hope of defending herself.

"She is here! My lady is here," called Owen. He loomed out of the mist just above her. He held a baying hound by its collar.

"Hold!" shouted Jarrad.

Owen tied the hound to a shrub. "I think your lady wife cannot run, my lord. She has been beaten."

"Alaric, hold the dogs. Stay back," commanded Jarrad. He appeared above her on the slope. He looked feral, his hair and clothes coated glistening with the mist. He sheathed his sword. Blood flecked his face.

He circled the trees to get near her.

"Don't touch me, Jarrad du Terrenord. I going to burn in hell for eternity and it is all your fault." Fern took a step away. He looked furious.

Owen moved behind her to block her retreat. The fool tried to wrap his cloak about her.

She flung it off with difficulty. "S-stop, Owen," she said through chattering teeth. "I am going to get as cold as I can, before I die and burn in hell for eternity."

Both men leaned down to hear her words. Jarrad gripped her by the elbows. "Where is he?"

She stared back at him in as belligerent a fashion as she could manage. "Who?" she asked. Her back hurt too much to shrug her disdain.

"Your lady wife says she is going to burn in hellfire," said Owen. "What has she done?"

"Where is he, Fern?" He tried to control his fury.

She laughed in his face. "Don't you trust me?"

His hands tightened on her elbows. He lowered his voice, "Forgive me, chérie, I didn't guard you well. What did James MacBoone do to you?" His voice vibrated through her in time with her shivers.

Owen knelt to remove her shackles with a key he took from his tunic.

Her feet were numb. Her ankle screamed a warning.

She growled at the fool.

Jarrad released her but her attempt to hop away from the men ended with her stumbling over the fool's foot. She winced with pain. The spasms in her back increased until she could scarcely draw a breath.

"Where is he, Fern?" Her husband blocked her path. "Damnation! I mean tell me if it pleases you to tell me, little one. I want to tear him limb from limb with my bare hands."

"He didn't touch me," she said through gritted teeth. "Except to beat me."

Jarrad stroked bits of dead bracken from her shoulders. "As he is not with his men and not with you, I can only ask you where his body lies."

"I am too dangerous a wife for you." She winced at his touch on her cheek.

He gently cupped her face. "I'm sorry I didn't protect you from him."

"Count yourself lucky you are not wed to me, oh great Lord of the Isle." Fern mocked him with Owen's affectionate title. She lifted her chin and looked him in the eye. "Boone displeased me, so I killed him."

He gently stroked her cheek. If she'd been able to throw herself into his arms, she might have done it.

"Forgive me for what happened."

He bent his head and kissed her lips, as if to reassure himself she would let him.

She pushed against his chest. The wound on her arm complained. "Give your commands to someone who is not already damned, Jarrad du Terrenord. It is impossible to burn for eternity twice. I am doomed, so I may do as I please, and it pleases me to tell you we are not married." He'd not want her now he knew her capable of murder.

Jarrad reached out a hand for Owen's cloak, to wrap his wife in it with his fool's help.

His wife's gentle voice began her litany of complaints. His relief at finding her alive, made him smile as he listened to her.

"You let them tether me like a criminal. And now, no doubt, you think I went willingly with that madman. Yes, it is every woman's dream to be dragged from her home through a noxious hole, clad only in a bed robe." She looked up at him suspiciously. "Don't you dare laugh at me! I refuse to love you. I refuse to let you touch me. When we are in hell together, I shall take consolation in seeing you suffer with me."

Jarrad held her gently. "Tell me more." He touched his lips to her ear and her shivers grew worse. He drew her towards him with the cloak. She stiffened and gave a faint cry.

"My lord, your lady wife has been beaten. Don't touch her back, I beg you," cried Owen.

"Forgive me, chérie. May I carry you?" Her expression of horror persuaded him not to try. "No? Then walk with me, you need warmth and your wounds tended. Come." He held her hand and gestured to Owen to assist him.

"I am not going with you. We are not married I tell you. My mother gave me to that madman and I killed him. I had to kill him to stop him from—" She tripped on a wayward tuft of grass and would have fallen if he had not held her up.

Owen grunted his disgust, and then mimicked her voice. "Oh woe is me, I killed a man. Alack, alas! Pity me!" He mimed a swordfight. "Men kill men all the time, my lady, and don't worry about burning in hell for it."

Jarrad held her shoulders carefully. "Morag never gave you in marriage to James MacBoone. She might have asked him to bring you to her, but that would have been his last day on earth. Morag is no fool."

"Think, my lady," said Owen, "what use would your marrying him do her? She made no pledge for you, so know this, you are married to my noble lord and master. And he is not likely to let you go, is he?"

Jarrad reached down to gently test the back of her thighs. "Can you sit, wife? Owen, grasp my arm."

They made a chair from their arms and scooped her into it. Poor Fern could not lift her arms to hold on when they hoisted her between them.

"I am not your wife, even if we are married. I am your prisoner. You don't trust me and never will. No fire! Locked in the broch! You won't let me meet my mother! Not that I want to meet her now!" A sob escaped her. "Whatever you tell me to do, be warned, I'll do the opposite."

"Then hate me to your heart's content, Fern. Hate me and curse me, and deny me the comfort of your body next to mine. Refuse to kiss me, flog me until you ache from it, and never let me see you writhe sweetly under me aflame with desire."

She blushed at his words.

He had no intention of denying himself the comfort and pleasure of her body.

Owen laughed out loud. "I told you, my lady, it's all my lord ever thinks about."

“You lie, Owen, for he thinks of many other things. How to keep me content to be his prisoner is not least of them. Let both of you be warned—I’ll not submit meekly again. I have given my soul into the devil’s keeping and Lucifer has rewarded me with freedom. I can do anything I like now because I am going to burn for eternity.” Tears ran down her cheeks.

Jarrad shuddered at the sight. He stopped climbing the slope. Owen flexed his arm under her to slide her down to stand between them.

Jarrad held her chin gently. “Where is his body?”

Fern pointed down the hill.

“Let’s go and make sure he is dead, Owen. I doubt my lady wife has strength enough to kill a man.”

They lifted her and made their way carefully downwards. The slope was more difficult to descend, burdened as they were. Fern tried to persuade them there was no need. She didn’t want him to see what she had done.

Finding Boone proved difficult.

Jarrad was about to order Owen to go back and get the hounds when he saw a trail of flattened reeds. He followed it, sword in hand, to search the reeds and the river bank.

Nothing.

He called to them, “Boone probably drowned in the river. He was not killed by you, Fern. He crawled in and drowned himself.”

“Listen, my lady,” said Owen in a mock whisper. “You must once again meekly submit, though, you might be able to train my master to enjoy you fierce instead of meek. Get ready to fall to your knees and thank him from delivering you from hell’s torment.”

Fern tried to pry away his restraining hand. Her jangled feelings didn’t permit her to feel joy at being saved. Now she had to worry about being damned by that awful vow. “Will it amuse you, Owen, to see me fail to keep my vow of perfect obedience? He is sure to ask something of me that I will fail to do.”

“My lady, don’t slither to the devil on your belly like a slug on a slimy trail of imperfection. Tell yourself you, and you alone, know what my master wants. Don’t all wives think they know best? Don’t we all think we know best?”

“He can’t want to be married to me.”

Owen laughed. “He doesn’t know what he wants, my lady. He never expected to love you.”

Chapter Eighteen

They kept away from villages and made their way by less traveled paths ever northward until they came to the English half of the Isle. The sun was high in the sky by the time they reached the castle on the hill overlooking the harbor.

This was her husband's domain, guarded by his men. It looked as poor as the Scottish half of the Isle.

Fern limped up to the solar. Her back barely permitted her to climb the stairs but she didn't want to be carried.

He let her warm herself by the fire while he washed quickly in a bowl of water. He dressed in fine clothes, like a lord. Fern thawed by the fire, seated on a cushion. She thanked Owen for the mulled wine and sipped it, glad of its warmth.

Jarrad knelt beside her. "Are you warm enough to bathe now, chérie? I dared not insist you do it until you were warmer, for fear you'd react like a scalded cat again, and accuse me of trying to boil you alive."

He touched the marks on her face with gentle fingers. "You will bathe in front of the fire with your mother to tend you. I can give you only this one meeting, Fern, don't beg me for another. We must trust one another, you and I, for without trust how can we love?"

"Do you command me to love you?" Her tone was desperate.

He answered with a smile on his lips. "No, love must be freely given, like trust." He brushed his lips over hers and slid his hand into the bed robe to caress the swell of her breast.

"Fern." His tone demanded she meet his gaze. "I shall not use you for my pleasure until you give yourself to me of your own free will."

"I have no will but yours, my lord husband. Do with me as you please."

"It pleases me to be the man you desire, chérie. In this, you command me."

A knock sounded at the door. His smile died. He whispered in her ear, "Try to comfort Morag, she's terrified."

But comfort was impossible for Fern to offer the dark-haired lady of great beauty who stared down at her while the bathtub was dragged towards the hearth.

Jarrad left them, but not alone. Female servants watched with interest this meeting between mother and daughter. The bathtub was filled and a linen tent placed over it to keep the air warm and moist.

They helped her into the water.

Fern ordered the malodorous dressing gown burned. She leaned forward and

raised her knees to pillow her head, while her back was cleaned.

Her mother did not touch her.

Two servants bathed her while her mother watched. They made noises of distress when they saw her back, which brought Morag closer to see. She bade them hurry at the task in a nervous voice.

When at last Fern's hair was rinsed and rubbed until it didn't drip, they dressed her in a fine robe of blue wool and placed a cap upon her head. The clothes were her mother's. Fern thought they looked more like sisters than mother and daughter. And if anyone had to choose which one was the elder, well, it did not help that Fern straightened her back with an effort and walked with a limp.

Morag sent the women away. "Do you hate me, Fern?"

"No, Mother. I must thank you for leaving me with Baron Welford. I don't doubt you saved my life."

"Then let me give you a mother's warning, do not trust Jarrad. I marked him. He tells himself he doesn't seek vengeance, but I am doomed. I know it."

"I don't think he means ill by you," said Fern.

Morag laughed—a cold sound. "Did he tell you that?"

Fern nodded. "Truly, he means you no harm. He fears King Henry's punishment of you if a rebellion is made in your name."

"He is a du Terrenord," sneered her mother. "Do not trust him. Do not trust any of them."

"How can you accuse him?" asked Fern, "when he has suffered so much without complaint and still speaks of you with affection."

"Affection! Don't be foolish, my child. He wakes at night in a cold sweat when he dreams of me. His one thought is to control me and put me forever out of his way."

When Fern opened her mouth to argue, Morag's eyes flashed a warning. It was a likeness between them. Fern thought it the only one she had seen so far. Many times she had used that expression to quell her foster sisters.

"He wants to give you a chance for life, for happiness, Mother. Would you prefer to be locked in a convent or castle?"

"Have you met Xavier du Terrenord, Fern?"

Fern shook her head.

"I met him only once. He gave me a jeweled casket and told me it was a gift from his father and himself. He warned me that only his father's command stayed his hand, and that if he ever met me again I should expect a lingering death."

"No wonder you fear him."

"My heart pounded in my breast. I was young and foolish then. His words were nothing, Fern. Do not fear a man's words, fear his deeds. Inside the casket was a tiny heart. They had killed my infant son and given me his heart."

Fern's eyes filled with tears. She fell to her knees and wept with Morag standing

over her.

“Do not weep, my daughter, learn from this. Do not trust the du Terrenords. They are cruel men. When Jarrad returned to the Isle I warned him away, but imagine my surprise when he brought me news of my son. Safe, loved and protected. Is it true? I know not. But I dared not try to stop Jarrad from taking over the Isle and I dare not refuse to go with Xavier du Terrenord.”

Fern grasped her mother’s hands. “But if your son is alive and well, then they are not as cruel as you feared.”

