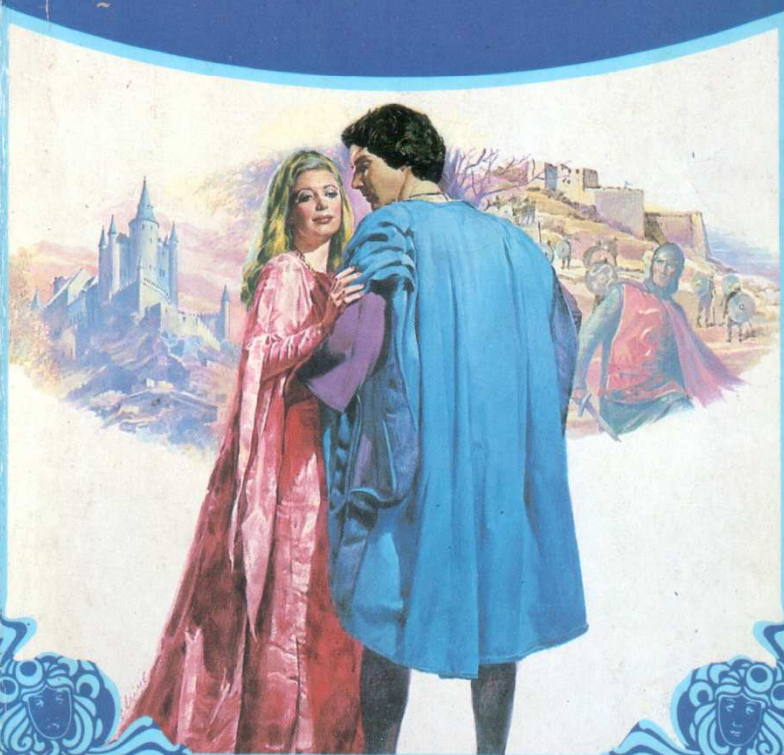


MASQUERADE

HISTORICAL ROMANCE

BEWARE  
THE CONQUEROR

ANNE HERRIES



# **BEWARE THE CONQUEROR**

**Anne Herries**

*'Beware the conqueror, I say, come not with a sword in your hand, for it will avail you nothing against a woman's smile.'*

Desperate to escape her arranged marriage, Elona, daughter of a Saxon lord, seeks out a sacred spot in the forest and offers a pagan prayer for deliverance. And deliverance comes-in the guise of the Norman soldiers who invade her village, and in Raoul de Bainwulf, cold-eyed liegeman to Duke William, who takes her captive. Elona expects cruelty, even death, at the hands of her enemies. But Raoul seems determined to conquer by force of love...

## CHAPTER ONE

AT THE edge of the forest Elona paused, glancing over her shoulder towards the village and, just beyond it, her father's hall. Dusk was falling and a fine mist was beginning to swirl across the river. Already the beasts had been driven into their enclosures for the night, and the men were making their way home from the fields. This day was one of several each year given to the Lord Sigebert in return for the strips of land that each man held.

It was also the night of the moon's waning, a night of mystery when the power of the spirits was at its height. The night Elona had waited for these many weeks.

The girl shivered, wrapping her thick woollen mantle closer around her shoulders. Before her the forest stretched dark and uninviting, making her want to run back to the safety of her father's house. She had always feared the forest, for it was the dwelling-place of the spirits and she felt it was evil.

Suddenly her great adventure had become a frightening ordeal. It had all seemed so simple when she was with Alfrida, sitting by the fire in her hut and watching the pictures the wise woman conjured up in the flames. Listening to the tales of the long-ago time, her mind had come alive with curious longings and fantasies, and she had yearned for something to which she could not put a name.

Alfrida could sing the history of the Saxon kings from the time of Egbert, though she had no documents to help her. It was only the monks who had such learning. Elona could neither read nor write, and reckon only as much as she could count on her fingers. But Alfrida had the wisdom of the old ones. It was she who had guided Elona, telling her what she must do.

Her deep blue eyes sparkling, Elona lifted her head. Was she not the daughter of the Lord Sigebert and the Lady Eifleda? Through her mother she could trace her lineage back to the kings of Sussex, and she was proud of the princely blood flowing in her veins. Only a coward would turn back now, when the alternative was to give in to her father's wishes and wed a man she hated. She touched the bronze clasp at the shoulder of her tunic, rubbing it for luck as Alfrida had told her; then she gathered her courage and stepped

into the forest. Her only hope of avoiding the marriage her father planned was to follow the wise woman's instructions. She must visit the sacred tree and lay her sacrifices in the circle of stones. She repeated Alfrida's words aloud, taking comfort from the sound of her own voice in the eerie stillness of the woods.

'Flesh, the fruit of the earth and thy favourite possession must thou lay at the roots of the tree,' Alfrida had said, her eyes rolling as she gazed into the fire. Thrice times must thou repeat the words I told thee, then prostrate thyself before the great spirit and speak the favour thou would'st ask only with thy mind.'

'And will the spirit of the tree grant my wish?' Elona had asked.

Alfrida consulted the flames, casting a fine powder made of ground animal-bones into the fire and watching the pictures take shape. 'If thou hast the courage, and thy heart is pure, thy wish will be granted on the night of the moon's waning.'

Elona had waited impatiently for the night of the moon's waning, praying that her father would not arrange her marriage before she could visit the sacred tree. She had told no one except Alfrida of her plans, for her father had forbidden the old ways and he would have kept her fast if he had learned what she meant to do. Although a cold and uncaring father, Sigebert was a devout Christian and he would have been horrified by her wickedness.

Indeed she herself was a little shocked by her own boldness. Seldom having left the confines of her small village, she had always been a meek and dutiful daughter despite the rebellion which often flared in her heart. To venture into the forest at night and in direct disobedience of her father's orders had cost her many sleepless nights; only desperation had driven her to such wilful behaviour.

In vain Elona had pleaded, wringing her hands and kneeling before her father as she begged him not to give her in marriage to the Lord Oslac, who was a coarse-mannered, unfeeling man with flowing black locks and cruel eyes. She had succeeded only in making her father very angry. He had taken

a rope to her, striking her buttocks several times to teach her how to behave with the meekness proper in a woman.