Morag shook free. “He is more likely dead. When I am killed, I’ll know the truth.” She fumbled with the neck of her chemise to pull out a golden chain with a miniature portrait attached. She lifted it over her head and placed it around Fern’s neck.

“Jarrad gave me this. He says it is my son. I wish you never had been found, Fern, but I give this to you in the hope that if your brother is alive, you will do your best to aid him.”

With anxious eyes, Fern peered at the little painting. The young man was not Owen. To have brought her brother back to Isle of Demons as a castrated jester ... Fern shuddered at the thought. Yet Owen knew and feared Xavier du Terrenord, as did her mother.

Maybe Owen knew what had really happened. If she showed the portrait to him, he might let slip some information.

“If my brother lives and I can aid him, I’ll do it, but—” Fern got no further with her speech.

A slight sound from the door made Morag place a finger to her lips.

“Go to Jarrad now, Fern. Beg him to let me stay here. I’d be no trouble to you. Let me stay as your servant. He need never see me. I beg you, Fern, plead for me. I am not brave enough to endure Xavier du Terrenord’s revenge.”

Morag bent her head and pleaded until Fern could stand it no longer.

“Calm yourself, Mother. I’ll go to Jarrad and ask him to come to you. Maybe if you meet Xavier in my husband’s presence you’ll see he is not the monster that you suppose.”

Eagerly, Morag went towards the door. “Go to Jarrad, ask him for me, Fern. He is below. Go, I beg you.”

Fern was ushered through the door. It was shut and locked behind her. The alacrity with which the bolt slid home gave her pause. She began to doubt very much that the man waiting below was Jarrad.

Trust. She had asked Jarrad to trust her and must she not in return, trust.

Slowly, she circled down the stone steps in a calm, dignified manner as befit the Lady of the Isle.

Her heart began to show its cowardice by its rapid beating.

Around the last turn was a small gallery with a window. At the end of the gallery,

Jarrad stood with his back to her as he looked out at the sunset.

Relief flooded her. It gave her feet wings. She sped towards him and collided with him as he turned.

The man's face was unblemished, his nose straight, his cheeks lean and sculpted. His lips and jaw were Jarrad's. His face was exactly as Jarrad's would have been had Morag not erred those many years ago.

As eagerly as she had run to him, so did her feet now try to put some distance between them. Xavier du Terrenord's expression held none of Jarrad's warmth.

"Morag, forgive my tardiness, I was delayed by storms." Even his voice was like Jarrad's. He spoke French with the same inflections, in comforting deep tones. "You are looking haggard. I'd not have known you."

Perhaps his words were less than polite, but his touch on her injured cheek was light. Fern drew back.

His fingers skimmed lower until he grasped the portrait hanging from the golden chain. "I had this painted in Genoa. Let me warn you now, Morag. If you so much as dare to look me in the eye, your son will meet this fate."

He drew his knife and scratched across the portrait, erasing the face.

Fern watched Xavier's hands from beneath her lashes. The chain bit into the back of her neck as she pulled away from him.

"Where do you think you are going, Morag?" He sheathed the knife and twisted the chain around her neck. "You have heard your name for the last time. From now on, you answer to *slave* and you must call me, *master*."

He seemed disappointed she made no objection. The chain was so tight around her throat that Fern dared not provoke him. "Come, slave, I have much to do before the dawn."

He stepped away and tugged her to follow him. "I did not hear your reply, slave."

Nausea swept over Fern, in an instant she was bent over, heaving and shaking. If Xavier had not let go of the chain around her neck she'd have broken her own neck. There was nothing in her stomach, but that did not stop it from trying to climb out of her throat with every dry heave.

It was minutes before Fern felt able to stand upright. Her throat was tight and painful, speech was impossible. The hand on her shoulder gave her a little shake.

"Come, cowardly slave, you can vomit as much as you like when we are aboard ship."

As if he knew she was unable to answer, he simply linked his arms in hers and made her go with him.

Owen watched Fern being led away. He wiped the sweat from his face and urged his shaking legs to hold him. Only fear of being discovered had kept him from joining Lady Fern in a vomiting chorus.

Xavier du Terrenord had made a mistake. An error grave enough to get him

castrated and killed.

If only he dared to do it.

A tear of pleasure moistened Owen's eye. Revenge, some measure of it, at least. Sweet vengeance, would be his.

His long legs carried him swiftly to the jakes. He took his place on the nearest hole cut into the long wooden seat. With moans and groans, he rubbed his belly.

He slyly eyed the other occupants, a thin watchman and an old man. Both turned to see who was making enough noise to wake the dead.

"I have such cramps, forgive me," said Owen. "I am guarding my lady Fern and cannot tarry at this task." He mimicked a man in dire need until he was certain they'd not forget him, and then he mentioned the setting sun so they could be a witness for time as well as place. A witness for why he had missed Lady Fern being abducted by Xavier du Terrenord.

He returned to the tower steps and went up to knock on the door. He called a greeting when there was no answer to his knock. "My lady Morag, I am to escort you back to your chamber. Open the door, or I am to send for my lord." He listened carefully with his ear to the door. "Lady, open the door, I beg you."

Owen was sure Morag listened on the other side of the door. He turned to stamp his feet down a few steps. He gave a horrified gasp and called out. "Is my lady dead? It cannot be! How can that be, Alaric? Her throat cut, you say?"

The bolt slid back and the door swung open.

Morag rushed out. She stumbled on the stairs.

Owen caught her arm. "Where is Lady Fern? What have you done with her?"

He searched the room quickly, just to be able to say with truth that he had. In a few strides, he caught Morag descending the stairwell.

"You have sent her in your stead, have you not, Lady Morag? A more monstrous mother, I have never met."

"Is Fern dead?"

"Nay, my lady, but after this day's work you may be. I go to rescue her. If I hurry, I may be able to save her."

"Fern is in no real danger." Morag recovered quickly from her fright. "All she has to do is say who she is and he'd not touch her. I just need time to get away."

"Get away? My lady, they will kill your son. How can you run?" asked Owen.

"She knows of him. Fern will save her brother. Let me go, please, do not take me to Jarrad."

"I have no time to take you anywhere. I go to the harbor, but I must send word to my lord and master, if I dare stop to do it." He pushed her one way while going the opposite. "You might escape. Good luck, my lady." He stopped to make a sweeping bow. "You have not half the brains of your daughter," he jeered.

Owen ran with long, easy strides down towards the harbor until he caught sight of

Fern and Xavier du Terrenord. The lady stumbled as she walked and winced when he gripped her arm. She had not told who she was, that was certain. Maybe she could not speak. It would be better if she could not. His dagger itched to play about Xavier du Terrenord's body and no one was going to stop him.

Chapter Nineteen

The ship wallowed as it rode at anchor. Xavier du Terrenord gave orders through the open cabin door.

Fern sat on the floor with her back to the wall. She watched him walk effortlessly over the swaying deck to light an oil-lamp hanging from the low ceiling. She slid her gaze away before he could catch her looking at him.

The bed was covered with furs. A table was bolted to the floor under the lamp, with a stool under it.

She made a testing noise, a hum, just to see if she could risk speech. He turned toward her at the sound.

"If you are going to vomit again, slave, I suggest you wait until you have something in your stomach."

Fern bowed her head lower and tried another small sound. His boots came nearer. He kicked her foot. It was a gentle kick as kicks go, but it jarred her injured ankle. She winced and pulled her knees closer to her breast to give him more room to pass.

The wince brought him down to her level. He reached under her skirt for her ankle. It was a reflex to shove his hand away. One she regretted as soon as she'd done it.

He raised his hand to strike her, and then seemed to think better of it. Instead he took her wrists and pulled her to stand in front of him.

"What happened to you, slave? Why are you in this miserable condition? Your value is less than worthless."

He ran his fingers over her face, down her arms, up her back, around her neck and down towards her breasts. Fern folded her arms to protect herself.

"I fell down," she said, her voice creaking.

He whispered in her ear, "I fell down, *master*."

Now was the time to say who she was, to reveal her identity. Her arms were pressed against his chest. His handsome face was so close that the movement of the boat made her forehead touch his chin. The rasp of his bristles hurt her wound.

His knife pricked her neck before she realized he held it to her throat.

"Do I end your life now, slave, or do you call me master?"

"What do you intend to do with me, master?" she asked.

He listened intently to her voice.

She gave a shudder of relief when he sheathed his knife.

"I intend to remove your clothes and have my physician tend your wounds, and

then you will be fed lightly. Afterward, you will be given a choice. You may share my bed or be shared by my crew.”

“Jarrad promised me you’d not harm my mother. Surely forcing her to play the whore for your men or yourself is harming her?”

“At last, Lady Fern, reveals herself to me. I am shocked. Now, what is it my saintly brother calls all his women—*chérie*? Does he call you *chérie*, Fern? Or does he only call his whores that?”

Xavier du Terrenord stepped closer to press her against the cabin wall. His hips pinned hers, but it was her shoulders she tried to keep away from the wall. They had borne the brunt of the blows Boone had given her.

When she made no answer he bent his head and spoke, so close that his breath warmed her ear. “You will call me, *master*, until my brother comes to claim you. If he doesn’t want you back, then you suffer her fate. Your bitch of a mother failed to gain control of you and raise the Isle against him. You have failed in your treachery.”

“I am loyal to my husband.”

He whispered a word in her ear, “*Master*.”

Fern lifted her chin. His knife touched her neck.

“My lord husband will come for me, master. He needs me to claim the Isle.” She kept her voice calm.

“Good, *chérie*, you remind me I have not much time to spare for dalliance.”

Dalliance?

He lifted her to sit her on the table. “Remove your clothes, slave. Of course, you refuse. I threaten. You cry. *Non*, Morag’s daughter doesn’t weep. She rages, in so soft and gentle a voice it makes a man hard just to hear her speak. Is that the effect you wish to have on me, *chérie*?”

Fern shook her head, afraid to say anything at all. Her stomach wanted to rebel again. She fought the urge to vomit.

To her relief, Xavier moved away. He opened the cabin door to shout his orders and used a foreign tongue, in a voice that echoed in her head.

Soon, she heard footsteps. Dark-skinned men entered with covered trays. They bowed out without looking at her.

Xavier gave her a piece of bread. Fern broke off some crust to put in her mouth. Her stomach said a prayer of thanks and settled instantly. She was with child. How often she had sent to the kitchen for bread to calm a new bride’s queasy belly.

Inside her was Jarrad’s child. A feeling of joy soared through her. Jarrad could not doubt the child was his. Relief brought tears to her eyes. She smiled to herself and gave a soft, slightly hysterical, giggle of delight.

“Why do you laugh, *chérie*?”

Fern ate another piece of crust before she answered.

“Take me back, Xavier, master of the seas, before it’s too late.”

“How much do you think he’ll pay to get you back, *chérie*?” He leaned over the other side of the table to unfasten the laces of her overdress.

Fern ate another piece of bread and swallowed it with difficulty.

“You cannot mean to hold me for ransom—Jarrad cannot pay you to get me back. In truth, he doesn’t need me to rule the Isle, not when it’s King Henry’s protection the people want.” She added a hasty, “Master,” when his hands stilled.

Slowly, he began to remove her chemise. The air felt cool on her breasts as he exposed her.

Bruises from Boone’s grip discolored her from shoulder to elbow. Blood glued her sleeve to her arm. The cloth crackled as he removed it.

The wound on her arm caught his attention. The stitches had pulled free in the middle.

“Who did this to you?”

“It’s nothing, no more than a scratch.” She explained, “I tripped Jarrad when he was running with his sword drawn.”

“And then? Tell me more, *chérie*. Who died?”

Fern tried to move away when he reached around her to unfasten her cap. She felt a wave of relief as her hair tumbled down. With a shake of her head, her breasts were hidden.