Oslac's village was situated a short distance across the river, and for many years an armed truce had existed between the two thanes. A year ago some of Sigebert's kine had strayed over the bridge and been found by Oslac's men. They had killed and roasted the beasts in the hope of avoiding discovery, but Sigebert's ceorles had seen the beasts being consumed. A fight had broken out between the villagers, resulting in the death of two of Sigebert's followers. The thane had sought justice and received the *were gild*, a sum of two hundred and sixty-six thrismas for each man, which was their legal value. But money was no compensation for the loss of two strong men who were needed in the fields.

Oslac had promised that for ten years each of his men would give a day's work to Sigebert's village in return for his daughter's hand. In addition he would pay three kine, a good horse, two ornaments of silver and one of gold, and a chest of carved bronze for Elona's bride-price. It was an offer Sigebert could not ignore, neither did he wish to. The marriage would bring an end to hostilities between the two nobles and their followers; it was an answer to his prayers; and only the sudden news from London, which had taken Oslac hurrying there, prevented Sigebert from having his scribe draw up the contract at once.

It was getting steadily darker as Elona walked deeper into the forest, following the trail Alfrida had shown her some days previously. Something scuttled in the undergrowth, startling her. The girl paused for a breathless moment, her heart thumping as her mind conjured up all kinds of creatures which might be lurking there to prey on her. Then she saw a small furry body disappear into a burrow, and smiled—the creature had been as frightened as she.

The mist was beginning to creep into the wood now, little wisps threading the branches of the trees with smoky ribbons. The branches looked like crooked fingers clawing against a black velvet sky as she passed, and, she felt them catch at her mantle like a witch's claws. Several times she gasped

with fright, her heart thumping loudly enough to make a drumming sound in her ears.

All at once Elona came to the clearing, halting as she saw the sacred tree and the circle of flat stones almost hidden beneath the moss and grass. No one came here, now that it was forbidden to worship the old gods, yet the girl could feel the pull of its ancient mystery. There was power here; she knew it instinctively and was frightened by it. Until this moment she had secretly doubted the magical powers of the sacred tree, but now she believed everything Alfrida had told her.

Taking care to enter the circle by the third stone, she laid her offerings between the protruding roots of the old tree: a fine fish she had caught herself that morning, flowers, fruit and her favourite silver bracelet. This last made her sigh with regret, but Alfrida had stressed that she must give up her most treasured possession, and she dare not cheat the spirit of the tree. Alfrida had warned of the terrible retribution that would follow if she tried to give something she did not value.

Prostrating herself on the dry earth, her fingertips reaching almost to its roots, Elona began to chant the words Alfrida had taught her:

'Spirit of the earth, air and fire, hearken to me. Thou who livest in the wind and the rain, listen to my words. Thou art all powerful, all knowing, all seeing. Know then my heart is pure and accept my sacrifice. And, knowing, grant my true desire.'

'There is no need to name thy desire,' Alfrida had said. The tree can see deep into thy heart.'

Three times Elona repeated the verse Alfrida had made her learn, her face pressed against the grass, not daring to look up. She must wait for a sign that her sacrifices had been accepted, the wise woman had said. Time passed and the girl grew cold, but nothing had happened.

Then she heard a stirring and a whispering in the trees. The wind was getting up. Elona felt its force as she rose to her knees, holding her arms out in supplication to the tree. Suddenly the wind's howl rose to a high-pitched

scream which had an evil sound, as if a soul in Hell cried out for release. It swirled about her, tearing at her mantle and her head-rail. It seemed to whirl about her in a fierce vortex as if it would tear her from the very earth and carry her with it. There was a fearful roaring in her ears like the thunder of many horses' hooves and the moving of a great force; she heard the clash of iron as if a terrible battle raged about her, and the screams of dying men seemed to be carried in the wind. Then she saw a man's face—it appeared to float without its body, coming towards her like a comet through the sky. Elona threw up her arms to protect herself, hiding her eyes. This was too terrible to be borne!

Scrambling to her feet, she cried her fear aloud as the wind held her imprisoned at its centre and the awful images crowded in on her like demons of the night. She crossed herself, terrified by what she had done. By her wickedness she had brought forth a terrible force which would wreak havoc on the land. She pressed her hands to her ears, trying to block out the noise, and screaming for it all to stop.

Suddenly the wind died and Elona uncovered her ears, trembling as she looked about her and saw the destruction the wind had wrought. She knew then that such forces were too strong for her to tamper with. She should never have come here! For a moment she was too shocked and dazed to move, then all at once she began to run through the forest, her breath coming in ragged gasps as she fled into the darkness.

Elona's lips moved in silent prayer as she besought the saints to intercede for her; her one thought now was to reach the sanctuary of the church before she was struck down by the sword of vengeance.

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A light mist was swirling over the sea as the long ships nosed their way down the Sussex coast, their carved prows riding proudly over the water like mystical sea-horses. On and on they came, wave after wave of warships packed with fighting men, horses and terrible weapons of destruction.

Duke William of Normandy was come to wrest the throne of England from the faithless Harold, who had been crowned king despite the most sacred



vow he had taken to uphold the Duke's claim to that title. On hearing of Harold's perfidy, William had called his nobles together, promising them lands and riches if they would assist in his struggle to gain the inheritance bequeathed to him by King Edward the Confessor, a pious man who had passed over the natural heir, Edgar Atheling, in favour of his kinsman because he believed that only William was strong enough to subdue and rule the quarrelsome English nobles. And because he was jealous of Harold's popularity with the people.

Like the Earl Godwin, his father, Harold had attained great power even while the King lived. His bravery and skill in battle brought him the affection of the English people, and when Edward died it was by popular consent that he was crowned. Thus, when Duke William demanded that he should relinquish the crown to him, Harold answered contemptuously that he had been constrained to take the oath of allegiance by violence and did not consider it binding. From that moment on it was inevitable that William would invade England, and now that day was come.

As the first ships beached at Pevensey, Raoul de Bainwulf turned to the Duke with a faint smile in his grey eyes.

'Well, my lord, I wish you joy of this England you covet; for myself I prefer Normandy. It is a grey dismal isle we have come to, I vow.'