“No one died. Lord Jarrad had misheard me, which was why he charged. Then he fell over me and his sword nicked me.” She turned to look at him and was surprised to find him silently laughing.

“It wasn’t funny at the time, I could have been killed.” She frowned at him. “I think he was sorry for it afterwards because he agreed to let Marie marry Duncan.”

Wrath leapt into Xavier’s face.

Fern hurried on, “Marie deserves a husband she can love after being married to Black Angus McKay. I see no reason for you to take the marriage in dislike, master, not when you allowed that monster to torment her for years, while doing nothing to aid her.”

He wrapped her hair round his hand to force her to lie on her back.

Fire blazed up through her shoulders. Too late she remembered Jarrad’s warning to treat his brother with respect. Perhaps she had rebuked him, but he’d deserved it and she had remembered to call him master.

Fern fought against him. If she had to lie on the table like a roast ready for the carving, she wanted to lie on her stomach, not her back. Spasms of intense pain made her try to climb or fall off the table.

He turned her over and held her down with a warning hand on the back of her neck.

“Don’t panic, *chérie*. I am not going to rape you. You were curious to know what I intend for your mother. You now suffer her fate. It is this, you will be pampered and perfumed, the hair on your body removed. You will be dressed in a revealing

costume and given as gift to an old friend of mine. I shall tell him you are a whore from the East trained in a thousand ways to please a man, and I shall leave you to please him or not, as you wish. Jarrad's arrival will stop this game at any stage, but I must warn you, we are under way and I doubt he can catch us."

"My mother makes a poor gift for your friend, master."

Xavier's hand rubbed the back of her neck in a soothing way. "Lay still, Fern. My physician must treat your back."

Fern jumped to feel someone else's hands removed the rest of her clothing. She shivered at the touch of fingers on her back. To distract herself, she asked, "What happens when my mother won't do as she is bid?"

Xavier didn't answer. He let go of her neck.

She shuddered as liquid was sponged on with a light touch. "Master, you send her to her death. And permit me to say you are not likely to keep your friend." Fern hesitated. "Oh, he is not a friend, is he? You intend to give my mother to your enemy! What of your vow to take her to safety?"

"He will be in awe of her, afraid her talents will overshadow his. He will think she is a gift of great price and treat her like a treasure." He laughed and Fern didn't doubt he thought it a splendid trick to play on both of them. "Lie still, Jarrad arrives when he arrives."

He stroked her cheek. "Who did this to you? I know it wasn't Jarrad. He is foolish where women are concerned, too grateful for their favors to beat them, too eager to please. Did you find him so, *chérie*? Or are you going to tell me he did this by accident, too?"

"James MacBoone beat me." Metal scraped on metal. Fern felt the sting of a blade on her lower back. "MacBoone kidnapped me and I killed him, though Jarrad says he drowned, but I had killed him first, even if he was still breathing." She babbled on, "Jarrad doesn't like other men to touch me. Be warned, it's really better if you let me go."

He moved away from her. "It's strange to be warned by your touching voice. Tell me more, *chérie*."

He returned to wrap something round her ankles. "Don't kick poor Ali. He is miserable enough in these northern seas." Her ankles were separated and tied to the table. She didn't try to stop him. Her heart beat faster and her stomach tried to climb out of her throat. A warm cloth slipped up her body to her waist. She muffled a sob of relief.

"You have a tree of splinters in your back, Fern? Who tended you? They did you no favor, leaving you like this."

Fern let his question go unanswered. She'd no wish to bring his wrath down on her mother's head.

"My physician is a Saracen and knows no tongue but his own. Whimper if he hurts you, the sounds of pain are the same everywhere." Xavier offered her some more

bread.

She opened her mouth.

He was a strange mixture of kindness and cruelty.

“May I see what he removes, oh great master of the sea?” she asked politely.

The slight stings were nothing to complain about.

Fern peered with interest at the splinter Xavier held for her to see. How could her mother have left her like that? Didn’t she care if an infection set in? No doubt after sending Boone to do his worst, her mother saw no need to worry about splinters festering in her back.

Xavier showed her more until Fern turned her head the other way. The stings were growing in number.

She raised her head. “Use lye soap to clean the wounds.”

Xavier offered her a piece of bread dipped in honey.

She politely ate from his fingers. It was calming to think that she had lots and lots of splinters to be plucked out. It would take a long, long time. With luck Jarrad would rescue her before Xavier had time to ask more of her than this.

Exhausted, Fern closed her eyes.

“The drug worked, master, she sleeps.”

“Finish quickly. I want her plucked before my brother arrives.”

“Lord Jarrad may not appreciate your joke, master.”

Xavier stroked Fern’s cheek. “If Jarrad were not my brother, I’d keep her.”

Chapter Twenty

Owen listened from his hiding place in the adjoining storeroom. He knew this ship well. Every hair on his body stood erect with remembrance. He waited for the physician to leave and prayed Xavier du Terrenord had not wits enough to lock the door.

He crept out to try the handle. The door to the cabin swung open. Swiftly he stepped inside, his knife ready. He took the time to bar the door, certain of his skill in the fight.

Lady Fern lay on the bed, her costume finely transparent. She moved as one waking from a heavy sleep.

At the table, Xavier pored over a ledger, pen in hand. Not exactly the scene of seduction Owen had hoped for.

"My lady, my lady," he shouted, "I have come to save you!"

Xavier leapt to his feet. "What are you doing here, imbecile?"

Owen grimaced and flashed his knife. His breathing was so rapid it threatened all his plans for vengeance. Fear kept him braced against the door.

"Owen, is my lord husband here?" asked Fern, sleepily.

"He is on his way, my lady. I could not wait for him, lest this foul debaucher of innocents have his way with you. But, fear not, I intend to deprive him of those parts he treasures most."

The stool caught Owen on the hand that held his knife. He clung to the handle, too eager for blood to feel the pain.

Xavier leapt for him, dagger drawn.

A scream brought Fern quickly to her senses.

She leapt to Owen's aid, then stepped back when she realized the scream came from Xavier du Terrenord.

He writhed on the floor in agony clutching his broken wrist to his chest, the bones cruelly displaced.

Owen picked up Xavier's blade to test the edge.

"Owen, you cannot do this," warned Fern. "I beg you, think what you are about."

He grinned at her like one possessed. "I avenge your honor, my lady. Shut your eyes, if you do not like the sight of blood. Block your ears with your fingers if you do not like the sound of screams."

Fern fell to her knees beside Xavier. "You will start a war, Owen. You will break Lord Jarrad's heart, for he loves you the most of anyone in the world. You are his friend. How can you force him to execute you?"

A powerful kick from Xavier made Owen jump gracefully out of range, but he had forgotten about the low ceiling of the cabin. His head hit with such force he stunned himself. In the few moments it took him to recover, Fern subdued Xavier by holding his broken wrist in a warning grasp.

"You might faint from the pain, Xavier, hold still. Believe me, you cannot win a fight with Owen. Not even with two good arms. You've no chance against him now." The man stilled under her words. "Once he held Duncan for me, so I could cut his throat. Don't look at me like that—I didn't do it."

Owen staggered toward them.

"Hold him down, my lady, and I'll love you with all my heart and soul."

"No, you won't. You love Jarrad and you must not harm his brother no matter how just your cause. I'm sorry, Owen, I cannot allow you to do this."

"My lady, he means to ravish you. I will deprive him of the means to have his way with you." The fool lunged with a knife in each hand.

Fern rushed to cover Xavier's groin with her hands. The knife flickered in the lamplight to almost graze her fingers. "Stop it, Owen. God give me strength!"

Owen lunged again.

Fern suffered a scratch on the back of her hand when she covered Xavier's face. She covered each target and made Owen retreat by knocking at the nearest blade with her shoulder.

The fool ranted beside her mad with frustration. "You cannot cover all of him. I shall cut his heart out and give it to your lady mother. At least one in your family knows how to seek vengeance. Your mother would urge me on, not try to protect him. Have you been seduced by his face and his honeyed tongue?" He struck at Xavier's heart.

Fern rushed to position her hands and scared him off with a scream. "I didn't know he had a honeyed tongue, Owen. As for his face, I find my lord husband's face far more beautiful."

Owen snorted his disgust. He raised the knife to between her straddling hands.

Fern caught at the blade. The fool jerked back to watch her blood drip on Xavier's chest. "You are mad, my lady! He deserves to die!"

"You cannot kill your friend's brother. You cannot set brother against brother or make your lord an outcast in his family. Keep back, Owen!"

The door opened and the sea breeze changed the air inside the cabin.

"Owen!" Jarrad's voice blasted from the doorway.

"He raped your lady wife, my lord, give me permission to strike him dead!" shrieked Owen.

"My brother has no taste for rape. And he still lives." Jarrad put his hand on his fool's shoulder and said kindly, "Have you forgotten what happened to the last man who tried to force himself on Fern?" He took Owen's knives from him, and kept him by his side with an arm around his shoulders.

Fern removed her hands from Xavier's body. She patted his shoulder and would have left him to the ministrations of his physician, but he grasped her hand and brought it to his lips. "Command me, I am yours. Wish for something that I can give you and it is yours."

"Don't punish Owen for what he has done." She looked up at Jarrad. He gave a smile to thank her.

Xavier sat up to cradle his broken arm against his chest. "You don't ask me to be kind to your mother?"

She was not so foolish. "Master, you have already made promises to Jarrad concerning my mother. I cannot love her more than he does."

"I'm glad you didn't waste your wish on your mother," said Xavier in a menacing voice. "Owen, take Jarrad below. You know the place." He paused and added in a voice that froze her blood, "You can try to save him from the worst of it, if you think him worth the trouble."

Fern saw Jarrad's sudden stillness. She recognized his response to his brother's threat. He refused to be moved by it, just as he had refused to offer violence to her. Jarrad neither demanded to know what he had done, nor tried to argue his innocence.

Xavier asked him, "Did you bring Morag?"

Jarrad put a hand on his sword. "Yes. You gave your word, and I am here to make sure you keep it."

Xavier staggered to his feet.

Jarrad mouthed to her, *I love you*.

Xavier spoke in a voice goaded beyond endurance, "A pity you didn't use your wish to save your husband, Fern. Now I must put myself to the trouble of punishing a traitor, or should I leave that to King Henry?"

Chapter Twenty-one

Fern brushed against the cabin walls hung with silk as the ship danced in the firth with the retreating tide. Scented lamps swung to and fro in a sickening manner. She told her uneasy stomach to be quiet. The scent of spiced food wafted in every time the door opened. Her transparent clothing seemed normal now. No one had stared at her when they'd brought her here, nor when they darted in and out setting the table.

The table had been lowered to a foot from the floor. It was set for five. Fern listened to the new sounds from the hull—the knock of wood on wood and the creak of someone climbing on board.

Moments later Xavier opened the door with a flourish. “Come in, Merlin, we are glad you could join us.”

The man bowed his head as he entered after Xavier. The scent lavender and of smoke from a peat fire came with him.

“Master,” he replied in a languid voice. He remained standing by the door. His clothes were old and worn, and padded for warmth. Even without rich clothing, he looked like a lord. Silver glinted in his dark hair to show he was long past youth but not yet old.

“Fern,” said Xavier, “I want you to meet Merlin. Fern is Jarrad’s wife.” Xavier pointed to a cushion on the floor beside him. “Sit, Merlin, my old friend.”

There was something about the way Xavier said *old friend* that made Fern certain they were old enemies.

Merlin obeyed with a groan. His knees cracked when he lowered his body down to the cushion. “If it pleases you,” he said in his odd way, as if the words were in no hurry to leave his mouth.

Fern heard Jarrad in those words. Where was he? Her one attempt to ask Xavier had ended with him insisting Jarrad was teaching his slaves a thousand tricks. When she tried to demand to see him, Xavier had asked, *Do you want to hear him scream?* She’d not dared ask for her husband again.

They were three days sail from the Isle of Demons. She’d been allowed to see nothing of the isles they passed with careful soundings and with cargo unloaded and loaded. Her mother never made a sound she could hear. Owen didn’t appear. Even the crew was strangely silent.

Gold plates laden with richly spiced food were placed on the table. Goblets were offered. Fern’s contained watered wine. She saw that Merlin didn’t drink from his and he didn’t offer a greeting or a word of conversation. He was there—it seemed—against his will.

“The boy is a scholar,” said Xavier. “Latin, Greek, French, English, Spanish, Arabic and that heathen tongue of the Gaels.”

“What did you expect? He’s bright and I love to teach,” said Merlin. He ate the

exotic food after Xavier had tasted it. Did he expect to be poisoned? Suddenly, he sighed with pleasure and ate with enjoyment. "The lad has sense, a good head on his shoulders. He has only a boy's judgment because he has seen nothing outside the glen since you sent him to me."

So that was what Xavier had done with her brother—he'd given him to Merlin to raise.

Xavier hefted a package from under the table to give it to Merlin. "Books for you." He clapped his hands. "And you must choose one of my women to take with you."

"I'd rather have my freedom," Merlin drawled.

"You know you have it, for as long as you stay in your glen."

"Thank you, Xavier, you are too kind. Don't think you can forget me and leave me here to rot. If you don't bring me goods to trade, remember, I know where to get them and how. Even if it is over your dead body." The slow drawl gave a humorous edge to Merlin's threat.

The door opened to perfume and the rustling of silk. Fern gave a gasp when she recognized her mother, painted and perfumed, dressed in transparent garments that covered but hid nothing at all. She looked frightened and younger than her years. Jenny followed, her flowing blond hair covering her to her waist.

One of Xavier's servants led them inside. As the men watched, he guided first Jenny to a cushion across the table from Xavier. While pretending to help her sit and arrange her clothing, he lifted the draped cloth aside to give a better display of female parts in such a way that it made the glimpses seem accidental.

Fern caught sight of Xavier watching Merlin, who only heaped his plate with food. The women were of no interest to him.

Morag refused to be aided to sit. The servant retreated to sit behind her. It was then Fern noticed the leather thongs bound about her mother's elbows. The servant pulled the bonds tight and released the top veil to reveal Morag's breasts.

Jenny gave a gasp of surprise that Xavier quelled with a look.

"Which one do you want?" he said. "Neither one is very skilled, to tell the truth. Jarrad's had little time to instruct them. To be honest, they are whores of a hundred tricks, not a thousand. Choose one."

Merlin sipped his wine before he answered. "Neither, though I thank you for thinking of my pleasure. My manhood lost interest after writing that book of a thousand tricks with you. It leaves me with nothing to offer a whore of even one trick."

Xavier took the goblet away from him. His servants silently cleared the table. They removed the cloth. "Would you like me to demonstrate how wrong you are?"

Merlin answered swiftly, "No, master."

"Then choose one. Ask them questions, if you wish."

"Could they wear some clothes?"

"I'll have them stripped naked so you can examine them."

"No, master. Let your whores decide which one wants to come with me to live in a poor clan constantly at war with its neighbors. Where keeping warm and fed are more important than knowledge or honor."

"Don't be a fool, Merlin," chided Xavier. "You can finish her training and sell her as a whore of a thousand tricks."

"To whom? They are all ravening beasts, not worthy of your perfumed whore. Besides, I doubt she'd survive the cold."

Jenny broke into sobs. She flung herself on the floor in despair. Xavier jerked his head toward the door. His servant lifted her up to carry her out.

"It seems the choice is made." Xavier smiled at Merlin, who shrugged like Jarrad.

"If it pleases you, master, but I can't help thinking that any gift you give me has a price attached I cannot afford to pay."

At a sign from Xavier, the servant sitting behind Morag covered her with the veil and released her elbows. Her mother folded her arms across her breasts. She stared at the wall above Merlin's head with icy disdain on her face. Fern did not doubt that her mother was capable of murder. Not that she was any different. It was all very well to be saintly when safe, but Fern had not hesitated to strike to protect herself. She doubted very much if Merlin would survive the night, if he stood in Morag's way.

"Before you go," said Xavier, "I have a new slave to show you. Handsome enough and educated enough to gain me a high price in the markets of the East."

A young man groaned as he knocked against the cabin door. Morag sprang to her feet.

Two of Xavier's men carried in a youth, naked as the day he was born. His black hair fell in waves to his shoulders. When his back hit the table, he opened his eyes to see Morag leaning over him. He moaned and lapsed into unconsciousness.

Merlin smote his hand against his forehead. He shook his head as if to clear it. "For God's sake, Xavier, you can't sell my son!"

Xavier laughed. "But he isn't really your son, is he? You can have him, if you can get him ashore. But I doubt very much if you can carry him."

"What the hell was in that wine? Do you never play fair?" Merlin braced himself against the wall, gripping the silk to help him rise. It was clear he had no strength in his limbs.

"I'll help you," said Morag, her voice rasping. She tried to drag the boy to his feet.

Merlin helped her. They hooked the boy's arms about their shoulders and made for the deck.

Fern followed them, stopping to take the parcel of books with her. A servant held her clothes to stop her from getting close. They'd never get him up the ladder.

The cool air from the hatch above revived Merlin.

He stopped Morag's attempt to lift the boy onto her shoulders. "Madame, he weighs more than you do. If you'd be so good as to go ahead of me, I'll hoist him up." Merlin staggered under the weight of the naked youth. He strained up every step, his neck muscles corded, sweat dripped from his hair. When he reached the top, his legs began to shake.

Morag pulled the boy from him with a scream of determination. They landed with a thud on the deck.

Fern raced up the ladder with the books balanced on her hip.

Xavier was on deck, amused at his joke. He didn't interfere. He just watched Merlin trying to work with Morag. She'd dragged the youth towards the rail of the ship to collapse beside him, unable to lift him over the side.

"Madame, if you'd let me climb over the side. Hold him bent over the rail until I'm ready to catch him. The water is very cold. Let's try not to swim back in the dark. Can you see the fire on shore? Yes? No?" He gave a groan of exasperation. "Madame, if we don't know where the shore is, we will be taken out by the tide, *with Xavier*, please look for the fire."

Her mother pointed to a distant glimmer of light.

"Good, now hand him down to me."

A small boat was tied up to the rope ladder, a swaying perilous way for a man drugged and carrying close to his own weight. For a moment, she thought Merlin had no chance. With a sigh of relief she saw him lay his son down and stumble to hold onto the ladder.

Fern gave her mother the books. "He wants them. Why not take them for him?"

Morag bent over the rail to pass the parcel to Merlin. He knelt to stow it under his son's head.

Fern watched him stroke the young man's hair from his face and check his breathing. He looked up to call out, "Madame, it was a pleasure to meet you. I thank you most heartily for rescuing us. If there is anything I can do for you, just let me know." He waited in vain for an answer. "You are welcome to come with us, if you wish."

Fern looked around for her mother. A sack writhed on the deck where her mother had been. Two of Xavier's men lifted it up and threw it into the water.

"A last gift, Merlin! Godspeed!" shouted Xavier. "Here is your whore of a thousand tricks." He shouted into the darkness, "Let her drown, if you don't want her."

Merlin slid into the water to retrieve the sack. The air inside it billowed then deflated as Fern watched.

Her mother screamed once. The craft with the unconscious youth drifted along after Merlin. Merlin's knife flashed and her mother's frantic hands grasped his arms.

"Don't try to climb in from the side, madam, or we will all drown," warned

Merlin. He shouted into the darkness, "Robert! Do not approach! Wait till the cog is out into the firth, and then come to pick us up."

Fern could hear him muttering, "Of all the foolhardy idiots ... they were trying to take the ship, madam ... may as well put one's head in a noose ... that is youth for you ... no sense at all. If you'd allow me to get in first, then I'll get you in?" He climbed in, careful to spread his weight on both sides of the small craft.

Morag ignored his outstretched hand. "I can swim. Pass me the rope. I'll pull you to the shore."

"There is no need to exert yourself. Let me get you in before the current sucks you under," urged Merlin. "There is no reason for anyone to die." He took her hand to haul her on board.

The ship nudged the small craft as it was driven forward by the river's current and the wind.

Xavier came to stand next to Fern. "It's time to go below before you catch a chill."

"You tried to kill her!"

"I gave her something to be grateful for, to stop her from killing him," said Xavier. "What would you have done with her?"

"There is no reason for her to kill him." Now Morag had her son, would she start a war for the Isle of Demons to give him his birthright? Even her mother couldn't hope to win against the king. "I'm sure she doesn't go around murdering on a whim." The words came out with more confidence than truthfulness.

"It's a habit with your mother. Can she resist the urge to kill? I take my promises seriously, Fern. I was to give her a chance for happiness. Merlin is a good man, honest, educated, trustworthy. Your mother speaks the language of the highlands. She is not a slave, and she can try to make a life for herself with people who look like her and who think like her. She is young enough to bear children and find happiness in raising them. Merlin is a lonely exile who needs a friend and a wife. She has much to gain under the protection of a man who has not an ounce of cruelty in his nature. My debt is paid, my promise fulfilled. Don't expect any more kindness from me. Join your husband below. He is being stubborn. Get him to bow his head or you can rot together."

"You said Jarrad was busy teaching your slaves the thousand tricks."

"I lied. The only one he must teach is you. Persuade him to do it, or not, as you see fit." He laughed and bowed his head. "As it pleases you."

Chapter Twenty-two

The trapdoor closed above her head, leaving Fern in darkness. Not a glimmer of light illuminated the hold. She crouched afraid to move. The place smelled of spices mingled with perfume.

"Fern?" Jarrad's voice shivered. "Are you there? I thought I saw you descend in a flash of light, just like an angel."

She could hear him shaking. "I bring you glad tidings, Jarrad. You have to agree to teach me the thousand tricks or we both stay here. Is Owen with you?" She felt around the cargo in search of him.

"No. He escaped over the side. He is either drowned or safe. What happened to Morag?"

Fern crept towards his voice. "She went with Merlin. How long have you been down here?"

"Long enough to regret it." He gave a low laugh.

She found his shoulder and explored carefully in the darkness to find him bound to the beam above them by a ring around his neck. He shivered against her. She whispered in his ear, "Can he hear us?"

"He can't hear you, my angel," he whispered, "but yes, if I speak in a normal voice, he can hear me."

"You have to agree to teach me the thousand tricks, and then he'll let you out." She stroked his chest, "I think Xavier regrets doing this to you."

"Only because I might die from it."

"Do you agree?"

"A thousand tricks? That might take a lifetime."

"Good! I have a bad memory. We might have to do the ones I like again and again, until I get them firmly in my mind."

She could feel his smile against her cheek.

"Knock on the wall. I am eager to please you, if I can survive long enough." He lowered his voice to a breath. "Save yourself. He is angry and means to make me suffer, not to let me make love to my wife."

"Why is he angry with you?"

The trapdoor opened.

"Come out, Fern," called Xavier.

"I'm stuck," she called in her loudest voice. "I tried to warm my husband's neck and caught my fingers under the metal ring. They are swelling up. Jarrad has fainted, I think. What should I do? Oh help! I think he's not breathing!"

Jarrad slumped against her. She wiggled her fingers under the ring around his neck and hoped her words were not going to come true. There was precious little space to put them.

Two men with a lantern entered the hold. They freed Jarrad and carried him out. She hurried after them, afraid they'd leave her alone in the darkness.

On deck, she resisted being stripped naked to no avail. Buckets of sea water were poured over her and over Jarrad. Naked, whipped by the wind, and deathly cold, she clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering.

Xavier knocked Jarrad to his knees. "You have one week to teach her the first hundred, then you demonstrate her skills to me. Do you agree?"