The Duke frowned. 'What, my friend, do you wish yourself at home so soon? Is it the clouds that dismay you, or have you no stomach for the fight?'

Raoul's eyes sparked with anger. 'My faith, William, do you judge me by those fainthearts who would have turned back before we sailed? I am not a man to wail that God is against us for the lack of a fair wind. And no man shall call me coward—nay, not even you!'

The Duke clapped him on the shoulder, his harsh features relaxing into a smile. 'Nay, not even I, good comrade. If every man here were as stout-hearted as you, the battle were already won.'

'And will be, my liege, never fear it.'

'Ay, England shall be mine. It is my right, and therefore God will grant me victory.' The Duke's face glowed with an inner light. 'Give me your hand, de Bainwulf, for I would take my first step upon English soil.'

The Duke leaped from the ship, stumbling as his foot touched the shore. Some of the soldiers watching cried out in alarm, fearing that it was a bad omen, but with great presence of mind he scooped up a handful of sand and showed it to those watching.

'See, I have taken possession of this soil!' he cried out in a strong voice.

Raoul acted swiftly. Running to a near-by cottage, he snatched a handful of the thatch and brought it back to his lord. Removing his helmet to bow his head in subservience, he offered his gift on his knees. The Duke looked puzzled, and asked what it was.

'Tt is seizin, my liege,' Raoul replied.

His words were taken up by the army with a great shout of laughter; those at the back pressing forward and demanding to hear what was being said. When they heard, they too began to laugh and cheer, for seizin was by feudal law the homage a tenant paid to his sovereign for his fief.

That was well done, de Bainwulf,' the Duke said as they walked up the beach together. 'Superstition can weaken the strongest warriors. For myself, I believe my cause is just and will be victorious, but we must keep the army with us by any means we can.'

'Ay, and an army marches on its stomach.' Raoul's smile was fleeting. 'For now we must disembark as swiftly as possible; tomorrow we should send out foraging parties before the villagers have time to hide their beasts and stores.' 'You speak wisely, Raoul. You shall be my quartermaster, for I know I can trust you in this. We must seek out the most advantageous site for our camp and consolidate our position—for it will be a most fearful battle.'

Raoul frowned. 'Have you no hope that Harold will seek to come to terms, once he finds you are on English soil?'

'Harold is a proud man and a brave warrior. His ambition will be his death—or mine.' Duke William's eyes glinted. 'It was written at his birth and mine that our lives should conflict. Neither he nor I would have it otherwise.'

'Then I pray God will keep you safe, my liege.' Raoul put on his conical helmet, pulling the metal nasal down over his nose. 'I must leave you, sir, for there is much work to be done this night—and those fools will awaken the dead with their noise if someone does not control them!'

The Duke looked towards the shore, scowling as he saw a string of horses being unloaded without due care. 'See to it, de Bainwulf,' he barked. Then, as Raoul turned away: 'Stay a moment. You have thus far asked nothing of me. You desire none of this land nor yet its cities—tell me, why did you come with me? Why did you leave that country you love so well?'

Raoul de Bainwulf smiled wryly. 'I am a soldier. I was born and raised to fight. I had a sword in my hand as soon as I could walk. I doubt not that I shall die with a sword in my heart. I came because you asked it of me.'

'Because I asked it of you?' The Duke's eyes gleamed. 'And because you love to fight, I think.'

The smile had faded from Raoul's eyes, a peculiar sense of regret spreading through him. 'It is all I know, my lord. What more is there?'

'What more?' The Duke considered, his eyes narrowing as he studied the other man's face. 'A man must have more, Raoul. Each man must seek out his destiny. Mine is here in England: I feel it surely in my bones. Perhaps you will find yours here too.'

Raoul laughed, his stern features seeming younger as humour curved his sensuous mouth. 'Perhaps. For tonight, my destiny is to make sure those horses are safe.'

The Duke smiled to himself, knowing well the dry humour of his friend. He watched as Raoul strode down the beach; his shoulders straight and square, his bearing one of noble pride, and wondered about the private man beneath the mask de Bainwulf chose to wear. Even after all the years of

comradeship, there was still some part of him he could not fathom. Yet a truer friend could not be found.

As the Duke watched, he saw order swiftly restored to the shambles on the beach and smiled with satisfaction. With de Bainwulf in charge, there was no need to worry. His temper was as sharp as his humour, and there were few enough who dared to cross him. Turning away, he surveyed the shadowed land, his heart filling with a sense of exultation. He bent down, taking a handful of small pebbles and letting them run through his fingers.

'England is mine,' he said softly, his eyes glowing with a fervent light. 'Man's destiny is written in the stars, and we can none of us escape it.' His mouth curved in a wry smile. 'Nay, not even you, Raoul de Bainwulf . . .'

Elona rose to her feet and curtsied before the altar. She had already spent an hour on her knees praying for forgiveness, and now she must hurry or her father would rouse the village to look for her. Here, in the quiet, dim coolness, she had recovered her calm as she looked up at the great wooden cross with its beautifully worked figure of Christ in his agony. Then she had dipped her fingers in the holy water in the rough stone font, making the sign of the cross on her forehead and murmuring a last prayer before turning away.

She left the church, her soft-slippered feet moving silently over the smooth stone flags as she passed beneath great stone arches; the thick pillars carved with flowing scenes of a ritualistic past which portrayed both the holy saints and strange, mythical creatures seen only in the stonemason's imagination. The church was the only substantial stone building in the village, and Elona knew it had once been a Roman villa in the days when the might of Rome had held sway in England, before the coming of her own people. For many years it had been left to dwindle into decay, but one of Sigebert's ancestors had at great expense brought in the materials and craftsmen needed to transform it into its present status as a house of God.

Outside, the village seemed silent, almost deserted, now that the day's work was done. Here and there the breeze picked wilfully at the thatched roofs of

the cottages, and the doves fluttered restlessly in the dovecot as if they, too, were uneasy.

Elona's heart thudded in her breast as she hurried past the shuttered huts towards the long, dark shape of her father's hall. Sigebert would be displeased with her for coming late to supper. She shivered as she pictured his harsh face, knowing he would punish her severely if his mood was bad. His rages were unpredictable and could explode without warning, even when she had done nothing wrong. Yet she had noticed that he seemed less inclined to beat her since the death of her mother some months past. He ignored her most of the time, appearing almost to forget her existence until something she did angered him.