Fern knelt to hide her nakedness. She put her arms around Jarrad, "Agree, my lord husband."

Xavier gave a crow of laughter. "He is not your husband, slave. Your mother gave you in marriage to James MacBoone long before you met Jarrad. You are Jarrad's whore and shall learn to act like one."

A roar came from Jarrad, "Guard your tongue, Xavier! Do not insult my wife!"

Fern felt his muscles bunch under her fingers. She hastened to explain. "My mother could not give me away in marriage. She babbled on, 'the baron was my foster father and my care was entrusted to him and him alone. Jarrad is my husband.'" She rested her cheek on his chest.

"Fern is my wife." Jarrad's cold lips kissed her forehead.

"You are forgetting that slaves cannot marry without permission."

Fern looked up at Xavier. "I am not your slave."

"And what do you say, Jarrad? You have sold yourself to me twice. Once for the price of Owen's freedom. And again to win Morag a man capable of pleasing her. Do you want to give renege on either of our deals?"

"No, Xavier." Jarrad stared up at his brother. "When you ordered me to give my oath of allegiance to Henry of Anjou, I gave it. Now I serve him and he wants the Isle as a staging ground to attack Ireland. I am his to command on land, and yours to command by sea." With a drawl in his voice, he added, "If it pleases me to obey you."

Xavier laughed in a way that made her blood run cold. "Flog him," he ordered.

Fern watched her husband being tied to the mast.

She had no pride, she could only beg. "Please don't flog him, master." Her voice quaked so much she sounded like a bleating ewe.

"Stand up and let me look at you."

She went to hide her nakedness against Jarrad's back. "You've seen me naked before, so I really don't think the sight of me will move you to mercy. I refuse to let you flog my husband."

"Fern, he will flog you," warned Jarrad. "You must get out of the way." They shivered together in the wind.

"Strike," ordered Xavier.

"Don't you dare!" shouted Jarrad. "Anyone who touches my wife will become my mortal enemy. Xavier, you know I cannot escape my fate, no matter how angry it

makes you. You cannot shield me from Henry's wrath. He rules most of our world. If his anger doesn't worry me, why should it bother you? Let Henry decide who owns the Isle and who shall rule it. You can't really think I want it. This is all part of a game that must be played out to the end."

"You are a stupid fool to risk your life," said Xavier. "Will you do as I command, while on board my ship?"

Jarrad shuddered his answer, "The first hundred, master."

"You have five days, and then you show me what she has learned. For every mistake she makes, your face is cut open. Teach her well, brother, or you'll be as ugly as you think you are."

Chapter Twenty-three

Fern snuggled closer to Jarrad. Even with extra blankets and warm potions, his body felt cold. The narrow bed had only room for both of them, if one turned sideways. The sound of water sliding along the hull, and the creaks and groans of timber masked their whispers.

She lay on top of him to warm him. "What are we going to do when Xavier wants to watch us make love?"

"My love, I cannot want you to act the whore, not even with me."

"But when we refuse, what will he do?"

"He has planned this. It's only a matter of time before the punishments get worse. His threat to cut my face is only to make you pity me."

"He won't do it?"

"He might, but he'd do it carefully. We have five days of peace. I think Xavier is going to visit Somerled."

"Is Xavier going to sell me to him?"

"No. That would ruin all his plans." He stroked her back with a cold hand.

She gave a squeak and pulled the covers tighter around them. "Why would it?"

"Because if my brother puts you in danger, I'll have to stop him."

"How?" She hoped she wasn't going to suggest murder.

He turned on his side to hold her. "The only way to stop Xavier is to persuade him it's not profitable. Or I could kill him."

"Killing your brother is not right. I know he doesn't want to hurt you. Don't you find him a strange mixture of kindness and cruelty? He locked you up then sent me in to bring you out. He wanted to flog you then stopped when you threatened him. Baron Welford never stopped, not for anyone or anything. He even flogged a corpse."

His lips warmed her ear. "If you want to fear a man, choose Henry. Xavier torments with threats, Henry punishes. There is a difference, I admit it."

"Will it torment you to teach me the first hundred tricks?"

"Five days to learn one hundred tricks. Do you think he wants to keep us busy while we sail to our fate?" He lifted his head to kiss her. "It's been so long, I might have forgotten them."

"We could make them up."

"Xavier will test our knowledge. He wrote a book with Merlin when they were youths. It was a task my father set for them. Neither one took much pleasure from it. Father liked to mock their efforts and I was glad I was too young to be of use. After the

first hundred, the tricks become more amusing. In those days Xavier had a sense of humor.”

Fern stroked his scarred cheek. “What will he really do, if we refuse to do his bidding?”

“He might mark my face, because he thinks that is what I fear the most.”

“What is number one? Twenty a day! Quickly, I must learn them all!”

“Don’t you see? he doesn’t believe I’ll obey him. Strangely, he thinks you need to pity me. You must have shown him your soft heart, and now he works on it. I don’t want your pity, Fern. Make love with me because you want me, not to spare me from Xavier’s wrath.”

“I do want you.”

“I know. I felt the attraction between us when we first met. When you grasped my shoulders and looked at me, I thought for one brief moment that I was not scarred.” He laughed at her mock guilty expression.

“I truly meant no insult.”

“I know. Let’s make love because we are in love. We don’t want five days of frantic scrambling, with tears and forgetfulness, until at the end of five days you don’t remember your own name. Let’s do this to please each other, not to please him. After all, we have no intention of displaying our skill.”

“I don’t have any skill.”

“You have every skill I need.”

“Teach me.”

“It is easy to remember what number they are. Let me show you how.” His kisses warmed them both. “The first is very simple. As I enter you I use my prized possession and place it in your perfect place. Many men never progress past one, yet live happy lives with joyful wives. Raise one of your knees—that is two—and I rise up and place your ankle on my shoulder—that is three.” He gave a low laugh. “Forgive me for not demonstrating it. I am afraid this place is too cramped for me.”

Fern guessed, “Then the other leg is four and five?”

“Alas! No. Left or right leg, it makes no difference. With one leg or both, it makes no difference.

“It is going to get very complicated, isn’t it? Long before we reach a hundred.”

“What does it matter, if neither of us intends to show our skills to Xavier?”

“I might have to show him, if he marks your face. I owe you perfect obedience, remember that. If you ask me, I must obey you or I’m doomed to eternal damnation.”

“The truth is, I don’t believe women can obey, so I don’t expect it of you. You can’t break a vow I don’t expect you to keep, not even if my life depends on you obeying me. In fact, you must not keep your vow, if I don’t expect you to keep it.”

“You’re making my head spin. Then why did you ask me to vow perfect obedience?”

"The vow was Father Rab's idea. He didn't ask me if I wanted it. He has never been Xavier's slave, doomed to obey his every command. Think, instead, how it cannot be my will to have you suffer or play the whore for Xavier. Fern, you are going to think of your vow often in these next few days or weeks." He gave a mournful sigh.

"Remember, I am from a merchant family and I am willing to pay, if there is no other way to get what I want."

"What do you want?" She didn't like him to speak in riddles.

"I want to please you." He laughed at her answering growl.

"Do you want freedom?"

"No man is carefree. Not Xavier, not Henry. Not me."

Fern sighed. He wasn't going to answer her. "Can we jump overboard and swim back to Merlin's home?"

"Did you like him?" asked Jarrad.

"Yes. Please don't tell me anything bad about him. What if my mother kills him?"

* * * *

Morag cried out, "Don't touch me! I am your mother." She stumbled over a heap of seaweed left by the high tide. The setting sun cast long shadows on the beach.

The youth dragged her among the sand dunes to hide from anyone out on the water. "Hush! My mother is dead." His groping hands tore the fragile tissue of her clothing. "Teach me all your tricks. My father has no use for a whore, he prefers books to women."

"I am your mother. You were—"

Merlin's voice came from the top of a dune. "Let her go, Angus. The lady is trying to tell you I married her on board ship, while you slept drugged out of your senses."

"You married her!" cried Angus. "One of that man's whores? What possessed you to do that?"

"Because she is not a whore." Merlin said patiently. "She is Graeme's mother come in search of him."

The young man shrugged an apology. He helped Morag to her feet. "My apologies, my lady mother. What a pity you missed meeting Graeme. He's off in yon boat with Xavier du Terrenord. I was trying to say goodbye to him when I was captured."

Merlin wrapped a cloak around Morag. "Come, my dear, I am going to take you to England to introduce you to your son. Angus, mind the clan. No wars and no wenches. Heed your uncle. I should be back inside a month or maybe two."

Angus gave a crowd of laughter. "Are you going to kill Xavier?"

"For teaching you not to be foolish? You were lucky to escape with your life." He held out his hand to Morag. "We have to find you some clothes to wear. You'll like your son. He is a fine young man, with more intelligence than his friend here."

Chapter Twenty-four

“Hush,” whispered Jarrad. “You are not supposed to find this amusing.”

Fern felt him stroke her back. She held her breath. His lips kissed her inner thighs. The warmth of his mouth in her most wicked place made her collapse in a heap in front of him. “I can’t balance when I can’t think. Are you sure this is only twelve?”

“It’s an amazing sight for a man. Try again. Let me help you balance.”

She raised her legs in the air, lifted her torso and balanced on her shoulders. Slowly, her legs opened.

He knelt in front of her to slide long fingers into her wetness. “Hush. I have to do this.”

Kisses tasted her, his tongue swirled to send her from laughter into passion. She gripped his fingers with the only part of her knowing what to do, not daring to move for fear he’d stop. She fell over at last when her body soared so high she knew not which way was up.

He lifted her to lie on top of him and entered her carefully—his body guarding her from the power of his need. She met his silent thrusts with her mouth hidden against his chest to mute her cries of passion.

The door opened without warning, and Fern flinched. Jarrad pulled the bed clothes over her.

Xavier looked down at them. He sniffed the air. “What number do you study now, Fern?”

Jarrad stood up, naked and glorious. “My wife is busy remembering. What do you want, master?”

“Jenny is going to be given away soon. I need you to teach her the hundred.” Xavier shrugged in a careless way. “I can do it myself, if you are too busy with Fern?” He smiled in a way that made Fern’s blood run cold. “It’s your choice. Do you mind, Fern? I have no patience with virgins. I can warrant no one will enjoy it.”

Fern saw Jarrad’s stillness. “My lord husband may do what he wishes to do, or, what he feels he must do, master.”

“Xavier gestured towards the door. “Go to her now, Jarrad, before you catch cold.”

“I’d rather dress, master, my nakedness is too much of a threat to a virgin.”

“You don’t have time. She is being prepared for me now.”

Jarrad pushed Xavier out of the way to leave the cabin. Fern wrapped herself from head to toe.

Xavier stood by the door, watching her. "I lied. Again," he confessed. "It seems I don't have to power to comfort like Jarrad does. I simply offered my shoulder for Jenny to weep on. She took my sympathy for a threat and, no doubt, now pours out a tale of woe in his ears. Do you think he'll kill me for it?" He tapped his fingers on the door frame. "Has Jarrad told you anything?"

Fern shook her head.

"He married you without the king's permission. He took the Isle, without Henry knowing anything about it. The king is furious." Xavier offered his hand to help her rise. "Get dressed. We are almost there."

* * * *

Fern looked toward the coast. A white mist obscured her view, but she could smell the bay with its miles of mud and sand bars. She hoped it was England and not Scotland. It smelled like home when the tide was out, and anyone collecting cockles and mussels had to resist being lured out too far. The unwary lost their lives in a race with the returning sea.

Ali escorted a weeping Jenny on deck. Jarrad followed her. He wore a piece of bed linen wrapped around his waist.

"Xavier!" he called. "Do you know who she is? Jenny belongs to the king. She was shipwrecked on the Isle of Demons. Her father is one of his barons. Henry will have your hide if this is known."