The hall was dimly lit by rush candles and bowls of tallow with floating wicks. The air was thick with the smell of burning fat, dogs, human sweat and smoke. Elona paused to tuck a flaxen plait beneath her flowing head-rail before entering. She breathed deeply to calm herself, her cheeks still slightly flushed as she recalled her terrifying experience in the forest, which now seemed like a bad dream. It was her own fault, she knew, for disobeying her father, and her wickedness was twofold in that she had turned her face from God. Yet somehow deep inside her she believed God would be more forgiving of her sins than the Lord Sigebert.

Elona held her head high as she approached the high table where her father sat, threading her way through the dogs who were snarling over a bone thrown to them by one of the ceorles from the kitchen at the rear. Her long tunic brushed over the rushes on the floor, and she paused to warm her hands by the fire in the centre of the large room. Its smoke was drawn upwards to the roof, where it escaped through a hole in the thatch, curing, on its journey, the huge joints of meat which hung from the wooden rafters.

Men and boys filled the hall, for everyone in the village ate supper with the Lord Sigebert each night, as was the custom. The thane was seated at a raised table to indicate his position, flanked on one side by his sad-faced scribe and by those of his men he favoured most on the other. Elona's own place at the very end of the table was glaringly empty.

On the wall behind Sigebert hung his swords and shields, and the skins of animals stretched out to dry. Scattered on the table before him were platters of roasted meats, pitchers of wine and glazed pottery bowls filled with rich broths, fruit and coarse black bread. He also had a knife, and a fork and spoon of beaten silver. At the lower tables the platters and bowls were of wood and the diners used their fingers to eat, dipping their bread in the gravy to soak it up and wiping their hands on the coarse woollen tunics they wore.

A few women were seated there, but none of them was of Elona's rank and she merely smiled in passing. Some of the youths lounged on the floor, teasing the dogs and playing with a wooden sword. Others were mending the nets used to snare wild birds or sharpening the tools they would need in the fields the following day. One or two were playing a noisy game of bob-apple and quarrelling good-naturedly over their prize.

Cedric, the young harper, passed between the tables as he played and sang in his high, clear voice. Elona's smile was especially warm for the youth, of whom she was fond. He was indeed the only real friend she had apart from Alfrida. Often during her lonely childhood she had longed for friends to whom she could confide her innermost thoughts, but though the villagers treated her with the respect due to their lord's only child, she had sensed a certain reserve in them. She lived among them, and yet in some unexplained way she was not one of them.

Once she had asked her mother why she had no brothers or sisters to play with; the Lady Eifleda had merely turned her face away, but not before Elona glimpsed the sparkle of tears in her eyes. After that she had learned not to ask questions which might cause her mother pain.

As Elona took her place, Lord Sigebert looked at her, his thick brows meeting in a frown. Black eyes glared at her with something akin to hatred, and she wondered again, as she had many times in the past, why her father found her such a source of irritation. Even when she was a small child he had shown no sign of affection towards her.

<sup>4</sup>'You are late, daughter,' he growled. 'Explain yourself.'

She clasped her hands beneath her mantle, her fingers teasing the threads of her girdle nervously. 'I have been in the church, Father.'

'Why so?' His flinty eyes bored into her, striking fear into her heart like a lance.

Elona flicked her lashes down to veil her eyes from his probing stare. 'I prayed for guidance, Father, and for the strength to accept my fate.'

His frown eased as he accepted her lie without question. It would never occur to him that the girl he had used so ill yet had the spirit to defy him.

'That was well done of you, daughter,' he said in a slightly less harsh tone. 'A woman must be content with her lot in life and give obedience to her father until her marriage, and then she must be a meek and dutiful wife; but if your faith teaches you modesty, it can be a comfort to you. Your mother was always a devout woman while she lived, Elona, and spent much of her time on her knees in the church praying for the redemption of her soul.'

Lord Sigebert's little eyes gleamed with secret pleasure as he spoke, as if his memories gave him great satisfaction, and Elona felt pity for the pale, silent woman who had been her mother. Although she had never spoken to Elona of her husband's cruelty, it had been obvious that she had suffered greatly.

'I do try to obey you, Father.'

She clenched her hands as she fought her desire to speak out against the unfairness of his words. Why could he not see that it was cruel to condemn her to a life of servility to a man she hated? A picture of the Lord Oslac came to her mind—she shuddered as she saw again the grossness of his huge belly and thick hands. He was fond of pawing at her with those hands, which always seemed to have dirt beneath the fingernails.

Elona was herself very fastidious about her appearance, washing her long hair in the bath-house every few days. She spent more than an hour each morning combing and braiding it into two plaits, which she bound with gold or silver cords. Like most of her people, she was very fond of pretty ornaments, and she wore several pieces of silver jewellery. Her long tunic

was fashioned from a fine woollen cloth which she had woven herself after Alfrida had dyed it bright crimson. Her mantle was also of wool, deep blue in colour and embroidered with a band of silver thread.

Despite her regal air as she sat at table, her pale face proud and cold as she hid her feelings beneath the mask of docility she was forced to wear, this evening Elona was unable to control the trembling of her hand as she lifted her drinking-horn to sip the strong wine. Perhaps it was this small sign which revealed her inner tension to the one person who cared to notice it.

Elona turned to the young harper who was approaching. 'Have you come to sing for me, Cedric?'

'If it will please y9u.' Cedric bent closer to her so that only she could hear his words. 'Why so sad, my lady? I like not to see you thus.'

Smiling, she shook her head. 'I'm not sad, Cedric, just . . . just a little fearful.'

'Beauty such as yours should not be wasted on Oslac the Boar!' he exclaimed. 'You should be at court, my lady.'

Elona sighed. 'You know well I have been but once to London. I remember there was a fair and the streets were full of pedlars and merrymakers. Since then my father has kept me close in the village. I think he saw it pleased me.'

'Lord Sigebert is a fool to crush so fair a flower,' Cedric said angrily.

'Hush, my father will hear you,' she warned, as Sigebert turned his cold eyes on them.

'Good news, daughter,' he boomed, wiping a hand across his mouth and tossing a bone over his shoulder to be fought over by the dogs. 'Oslac sent a message to tell of Harold's victory over the armies of his brother Tostig and the King of Norway. Our neighbour returns shortly. You will be a bride within a month, Elona.'

The girl turned her head aside, holding back her angry tears. .She had hoped that Oslac would be wounded in the fighting, and, while ashamed of her



wicked thoughts, she had prayed that his return would be somehow delayed. This was why she had visited the sacred tree. There seemed to be no escape from her fate, yet in her heart she knew she would rather die than lie in Oslac's bed. If there were no other way, she would commit the greatest sin of all and take her own life.

She looked up at Cedric, her spirits lifting a little at the sight of his boyish beauty. His face was delicate and sensitive, his eyes a melting brown which stirred her heart to new hope. Somehow she would find a way to escape this cruel fate that her father planned!

'Sing a merry song for me, Cedric,' she said, her eyes sparkling with pride. 'Sing of joy and love and the deeds of brave men. For I will not weep tonight  
..

'Perhaps you should visit the sacred tree again,' Alfrida said, pausing in her spinning to look at Elona. 'You must have forgotten something.'

Elona shook her head, her face stubborn. 'I did exactly as you told me, and nothing has happened to prevent Oslac's return. He arrived last night. The marriage contract is signed and I am to be wed tomorrow.'

'It is very strange.' Alfrida's wizened face screwed up in thought as she threw some powder into the flames. 'I see no marriage to Oslac—Wait, the picture changes! Ah. . .' She threw up her arms to shield her eyes as the flames rose higher.

'What is it?' Elona cried, her heart pounding with fear. 'What do you see?'

Alfrida shook her head, rocking back and forth as if in a trance. At last she looked up, her eyes dark with terror. 'I see terrible things,' she moaned. 'There is death and danger . . .'

'Shall I die?' Elona's face was pale. 'I would rather die than wed Oslac.'

'No, no—'tis not clear,' Alfrida muttered, her eyes rolling upwards. 'You will be in great danger, but death is not for you. There is much to fear, but the future points to. . . I see a man, not Oslac. This man is a fierce warrior who will cause you great pain . . . Ah, 'tis gone, I cannot see what the future holds, beyond . .

'Danger from what?' Elona asked, a hint of impatience in her voice. 'Who is this warrior who will cause me pain? I don't believe you saw anything at all. You made it up just to frighten me—it was the same with the tree. I don't believe it has magic powers at all!'

The wise woman shuddered and pulled her coarse mantle around her thin body. 'Mock me if thou wilt, child, but do not mock the gods, for they will have their vengeance if you do. You could not have followed all my instructions, or Oslac would not be here.'

Elona stamped her foot, her lovely face petulant. 'Well, he is, and I must wed him on the morrow unless I kill myself—or run away. I could run away, I suppose.'

'Where would you go? You know nothing of the world, Elona, or of the hardships outside the village. Besides, your father would only find you and bring you back.'

Elona sighed. Alfrida had not always lived in their village: she had travelled to many parts of England and suffered much. It was her stories that had filled her mind with a restless longing to stretch her wings and see what lay beyond the confines of her small world. Yet she knew the woman spoke the truth. Her father would not let her escape him so easily, especially since Oslac had offered such a high price for her. If she ran away, he would send men to search for her, and she knew she could not get far on foot. So she would have to steal a horse, but that would make her father even more angry, and she would be severely punished if she were caught.

'What am I to do, Alfrida? I won't marry Oslac! I won't . . .' She broke off as the sound of shouting outside reached her ears and went to the door to investigate.

'What's happening?' Alfrida grumbled. 'What's all the noise about?'

'There's a stranger in the village. He's talking to my father. Everyone seems very excited about something.'

Alfrida got up and hobbled to the door to watch. 'Tis important news,' she said. 'The omens have been bad for weeks. I've felt in my bones that something was about to happen.'

The two women watched the little gathering in the centre of the village. Lord Sigebert had taken charge now, and the villagers were listening attentively as he harangued them. All at once men were running everywhere, shouting and making excited gestures to one another. The message must indeed have been important.

'I'd best go and see what it's all about.' Elona looked at the old woman, and smiled. 'I'm sorry I was cross, Alfrida, it's not your fault the spell didn't work.'

Alfrida's lips parted in a toothless grin. 'Perhaps it is not too late yet, child. Methinks there's more afoot than stolen kine.'

Elona nodded and left the hut. As she approached, Lord Sigebert turned and saw her, beckoning to her impatiently.

'Come here, girl. There's work to be done, and no time for idle gossip with that old crone.'

'What is it, Father?' She went to him obediently, despite the surge of anger she felt at being addressed so rudely. 'Has something happened?'

'Ay, that it has!' Sigebert boomed. 'Duke William landed more than ten days since and is encamped in a castle at Hastings. The King has asked for all fighting men to join him to defend England's soil. This is war, Elona. We march at first light. At least there's food enough: your wedding- feast will not be wasted. Have it packed into baskets and we'll take what we can with us.'

Elona stared at him, hope stirring in her heart. 'You're leaving to fight with King Harold?'

'Ay, it's a matter of invasion now, Elona. No man or woman' will be safe abed if we do not drive the Normans back into the sea. When the great light was seen in the sky on the eve of Letania maior it foretold that some great event would take place this year. Now it has come and we must all make sacrifices.'

'I have heard it said the Normans are a cultured race,' Elona said thoughtfully. 'Duke William's quarrel is with the King—do you not think it would be safer to take no part in the fighting?'

'Where did you hear such treason? From that evil crone, I swear. Sometimes I wonder why I let her stay here. She is more witch than healer.'

'Alfrida has helped your stomach pains many times, Father,' Elona reminded him. 'Besides, it was from a travelling pedlar I heard it. I spoke only out of concern for you.'

'Would you have me cower in my bed while others die defending us? Oslac would laugh me to scorn if I stayed home while he went with the King. You prattle like a fool, daughter. I expected better of you.'

'Forgive me, Father; it was only my fear for you which made me question your decision.'

'Well, you are but a woman, after all.' Sigebert patted her cheek with contempt. 'I fear your wedding must be postponed Elona. Oslac would have it brought forward, but he has not yet given me all your price. I shall make him wait, and see what happens.'