Xavier stroked Jenny's cheek. "Did you or did you not agree, of your own free will, to come with me?"

The frightened girl sobbed, "I did, but I changed my mind." Jenny shook her head. "I don't want to be a whore." She clung to Jarrad's arm.

Fern was sure it was all a clever lie.

"Xavier smiled down at Jenny. "Somerled is waiting for my gift."

Jarrad persuaded Jenny to let him go. "You never meant to give her to Somerled. Admit that you wanted her for yourself. You always had a weakness for blondes and Jenny is beautiful. If you never try to please a woman, how can you be surprised when they shrink from you?"

Xavier gave a shudder of anger, though he spoke to Jenny in a mild voice. "My brother can persuade women to love him, if he tries. How fortunate for him." He shook his head in mock sorrow. "Obviously, Jarrad, you did not do my bidding." He pointed to a block of wood on the deck. "Place your hand there. Now!"

Fern ran to Xavier. "You can't maim your brother."

"I can, to save his life. Would you rather have him die?"

"Maiming him won't save his life!"

She saw Jarrad stare out over the water toward the coast—he was still and silent.

"The penalty for disobeying me is—what?" Xavier grasped her wrist. "What should it be, Fern? Name it! Name something that will save his life."

“Brother should not fight brother,” Fern babbled. She had no idea how to save Jarrad from King Henry. She gabbled on with a speech made many times to her foster sisters. “Don’t you realize you are stronger together? If you let others divide you, then they will find it easy to best you. Brother should not fight brother ...” Her voice trailed off at the expression of wrath on Xavier’s face.

He lifted a hand to strike her.

Jarrad grabbed his arm. “Do you really think I repeated your words to my wife, Xavier? The first time I heard her speak those words, I laughed and thought of you.”

It was true. Jarrad had laughed at her when they were on their way to the Isle. She’d told them not to fight, told Duncan not to strike his son. She’d rattled on and on about family and friendship, like a fool.

Xavier put his arm around Jenny’s shoulders. “If you’d told me you had family, I’d have gladly aided you to find them.”

Jenny looked doubtful, but she did no more than curtsy her gratitude and shrink from his arm.

Fern whispered to Jarrad, “Is it too far to swim?”

“And leave Jenny to Xavier’s mercy?”

“He thinks brothers should not fight.” She leaned against him to keep him warm. “I don’t know you, do I?”

“You know all there is worth knowing.”

“No,” she answered, “I know nothing about you.”

Xavier’s voice sounded behind them. “Take your wife below and tell her about yourself, slave, or I will. When you are ready to lose your hand to save your life, it shall be done.”

She felt Jarrad shake his head. “If you look behind you, brother, you will see this game is over and another is about to begin. Unless you want to explain to the king why you think you own me and can maim me?”

Warships lined the channel from the bay. They loomed out of the mist bearing the king’s standard.

Xavier shrugged and laughed bitterly. “Then return Owen, and we are even.”

“No. I freed Owen and will defend his right to be free with my life. When you meet Henry, bend your knee and your head. He has his royal dignity, so you must lessen yours.” Jarrad called to Jenny, “Get your things, you are coming with us.” He grasped Xavier by the shoulder. “Remember, you are only a merchant now. I shall tell Henry you kindly helped me deliver Morag’s son to him. Bring Graeme up.”

Chapter Twenty-five

Boone squinted with his one good eye as he watched Morag smile at a man. He adjusted the bandage hiding what was left of his blind eye. That was a sight he never expected to see. The fool guided the two in, babbling away in such joyful tones it made Boone want to strangle him.

"We made it! Give thanks! Always give thanks when you have survived a sea journey. The king is waiting for us. Why he wants Ireland, I can only guess." The fool capered around. "Jarrad is here, I can feel it in my bones. Hurrah, hurrah."

"Hush, Owen. We made good time." The man held out his arm to Morag. "My lady, I hope you are not too fatigued by the journey."

"I'd travel to the ends of the earth to meet my son."

"Then I can only hope you are truly interested in understanding him."

"What do you mean?"

The fool took Morag by the arm to pull her along. "I can smell dinner. Let's not be late. I care not if it is fish and bread, just let it be in my belly."

"Wait, fool. What do you mean, Merlin?" asked the lady.

"He means, my lady," said Owen, "that he hopes you want to find out who your son is and what he wants from life. For all you know, he wants to be like the librarian laird and is not like you. That is to say he is a reader and not a warrior. Not that you have killed anyone recently, as I can attest, if I have to bear witness, though I'd rather have to bear dinner." He leapt high to sniff the air. "Don't expect much in the way of dainties. Henry cares not what he eats. Let's dine before I die from hunger."

Boone watched them go. They'd all die soon enough, and not from hunger.

* * * *

"My liege," said Jarrad, "the Isle of Demons accepts your rule. The English prefer a male to rule them, but not one they have never seen, or one who might be loyal to Scotland. The Celts are not loyal to Scotland, but they acknowledge a firstborn's right to rule even if female, if only because it gives them a chance to marry her and rule. When I found out what they planned, I thought it best to marry Lady Fern and take the Isle for you. The Celts who plotted have fled to Ireland. The rest have English wives or no taste for war."

King Henry smote Jarrad on the shoulder. "Lady Fern was promised to another. You married her without my permission."

"My liege, it was never my intent to usurp the lordship of the Isle."

"Alas, that will not satisfy him or me. You show your merchant blood, Jarrad, when you prefer to negotiate instead of fight. Simon intends to make you smart for it. I just hope he doesn't cripple you."

"May I introduce Merlin to you, my liege? The laird is eager to thank you for your interest in his treatise on justice."

"He is here? How did you persuade him? I have often urged him to visit me."

"He is recently married to Morag, who is Lady Fern's mother."

"That woman is not allowed to show her face. A woman who murders her husbands should be burned to death. That is the law. Is she with him?"

"No, my liege, she is not. Merlin has made a study of the alphabet with a view to making it more legible."

"A fine hand he writes, it can be read by candlelight. Bring him to me after dinner." Henry dismissed Jarrad with a nod and a warning. "Watch out for Ralph. I want your head on your shoulders."

The castle was full with the king's court and petitioners begging for the king's justice. Jarrad made his way out of the crowd, into the courtyard where he had left Xavier guarded by Owen. A strange idea for both of them.

"Whoremaster!" shouted Ralph of Hereford, the king's champion. "You die by my hand, Xavier du Terrenord." He lashed out at Owen, who danced out of the way. "You should have died, Owen. You are an insult to the family and my honor. You should have died fighting, not let them castrate you."

"Bastard," shrieked Owen. "You sold me to him for a sword of Damascus steel."

"Worthless scum!" shouted Ralph. "You were supposed to escape, not go with him. I'll kill you, after I kill the du Terrenords."

"You didn't want to share your inheritance. I wanted only the pittance our father left me. You wanted rid of me. How was I supposed to escape when you'd drugged me senseless?" Owen tried to hide behind Xavier.

"You weren't supposed to drink the whole flask, you stupid fool." Ralph flicked a knife at Owen's face. "Why don't I make you as pretty as he is?"

Jarrad caught Ralph's hand. "Your quarrel is with me. My brother is a merchant, not trained in the art of combat. You cannot fight my fool. The only one you can fight with honor is me. I accept your challenge and will meet you tomorrow, at dawn."

"You die tomorrow," sneered Ralph. "I'll carve your flesh until it hangs in shreds."

"And I will give you a chance to do it. Tomorrow."

Jarrad led Xavier away, back to his ship.

Xavier sighed and took his arm. "How good a fighter is Ralph?"

"As good as Owen, but he is more murderous in his intentions."

"What will be the outcome?"

"I cannot win. He meant to challenge me before I went to marry Fern. I persuaded Henry to let me use my knowledge of the Isle on his behalf, before I had to fight Ralph. Henry saw at once that dead men are not useful and agreed to let me go."

"Come away with me."

"No. There is no honor in running away."

"I have gifts for the king and his queen."

“Give them, but don’t expect an audience. Henry has a love of scholars and will talk to Merlin for hours yet.” He gripped Xavier by the shoulder. “Don’t linger here. Don’t even think of vengeance. Ralph is the king’s champion.”

“This is not a court battle. Come away with me, as my brother. We can trade the world over and not set foot anywhere Henry rules. Why does the king allow you to be killed uselessly?”

“It’s just a fight. It shouldn’t end with my death, but Ralph is so fast that I’ll be dead before anyone can stop him.”

“Come on board with me,” urged Xavier.

“Never. You have your fate and I have mine.”

“You are mad!”

“And you are a merchant. I live in a different world from you, one where I give perfect obedience to my liege lord. The Isle is quiet and belongs to Henry. Morag is safe. Fern will have Hollingham, unless Henry insists she marries Simon. He’s a good man. Owen will stay with Fern, to protect my unborn child and help raise him or her. There is nothing for you to do here, Xavier. Promise me, you won’t try to scourge England, I am not worth it.”

* * * *

“Mother?” A youth stood by the door to the cabin on Merlin’s ship. His cropped red-hair reminded her of his father, but his face was kind and peaceful. “I am Graeme.”

Morag let her tears fall. “Do you hate me? I loved you from the moment of your birth and never stopping loving you and praying for you.”

He kissed her cheek. “Don’t weep. Everyone tells me you are a fearless warrior. You are going to make me think them liars.”

“I didn’t know you were alive.”

“I am very much alive, Mother.” He helped her to sit on the low bed.

“The Isle of Demons belongs to you, Fern doesn’t want it. I want to give you your birthright.”

He knelt on the floor in front of her. “I am going to be a Benedictine monk, if the king permits it. Xavier has agreed to take me to France.”

“Don’t go with him. He told me you were dead. He is evil.” She wiped her tears away with a steady hand.

“I’m alive, so Xavier cannot be as hard a man as you think,” said Graeme. “I’ve heard he loves his brother and only banished Merlin to save him from a life he hated.”

Morag saw no gain to be had in arguing with her son. “Why do you want to take holy orders?”

He smiled like a saint. “I want to save your soul.”

She had no patience with saints. “Your father killed many times the number of men that I killed. I only protected myself.”

“I will pray for you both.”

"Is this Xavier's doing?"

"Mother, I have always wanted to be a priest. To read and write, to think and pray, those are my pleasures."

"Marry first, have children. Decide later."

He rose to kiss her hand. "Goodbye, Mother. You can write to me and visit me if you wish. If not, I will see you in heaven."

* * * *

"By God's Blood!" shouted Simon de Gravis as if he really meant it. "I'd hack your limbs off if Ralph hadn't got there before me. That Isle should be mine. Now that Henry wavers about it, I shall have to kill you and marry your widow. You are a damned strange friend." He laughed and offered Jarrad a tankard of ale.

Jarrad raised it to take a long drink. "They'd have cut your throat for the exercise and wondered who you were afterwards. Do I have to point out that you can't speak either of their languages? You should thank me for taking it for you."

"For me? You don't want it? Come now, Jarrad, confess you want to be Lord of the Isle."

"Henry decides who rules there. If you marry my widow, you must treat her well and raise my child as if it were your own."

"Shall I take her from you now?"

"After I am dead is soon enough."

"Introduce me, lest the lady decides to murder me when I try to take your place."

"Simon, try not to lure her away before I am dead or I shall meet you and hack your worthless parts from your cooling body."

"Your brother has offered me a whore of a thousand tricks to forgive your insult to my honor." Simon reddened at the thought.

"He doesn't have one with him," said Jarrad.

"Xavier swears he will bring me one from the East, laden with gifts, perfumed and eager to please." He laughed uneasily. "Do you think she'd like me? I'd feel like a clumsy oaf beside her."

Jarrad laughed. "Why not get married? Xavier never gives whores to married men."

Simon choked on his ale. "Nay, I'm not that desperate." He shrugged and changed the subject. "If Henry were really angry with you, you'd be in chains now."