'It is as you wish, Father.' Elona dropped her thick lashes so that he should not see the sudden joy in her eyes.

Sigebert frowned. 'While I am gone, you will remain within the house. I shall leave my cart and a swift horse with you. If you hear that the King has

been defeated, you must pack everything of value into the cart and hide it deep in the forest until I return. Do you hear me, Elona?'

'Yes, Father. I shall do as you say.'

He smiled suddenly. 'You are an obedient girl, and you shall have a present when I return. What would you like—a gold ring for your finger?'

Elona could not help flushing. It was not often that her father was kind to her, and the offer of a gift made her feel guilty, since she was already planning to disobey him.

'I shall let you decide, Father.'

'Well, we'll see when all this is over.' Sigebert's smile disappeared, a coldness entering his eyes as though he had begun to regret his generosity. 'For now, there's work to be done: we have no time to lose if we are to reach Harold before the battle begins.'

Sigebert strode away and Elona ran up to the hall. The news had preceded her, and already the servants were rushing about in a burst of activity, packing great quantities of food into huge rush baskets. The men had a march of two days before them and must take what provisions they could.

Throughout the afternoon everyone worked with feverish haste, as long-unused weapons were brought out and sharpened, horses fetched in from the pastures and a service of blessing intoned by Sigebert's chaplain.

Later, Lord Oslac rode over to take supper with them and arrange a meeting for the morning. The two thanes had decided to join forces and march together for safety's sake. He sat by Elona's side at the high table, his presence making her almost sick with fear. It was all she could do to sit there so close to him without giving a sign of the revulsion he aroused in her.

Oslac lamented the necessity for the postponement of their wedding, stroking her arm with his thick hands and leering at her. Elona recoiled, hating the stink of wine on his breath and shuddering as he demanded a token from her.

'We are almost wed,' he said, winking at her boldly. 'Save for the priest's blessing, we are man and wife. Come kiss your husband, Elona. Give me a memory to carry with me to war.'

'It would not be seemly,' she replied, dropping her eyes in a pretence of meekness. 'I am not yet your wife.'

'Kiss me, Elona!' Oslac's great arms closed round her, crushing her in a bearlike embrace as she struggled vainly against him. He bellowed with laughter, belching into her face as his mouth closed over hers triumphantly.

Elona closed her eyes, feeling the vomit rise in her throat. In that moment she vowed that she would escape or die rather than be the wife of such a man.

'Leave her be, Oslac,' Sigebert growled. 'Time enough for that when we return; for now, we've more important business!'

Oslac released her, and Elona seized the chance to leave the table, going to sit with Alfrida near the fire. Soon she saw that he had pulled one of the servant-girls on to his lap and was kissing her with evident enjoyment. The girl made no protest, apparently happy to kiss him back.

Seeing that her absence would not be noticed, Elona soon got up and retired to her bed. Separated from the main hall only by a leather curtain, she was able to hear what was going on and sighed with relief when she heard Oslac departing.

She lay down on the wooden bed, which had a hard mattress of close-packed straw and a thick woollen blanket, feigning sleep and refusing to answer when her father's voice asked if she were awake. Receiving no reply, he did not disturb her and she heard him draw back the curtain to his own bed.

Closing her eyes, Elona tried to sleep, but she could only lie tense and strained, listening to the sounds of his snoring.

## CHAPTER TWO

A SLIGHT MIST curled over the river as Elona watched with the other women and children the departure of all the able-bodied men. Her father had left only the sick and the old to defend the village in his eagerness to answer King Harold's call.

Elona's eyes were wet as she saw the men march out and knew that many of them might never come back. At the last moment she kissed her father's cheek and promised to pray for his safety, though he only thrust her aside and grunted. Despite the fact that Sigebert had never shown her a father's love, the girl felt a pang of regret in her heart for what might have been if he'd been a little less harsh to her.

For almost an hour after he had gone, she wandered about the deserted village battling with her conscience. In Sigebert's absence it was obviously her duty to keep a watchful eye on the villagers, and despite the rebellion in her heart, she was racked with guilt at the thought of deliberately disobeying her father. It was clearly a great sin she was planning, yet to let this chance of freedom slip by would be to seal her fate. It was the only way. She could not, would not, marry Oslac!

Her decision fixed at last, Elona tied a few possessions into a bundle and took it to Alfrida's hut, lifting her chin proudly as a girl herding pigs into the woods turned her head to stare at her. Alfrida listened to her plan, shaking her head and sighing heavily, but making no attempt to dissuade her.

After a few minutes, Elona went out in search of Cedric. Too young to fight with the men, he was working in the fields with the other boys, driving oxen pulling a heavy plough. When his mistress called him, he came at once. His mouth dropped open in astonishment as she quickly explained what she wanted him to do.

'But it's impossible, my lady,' he cried. 'Even if we dare steal Lord Sigebert's cart, we should be caught. Besides, the Normans could be anywhere.'

'They've come to fight the King,' Elona said impatiently. 'Of what interest are a woman and a young boy to such men? We shall travel as harpers and

sing our songs for any who care to listen. If we can cross through the Norman lines we shall be safe from my father. I heard him talking last night, and I know the route he takes. We can go the longer way round and thus avoid meeting him on the road.'

The boy frowned. 'There are those in the village who would seek to warn your father if they guessed what you intend.'

'That's why you must tell no one of our plans. We shall leave tonight.' Elona touched his arm, looking at him pleadingly. 'Please help me, Cedric? I cannot manage the cart alone, or I would not ask it of you.'

Although Cedric smiled at her, his heart was wrung by the sadness in her eyes. He had often burned to spring to her defence when he saw the way she was treated, but he knew it was beyond his power to help her. Now she was asking him to do something which might mean his life, for if Sigebert caught them he would show no mercy.

'If you truly wish it, I shall come with you, my lady. Now I must return to the fields lest any suspect what is afoot.'

'Go, then, and I shall meet you after supper by the bridge. You must have the cart ready—and don't forget your harp.'

Cedric touched her hand. 'I shall not fail you,' he promised.

Elona left the wise woman's hut clutching the bundle she had secreted there earlier. Alfrida followed her to the door, peering into the darkness to make sure no one was stirring, before pressing a small leather pouch into the girl's hand.

'Tis a lucky charm I made for you. Keep it with you always,' she said, her faded eyes glistening with tears. 'It will protect you from evil spirits.'



Elona took it, slipping it inside her tunic; then she kissed the old woman's withered cheek. 'Thank you,' she whispered. 'You have been a true friend to me. I do not know if we shall meet again. I pray that God will keep you safe.'

'May the spirit of the tree guard you this night,' Alfrida replied, 'I shall always think of you. Go quickly: the boy awaits you.'

Elona nodded. Glancing over her shoulder towards the long wooden hall, she ran through the village, her heart pounding as if she feared discovery. There was no one left to stop her, yet she was still terrified lest someone might try. But there was no shout of warning, no command to make her return. Reaching the bridge without mishap, she saw that Cedric had the covered cart waiting for her.

'You managed to steal it without being seen, then?' she asked as he helped her up beside him. 'I was afraid someone would try to stop you.'

They are all locked in lest the Normans descend on the village during the night,' Cedric replied with a grin. 'Even if they had heard, they would only have hidden.'

Elona laughed. 'Are you frightened, Cedric?'

'A little.' He smiled at her. 'But more of being caught by your father than the Normans.'

Elona's smile faded. 'If my father should find us, I shall say I made you come with me. I threatened to have you whipped if you disobeyed me. You must remember that, Cedric, or he will punish you.'

'He will punish you too, my lady.' Cedric was thinking that Lord Sigebert was not likely to be influenced by anything Elona said. 'We have stolen his cart, food and blankets—for that he could kill us both.'

'Yes.' Elona bit her lip. 'But we shall not be caught if we are careful. Now, Alfrida says we should follow the road until it forks and then turn left. But it matters very little where we go as long as it is not the same road my father

took. From now on we are as free as the wind to go whither we please. I think that's exciting, Cedric, don't you?"

Cedric smiled. He knew that life was going to be much harder than Elona imagined. Their stores would not last for ever, and not every village would give them food in return for a song, but he did not want to frighten her. She would learn soon enough.

"If you are happy, my lady," he said, "then I am happy too . .

It was a chill October morning when Raoul de Bainwulf received the summons he had been expecting. Together with the other principal nobles of Duke William's army, he attended the counsel of war called by his leader.

"I have offered Harold the choice of holding this land in fealty to me or settling the issue by single combat," William said. "If he truly believed in his right to be king he would have accepted my offer of combat, for God will aid the righteous. All here know that my words were dismissed with contempt. Harold is come with all his army to do battle, and that battle must be decisive."

"We are with you, my lord Duke," Raoul said. "The men are ready and eager to fight."

"Ay, we'll fight!" A chorus of voices echoed his sentiments.

"You must urge the men to stand firm and have good courage," William continued. "For if we are victorious this day, then the war is all but won; if we should retreat, there is only the sea and death in dishonour." He paused and looked at them hard. "By collecting so numerous and brave a host I have done all that is possible, humanly speaking, to ensure conquest; and the sacrilegious conduct of Harold in breaking his oath to me gives me just reason to believe that Heaven and the saints, who are witness to his perjury, will smile upon my endeavours."

Cheers greeted his words, and the officers departed to rally their men in a like manner.

The night had been spent in silence and prayer; the Normans hearing the sounds of revelry coming from the Saxon camp with something like disbelief. What kind of men were these who would go to battle with their souls steeped in sin and unfit to meet their Maker? God would surely fight on the side of Normandy this day!

Raoul gathered his own men together for the priest's blessing before organising the march. He moved among them afterwards, speaking to each by name and urging them to fight bravely for the Duke's cause.

'Obey your officers and trust in the Lord. For our cause is just, and God will protect us this day.'

At a signal from William, the Norman army advanced towards the enemy encampment, singing the hymn of Roland. It was at the place of the old apple-tree that he came upon the English unawares.

King Harold had taken up a position on high ground for the night, having first taken the precaution of throwing up earthworks and digging trenches to slow the Normans' approach, but he had not expected William to march out to meet him quite so soon. Some of his army fled as they saw the strength of the Normans, but most stood firm. With the Kentish men in the van and he himself with his two brothers Gurth and Leofwin at the head of the infantry, the King had sworn to conquer or perish in the attempt. If his heart quailed within him at the sight of his foe, he gave no sign.

The first onslaught by the Normans was fierce, but stoutly resisted by the English. Bitter hand-to-hand combat raged on for some time, but the difficulty of the terrain gave advantage to the defenders and the Normans were pressed back despite the urging of the nobles.

William saw that things were come to a desperate pass and, calling to Raoul and others he knew most loyal to him, he hastened to the relief of the hard-pressed centre. His presence and the courage of the select band about him revived the soldiers' courage.

'We must bring them down to our level,' Raoul shouted to William across the melee as the fighting waxed hotter.

'Ay, they have the advantage of the high ground,' William' replied. 'We must draw them down. Tell the men to retreat as if in disorder.'

'They'll follow, and then we'll have them!' Raoul smiled grimly, wheeling his horse about to spread the word.

At the order from their officers the Normans turned and fled as if in terror. Seeing this, the English soldiers at once gave chase, yelling bloodthirstily at the first sign of victory. But once they were on the level ground, William ordered the infantry to face about and the cavalry attacked the English wings. The fighting was fierce, and many of the English were killed as they were driven back to the hill. Here they were rallied by King Harold, who stood bravely and encouraged his forces to hold on steadily against the furious attacks launched at them.

William again ordered a retreat and again the English followed, to be slaughtered in great numbers. Yet still they fought on bravely with Harold to the fore.

'We must break them soon, or the day will be theirs,' Raoul said to William. 'Our men are tiring and I know not how long we can hold them.'

'We must bring up the infantry in a heavy assault, with the archers in behind. Tell them to fire on all those who expose themselves when the infantry attack.'

Raoul wanted to demur, as such a move might mean that their own men would be in the archers' line of fire. Yet the English would not expect it and it might break their spirit. He gave the order, rallying his own men to lead the fresh assault. Charging at their head, he heard their bloodcurdling yells as they followed, plunging into the thickest of the fray. A hail of arrows went winging over their heads, which caused deadly havoc in the English ranks.