"He is looking forward to seeing me fight Ralph of Hereford tomorrow. Make sure Ralph doesn't go after Xavier when I am dead. I fight for him."

"God's Blood! Very clever of you to save your brother! Two for the price of one. You have no chance against him. Ralph looks as if a wind could blow him over but he is fast as the devil. He hasn't lost a fight yet."

Jarrad shrugged. "Watch over Fern. She deserves better than me. Stop Xavier from taking her away, if he tries."

Chapter Twenty-six

Owen waited at the harbor. He leapt out from behind a bale to prevent Xavier du Terrenord from boarding his ship.

"You've got to stop him, master." Owen quaked at being so close to his enemy. "Kidnap Jarrad to save him."

Xavier pulled him on board by the ear. "Jarrad cannot be controlled. He is as hard to rule as you are, fool. And don't offer to sell yourself to me. There is nothing I can do against the king. Besides, I'd rather not have you back, not even if you were made of solid gold."

"I have a plan, master. My brother is a glutton, and when he starts to eat, he cannot stop." Owen rubbed his sore ear. He'd a mind to break Xavier's other arm, except he needed him. "I want food, dainties from your stores, and lots of them."

"Take what you want. It might be your last meal," warned Xavier.

"And if I save Jarrad's life?" Owen rose on his toes to stare down his nose at Xavier.

"I swear to fill your belly for eternity," promised Xavier.

"With choice food, not molten lead." Owen waited for his answer.

"With choice food. What a high opinion you have of me."

"And drink?" asked Owen.

"And drink," agreed Xavier.

"Not poison." Owen laughed and twirled about to show his disdain.

"I have never poisoned anyone. Get out before I change my mind!"

Owen skipped away with a mocking bow. He whistled and shouted to Graeme to bring the cart closer.

* * * *

Fern held Jarrad in her arms. "Is that why Xavier wanted to maim you? To stop you from fighting?"

"Ralph intended to kill me and then Xavier, but this way he cannot, with any honor, kill us both."

"Do you have no chance against him?"

"There is always a chance."

"Where is Owen? He can help you prepare to do battle. He must know how."

"Owen was a child when he was sold to Xavier."

"Can't we flee?" She sighed and wiped her eyes. "I know. Men never run from battle. The entire court will be there tomorrow to watch you fight."

“You don’t have to be there.”

“Yes, I do. In case I can do something to help you afterwards. I must be there.”

“Let’s not talk of it. I want this night to be endless. I warn you, if you fall asleep I shall make love to you even sleeping.”

* * * *

Owen scratched on the door when the jars, pots and flasks were all in place around him. “Brother. Dearest Ralph. I’ve brought dainties to celebrate your victory.”

He squeezed a honeyed fig under the door. “Smell that, my fine brother. You haven’t tasted the like in England.”

The door opened. A foot kicked the fig away.

Owen scratched himself and plucked another from the pot. He ate it with relish, and reached for a handful of dates. “They are sweet and delicious. Stolen from Xavier du Terrenord’s private hoard. Try one.” He held up a jar of fragrant jelly. “Dip a date in this and tell me you taste the fruits of paradise.”

“Is it poisoned?” asked Ralph.

“Would I eat it, if it were?” Owen ate with reverence.

“Yes, you might because you are a fool.”

“Even fools like to eat.” Owen opened a dish of chicken fragrant with spices.

“Do I dine alone, or do you invite me in? I have stewed rabbits, all manner of fritters, cheese and quince dumplings, tubs of honeyed fruit, and a lake of rich custard to drown a host of fruit tarts. I have birds of all kinds, seasoned and stuffed. Food fit for the king, if he had any interest in eating like one. There is enough for both of us.”

Owen gave a sly smile as he helped Ralph carry the many assorted containers into his chamber. They would not all fit on the table, so Owen lifted the lids from the warm ones first.

“Take this, brother.” He held out a golden spoon. “The Gods on Olympus dined on such dainty fare. I stole the spoon, you can have it. I have another one for me.” He took it from his tunic and shoveled up a great spoonful of meat ground with spices.

Ralph took the offered spoon and the dish for himself. He elbowed Owen away from the table and began to eat with smacking gulps and loud sighs of pleasure.

Owen rushed to open another pot, to take one spoonful and let his brother take the rest from him. Ralph was welcome to sate himself many times over. The more he ate, the slower he’d be in the morning.

* * * *

Jarrad held Fern close to his heart. “We have to stop, it’s almost dawn.”

“No, the sky is still dark, the cock hasn’t crowed.” She sighed and nibbled his shoulder. “I begin to think of plotting with Xavier to kidnap you to keep you safe. There must be a way you can win?”

“Sometimes all that remains is hope. I’m sorry, my love. I wanted to help you escape another raid. To give you a refuge where you’d be safe.” He wiped her cheeks.

"I wanted to help Morag leave the Isle and to let her meet her son. I wanted to leave her with a man to protect her, who would never abuse her. Her son Graeme is more like Merlin than his own son. They will write to one another, and Morag will know her son through Merlin. Don't weep. I wanted to put the world to rights before I died. Will you look after Owen for me?"

"Where is he?"

"I hope he is making peace with his brother."

"Won't he try to kill him? Not that brothers should try to kill one another." Not unless it kept her husband safe.

"Owen knows his brother is the king's champion. He can't kill him. Don't you always say that family should not fight?"

"Yes, but I can't stop hoping Ralph falls down the stairs and breaks something. Even if it is with Owen's help."

"I have often wondered that when I bought Owen from Xavier for my freedom and my birthright, if it were not some elaborate plot to give me a friend. Owen was the only reason I lived in those dark days."

"You don't think these are dark days?"

"No day I share with you is dark."

"I think you are as mad as Owen."

"I must be. It's time for me to go. I'll send Graeme to escort you when it's time."

She helped him wash and dress. "Aren't you going to wear mail?"

"No, I need speed. Ralph will be weighted down with his. It might give me an advantage, if I can last long enough to exhaust him."

Fern hugged him and prayed with all her heart it was not for the last time. "I love you, Jarrad."

"I will always be with you." He kissed her lips and rubbed a warm hand where his child lay sleeping. "I love you, my angel."

He kissed her cheek. "Don't say goodbye."

Fern watched him go with a heavy heart. She dressed with care, knowing eyes would be upon her and not wanting to disgrace him in any way. Tears came and went. She fought for control of herself. She knew Xavier's surgeon surpassed her in skill and that he'd be there in case there was any hope, but she had seen enough sword wounds to know a swift death was better than a slow and painful end.

At a knock on the door, she opened it to admit her brother, only to find herself face to face with James MacBoone. His fist at her throat brought her backwards into the chamber. The door slammed shut behind him.

Chapter Twenty-seven

“Fool! What do you think you are doing?” Jarrad held his sword in both hands to fend off his attacker. “You’ll never get away with it. Everyone here can tell you are not your brother. Smite harder, before our audience falls asleep watching us.”

Ralph smote harder. He burped a ripe stench from a stomach still laden with a feast that had not ended till dawn. He peered at his opponent through the slit in his helmet. “I am no fool!”

“That’s true enough, you only act the fool. Leap about. Your brother is the King’s champion, not the King’s sluggard.” Jarrad pressed his attack and was astonished to see his opponent fall onto his back and stay there.

“Get up!” Jarrad gestured for him to rise.

Ralph’s sword whipped between them. Jarrad leapt back to save his hand from being parted from his arm.

“That’s better. Get up before you fall asleep down there.” Jarrad gave him room to rise.

With a belch worthy of giant, Ralph staggered to his feet to attack. Blades sparked each time they met, but neither man could best the other. Their arms began to tire. Jarrad twisted his blade to send Ralph’s swords into the dirt.

“Pick it up, Owen! Have you no sense at all? Half the knights here could win this contest with one hand missing. The King is going to be furious. Make it look real, I’ve no wish to see you flogged for trying to save me.”

“I am not trying to save you, I am trying to kill you!” shouted Ralph. He picked up his sword and wiped the mud from it.

“Very convincing, Owen. You have his voice but you are fighting as if you have done nothing but eat the night away. Not that your skill could ever pass for his.” Jarrad closed in. “Fight or make Henry laugh. God knows you can do better than this.”

“Maggot ridden bastard! I am not a fool! God strike you down, if I cannot!” howled Ralph.

* * * *

Graeme guided Morag to Fern’s door with reluctance. He knocked and said, “I am sure she has already gone, Mother.”

Morag shook her head. “Fern sent a message to Merlin’s boat asking me to meet her here. Maybe she is ill.” She kept her veil over her head, not that anyone knew her in England. Something bad was going to happen, she could feel it.

“She may be heartsick,” said Graeme. “They say Jarrad has no chance and the

king only allows it because he needs Ralph more than Jarrad, now that he has the Isle.”

“What?” cried Morag. “Is it a fight to the death? I knew something was amiss.”

The door opened. Fern stood with head bowed and a knife at her neck. James MacBoone beckoned them in. Morag stepped in front of her son to give him a chance to run away. Instead, he followed her inside.

“What a surprise to see me here!” Boone bared his teeth in a mocking grimace.

“We’ve been waiting for you. Now, what game shall we play?”

Morag swayed on her feet. She felt sick, as she always did before she murdered.

“I will trade you the Isle for my children.”

Boone laughed at her. “You don’t own it, Morag. Tell this bitch, she is married to me. Tell her you gave her to me.”

“I gave you to him, Fern. I regret it, but I did.” Morag scorned any man who thought a promise held good when it was made under duress. She gave a sigh and pretended to faint. She let her head hit a small stool first, before she landed on the floor with a thud.

Fern saw her mother faint. She tried to go to her and cried out when the knife pricked her neck. Boone seemed to like the sound so much that she moaned and cried out without putting him to the trouble of cutting her again. He’d done it carefully. She knew he did not mean to kill her so painlessly.

“Oh, Boone, what are we to do? I’ll be a widow, alone in the world. I’d marry you willingly now I know I was promised to you.” Fern leaned against him. To her surprise, he had difficulty keeping his balance. The arm holding the knife stretched out to aid him stand upright. As if it were all the invitation her mother needed, Morag sat up and hurled a knife at Boone.

Fern ducked. Did her mother not notice she was there? Boone jerked out of the way. The knife missed them. It bounced off the wall to clatter at their feet.

Graeme grabbed Boone’s wrist and held on to keep his knife away from her.

Still trapped in Boone’s embrace, Fern scraped the bandage from his eye. With quick fingers she pulled the twig out, sure he’d drop down dead like Harold the woodsman had done.

Boone stared at her through his one good eye. His muscles strained against her brother’s grip. The knife turned in his hand to cut and slash. Her body impeded Graeme’s ability to twist Boone’s arm to make him drop it.

With a wheezing gasp, Boone stopped breathing.

Fern looked down to see her mother’s hand at Boone’s chest. His blood flowed to stain her red. Her mother pressed upwards with all her might until it seemed as if her hand would vanish inside the wound.

Morag withdrew her knife. She stepped back so as not to stain her clothes and said calmly, “Always stab upwards in the belly towards the heart, if you cannot stab downwards from behind into his neck. Never stab downwards from the front, lest your

knife glances off the ribs.”

Fern watched Boone fall to the floor. “I know how to kill, Mother. I’ve sewn enough wounds. I didn’t have a knife. Besides, I was trying to kill him without leaving a mess.”

“You should always have a knife hidden somewhere—in your hose or in your bodice. Never be without a weapon,” chided Morag.

Aye, it’s true,” agreed Graeme. “You’ll never catch a clanswoman without a dirk hidden somewhere.”

“He should have died from a twig in his brain, Mother. Graeme, please go to get some water. We have to clean the floor and bind him up, so we can move him without betraying what we have done.”

Graeme went out to do her bidding. He closed the door quietly behind him.

“Do you think anyone heard us?” asked Fern.

“No, they are all watching Jarrad fight.”

“Good God! I have to go. I must go to him.”

A warm hand clasped her ankle. Fern kicked to free herself. In an instant she was upended, dangling in Boone’s grasp.

He lunged for her mother’s throat but could not hold them both. Fern found herself on her back in a pool of his blood. She grabbed the stool and smashed it against his skull. She didn’t stop hitting him. Not when he sank to his knees, not even when he fell face down on the floor. Not when a leg of the stool fell off. She didn’t stop until she saw his brains and squashed them.

Minutes must have passed. Graeme returned with Merlin.

She tried to smile a welcome and found her lips were stuck to her teeth. Her arms ached, her fingers held so tightly to her weapon that she could not put it down.

Merlin tried to pry her hand open. “You can let go now. He’s dead.”

Fern held on. “He’s been dead three times that I know of. I think he’s the devil incarnate. What if he wakes up again?” She came to her senses with a great shudder. “I killed him.”

“No, I killed him,” said Morag. “You hit a dead man, that’s all. I put my knife in his throat.”

“No, I killed him first,” insisted Fern. “And I’m not sorry for it.”

“We killed him together,” conceded Morag.

“Yes.” They might burn in hell, but at least they wouldn’t be alone.

Merlin helped her to rise. “Go to Jarrad, he might ask for you.” He placed a cloak about her shoulder to hide the bloodstains. “Morag and I will clean up here and take the body away. Graeme will help you find Jarrad.”

“Let’s pray for all our souls on the way and forever more.” Graeme opened the door.

A distant roar made Fern stiffen her wobbly legs to manage the stairs. It could

not be! That awful sound must not mean that Jarrad was dead.

* * * *

Owen watched the fight from his knees in front of the king's dais. Henry had a fondness for fools. A steady drizzle of rain began, which made the muddy ground slick and dangerous.

Why didn't Jarrad kill Ralph? Damn all Terrenords! They were hopeless at killing. Their merchant blood led them to sell their enemies, not waste them. And where was Lady Fern? He was supposed to be guarding her.

He gave a guilty shiver. Had Morag kidnapped her, or one of the knights eager for a wealthy wife? Nay, the knights feared Henry's wrath.

Owen waited until Jarrad had struck three blows in a row with no response from Ralph. He could hear a deep rumble of rebukes and realized Jarrad thought he'd taken Ralph's place. Well, he was loyal but not stupid.

He whispered, as if to himself, in a voice loud enough to heard by the king, "Does Lord Jarrad think Ralph is me? He speaks my name and urges him to fight."

A shout of laughter came from the king. No one could say Henry didn't have a sense of humor.

"Go stop it, fool," called the king. "Before someone gets hurt."

"My lord!" Owen leapt to his feet and waved his arms high. "Your lady wife has been kidnapped. Help!"

He laughed to see how fast Jarrad wrested Ralph's helmet off to knock him out with a blow to his chin. Owen had a similar sensitivity. He leapt for joy, and turned a somersault to celebrate his lord's victory.

The crowd roared with laughter at Ralph's plight. King Henry went so red in the face, it was impossible to tell his skin from his hair.

Owen let Jarrad stride away to search for his wife. It wouldn't do to risk his wrath by confessing he had fallen asleep after letting Ralph eat everything, and had no idea what had become of Lady Fern.

Except there she was, running over the field, giving little screams with every breath. Her brother, Graeme, tried to stop her from approaching, but the lady wept and did not see that the body on the ground belonged to Ralph.

The lady fell to her knees to run her hands over his brother. Ralph woke up with a start when she reached his groin. He knocked her hands away and sat up to vomit.

"Sir Ralph, it's you!" cried Lady Fern. "Owen, come to help him."

Did the lady have eyes in the back of her head? He'd rather not approach Ralph so soon, but at least Jarrad couldn't fault him now for losing her.

He approached cautiously to hear her say, "Keep still and quiet. Drink only small beer. You must not fight for at least a month or you might never recover properly."

"There is nothing wrong with me, Lady Fern," grumbled Ralph. "It's kind of you to care what becomes of me, after I killed your husband."

The lady paled and began to shake.

Owen protested, "Nay, you didn't kill Jarrad. Look, he is over with Henry, though I doubt if royal congratulations on his victory are welcome right now."

Ralph wiped his mouth. He grasped Owen's shoulder with a sticky hand. "I've decided Jarrad can live. He tried to save you and worried only for you, not himself. You can live with me, if you like? We'd eat like lords at his expense!"

"Thanks, but I dare not, for fear you'll sell me when you need a new weapon." He knelt with head bowed. "The king is coming. Lady Fern, the king is here." He called so all could hear, "Don't kiss your husband in front of the king, my lady. Don't fondle him all over! I'm sure all his parts are intact. Have some respect for majesty!"

Epilogue

Fern hurried along the gallery with the view of the harbor. Two young knights followed her from a distance. A busy port meant strangers were often in the castle.

She greeted the man looking out at the sunset. "Xavier, there you are. Why are you hiding here?" She went on tiptoe to kiss his cheek, only to have him pull back from her. "Are you counting your ships?" she asked.

He bent with difficulty to kiss her hand. His face bore signs of violence, a blue bruise on his jaw and a wound on his forehead.

Fern repeated the words he'd used to her, with a reminiscent smile, "What happened to you, Xavier? Why are you in this miserable condition? Your value is less than worthless."

His eyes flashed in surprise, and he gave a ghost of a smile. "We were attacked by pirates, my lady."

"I saw Jenny, I'm glad she came to no harm." Fern took him by the arm. "Walk with me," she commanded.

He limped docilely beside her. "I beg you will allow Jenny to live with you. She is big with child now." He put out a hand to steady himself on the wall when they turned a corner. "I beg you, Fern. It's too dangerous for her."

"Your *wife* may stay with me." Fern waited for his reply. Owen had warned her that Xavier discarded all his women once they carried his child.

"My lady," he said, keeping his voice strangely humble, "I cannot marry without my father's permission. If he learns of Jenny, he'll keep the child if it's a boy, and then sell her to get rid of her." He gave a defeated shrug. "He has a private army to compel my obedience."

"No longer." Fern assumed a sorrowful expression. "I have sad news. A letter came from Genoa informing us of your father's death."

"But—" he stopped.

Fern saw the look of disbelief on his face. It warred with his need to believe her. She said gently, "You must be shocked at the suddenness of it."

"Yes, it's been a while since I've seen him. I had no idea he was ill," he said in a mocking tone.

"A sudden event. Quite tragic. Your father announced his own imminent death in a letter. Death was certain." She tried to look sorrowful.

Xavier slowly shook his head. "Sad, very sad."

"I'm glad you're here to comfort us at this sad time." She stretched up once again

to kiss his cheek. To her delight, he gave a chuckle of laughter and let her do it. "You are just in time to celebrate with us," she said.

"What do we celebrate?" he asked.

"Your wedding to Jenny! Come, you'll feel better by the fire, and Jenny is waiting for you."

Xavier offered her his arm.

She took it lightly, not knowing where he was injured. "We are roasting a swan in your honor. Although, if I were you, I'd eat the chicken stewed with pepper and grains of paradise. Swans are only good for show. Be amazed when it comes to the table with fire flaming from its beak."

She called to William to help Xavier into the hall, then went ahead to wake Father Rab from a nap, and warn him not to add a vow of obedience for Jenny. "Not perfect, imperfect, or any kind of obedience, Father."

"Aye, lass, if she's going to take her chances with Xavier, it's prayers she needs. Vows will do her no good at all. Is he abandoning her on the Isle?"

"Now, Father, don't believe everything Owen tells you. Jenny is having her baby here and I think Xavier might be persuaded to stay to keep her company."

She kissed her niece and congratulated Marie and Duncan on the news of their second child. Jenny waited anxiously beside Marie. Fern gave her a smile of encouragement and went up the stairs to the solar.

Alaric opened the door for her. "They've been waiting for you, my lady."

Owen waved a greeting from his cushion on the hearth.

Fern went to the bath to kiss both its occupants.

"Did you know I met your mother in a bath?" Jarrad held up their squirming son to her. "Kiss your mother, Harry." He lowered the infant into the warm water. "Kick away, I'll hold you until you can swim." A shower of water splashed into the air. "Was Xavier any trouble, Fern? I can tell from your face, you got him to agree."

"No trouble at all, not really." She gave him a guilty look. "I just hope you won't mind—I had to slay your father."

Jarrad laughed for an answer and Harry giggled with him. "Poor father! Xavier must make his home with us until he is made a partner. No wonder he hates the sea. That's the seventh time he's been attacked by pirates. He's been a galley slave, ransomed three times, shipwrecked twice, run aground more times than anyone can count. I'll tell him he can use Port Creeve for his ships until father realizes his worth and stops treating him like a servant. What do you say, Harry? Can Uncle Xavier stay?"

Fern blew noisy kisses at her son and reached for the soap. "Which one of you wants to be first?"

Jarrad held out Harry. "Our wriggling son, before he adds his own gift to the water, if he hasn't already. Take pity on me and wash him first."

"That depends on whether you intend to share your bath with me, great Lord of

the Isle?"

"If it pleases you, my angel."

They washed their son together. Fern wrapped the infant in a cloth and dried him in front of the fire. She kissed his belly to make him shriek with delight.

Owen held out his arms, "Let me dress my godson before you forget it's almost time for supper." He rose to take the child away. "You have only an hour. We go to entertain your visitors for you, don't we Harry? Remember to be kind to your cousin. There is no reason to slight her because she has the misfortune to look like Duncan. You can blow bubbles at her, if you can't resist the urge."

Jarrad let them go with a gentle warning, "Mind your manners, both of you."

Fern locked the door. "You're my prisoner now, my love."

"An hour is never long enough," he warned. "I might have to delay supper."

Fern removed her clothes. "Even if I promise to indulge you with any number you like afterwards?"

"Can you stay awake long enough to sate me." He beckoned her into the water.

"My Lord of a Thousand Tricks doubts me?" She knelt between his knees. "But if I remember rightly, the first one to fall asleep last night was you."

"Forgive me, I was exhausted." He gave a mournful sigh. "The port is busy. Xavier has brought all his ships here."

"You're forgiven." Fern echoed his sigh. "Jarrad, I know you're not the least bit sorry and I am not fooled by your sighs."

"Good!" He began to wash her. "Did you talk to Jenny?"

"Yes, she told me Xavier is in love with her." Fern laughed at the expression on her husband's face. "She thinks he pretends to be you, when they're alone together."

"If she knew Merlin, she'd not think that," murmured Jarrad. "In truth, we both aspired to be like him. I must modestly confess to more success as myself than Xavier will ever attain."

Fern splashed him. "Jenny sighs over Xavier. Don't even think of rescuing her." She washed his chest, lingering over the task. "I forgot to tell you, I received a letter from my mother today."

"I hope all is well with them?"

"She tells me Esme has started to walk. Merlin is proud enough to burst and the little one leads him around all day by holding onto his finger. They have news from Graeme. He has gone to Rome with a delegation from his monastery."

"Would you like to see Rome?" he asked.

"No, I am as fearful of pirates as Xavier is. I only want to see you."

He rumbled an invitation for her to move closer. "I need you nearer my heart, my love. You always make me feel as if I am your great treasure. Let me prove my worth to you."

Fern moaned and sighed to make him laugh, while her hands played about his

body.

“Will I need the scarlet ribbons tonight?” he asked.

Fern shook her head. “It’s your turn to wear them.”

“My turn? Don’t we have a bargain? You wear them twice for every time I wear them?” He kissed her and lingered over the task. “I’ll have to persuade you to keep your word.” He looked for the drying cloths. “By the fire, if it pleases you, my angel?”

“It pleases me, my great treasure.”

The End