Locked in fierce combat with a giant of a man who pressed him hard, Raoul did not see the English King struck down. Receiving a wound in his shoulder, he staggered back as the Saxon swung his huge blade once more. He raised his shield to defend himself, trying to fend off the blow which sent him reeling to his knees, but even as the sword came down for the final blow, an arrow pierced the giant's neck and he fell dead.

Raoul remained on his knees, panting as he fought to recover his breath. Blood was dripping from his wound where the Saxon's sword had sliced through the sleeve of his hauberk, yet he scarcely felt the pain. He was stunned, almost at the end of his strength. Looking up, he saw the Duke astride his horse.

'The day is ours, de Bainwulf!' William cried exultantly. 'Harold is dead and the English are broken. See—They run, and our soldiers pursue them!'

Staggering to his feet to survey the scene, Raoul frowned at the confused mass of bleeding bodies and dying men. The bravery of King Harold had held the English to a man, but without their leader they were lost and had fled in terror. All around him the earth was stained with blood, Saxon and Normans lying side by side in death.

He gazed down at the red-haired warrior who had so nearly killed him, and felt a stirring of pity in his heart. It was a cruel death for so brave a man. Where was the chivalry in death which came from the air like a bolt of lightning? There was no glory in such a victory. He looked up. 'Praise be to God, my lord Duke,' he said quietly. 'The victory is yours.'

'It's ours, Raoul!' William cried, his face alight with triumph, 'it is truly a magnificent day.'

Raoul watched the Duke ride away, wondering why he did not share his leader's exultation. It was strange, but at this moment of victory he was aware only of a great emptiness within him.

'There's no doubt about it, Cedric, we are lost.' Elona jumped down from the cart, looking about her anxiously, i'm sure we've passed this way before—we must have gone round in a circle.'

Cedric nodded gloomily, i've thought as much this past hour or more. What shall we do now, my lady? It's a long time since we passed a village, and we have no food left.'

'I don't know.' Elona frowned. She did not understand how they could have been so foolish as to lose their way. 'We must rest the horse for a while, and find something to eat. I'm hungry.'

They had been travelling for four days, following the river and avoiding the first villages they passed because Sigebert would be sure to enquire after them there. It had seemed so easy when Elona planned her escape, but it soon became obvious that it was much harder to find a route across country than she had thought. She dare not use the highroads for fear of being seen and, never having been this far from her home before, it was not long before she had lost all sense of direction. Alfrida had tried to teach her to follow the stars by night, but Elona realised she was a far from apt pupil.

'Eat these, my lady?' Cedric handed her some berries he had picked. 'There are more on the bushes; we'll gather what we can before we move on. I'll fetch water from that stream, and see if I can find more food . . .' He hesitated as he saw a thin grey wisp of smoke just beyond the rise. 'Look, I think there must be a village not far away. Shall I go and see what I can find?'

Elona hesitated. It might be dangerous for Cedric to approach a strange village alone; the people would be suspicious and sure to remember the boy if enquiries were made by her father. Yet there was no sense in wandering round in circles; besides, she was very hungry and the food they had brought with them had all gone. They could snare small game in the woods, but if they wanted bread or cheese they must buy it from the villages or towns. And they had to take care where they set their snares, for poaching from a thane's land would cost them dearly.

'Yes, Cedric, find out where we are, and how far it is to Hastings,' she said at last. 'But be careful, and tell them we have money to pay for bread and

cheese.' She gave him a silver coin from her small store of money, i'll get the water while you're gone.'

'As you wish, my lady. The stream looks shallow at the edge—You could let the horse drink while you fill our flasks.'

Elona smiled and nodded, watching as the boy ran off. His songs had cheered her on their journey, and she did not know how she would have managed without his help. He was clever at setting snares, and could snatch a fish from the water without the aid of a net. Alone she might have starved, but with Cedric's help she would survive even if she sometimes went hungry for a while.

Fetching two leather flasks from the cart, she tied them to her girdle while she released the horse from its harness. It was a spirited beast and pulled at the bridle as she walked it down to the stream. As the horse drank from the shallow edge. Elona filled her flasks. Her eyes wandered round the pleasant scene, lingering on trees and grassy banks with a sense of joy. Overhead a bird was singing sweetly in praise of the mild autumn day. A flash of silver darting through the water made her wish she had thought to bring her net. The fish was small, but she was very hungry.

She stood up, lifting one of the flasks to her mouth to swallow a few mouthfuls of the cool, sweet water. It tasted good; refreshing her, but reminding her of her hunger. Sighing, she turned towards the cart, starting suddenly as she heard a shout. Spinning round, she saw Cedric running frantically towards her. He was waving wildly at her and shouting something she could not hear.

'Run, my lady!' the boy yelled. 'Run for your life. It's the Normans!'

Unable to hear clearly, Elona stared at him, wondering what he was trying to tell her. Then she saw a horseman appear at the crest of the rise. At once she realised what Cedric had been shouting and her heart began to drum with fear. Dropping her flask, she seized the horse's leading rein and tugged at it, calling desperately to the boy to join her as she did so.

'Go on, my lady,' he shouted. 'Don't wait for me!'

Elona pulled furiously at the horse's rein, but it was unwilling to leave the water's edge and resisted stubbornly, snorting and tossing its head. Seeing that at least five horsemen were riding towards her, she abandoned the horse and began to run. One of the men had already caught up with Cedric and was struggling to subdue him. The boy was flailing wildly with his fists, but his efforts only made the Norman soldier laugh.

'No! You must not hurt him,' Elona screamed, her heart banging wildly against her ribs as she began to run towards them, tripping over the hem of her tunic in her haste. 'Please don't hurt him; he's only a boy!'

Before she could reach Cedric, one of the horsemen had caught up with her. He jumped to the ground, bringing her down as he leaped on her. She struggled furiously as she fell, clawing at his face in anger as he held her imprisoned beneath his body. She screamed, hitting out at him and twisting her face away as he tried to kiss her mouth. She could feel the burn of his hot breath on her face as his hands moved over her body, filling her with a sense of despair as she realised he was too strong for her. Even Oslac had not dared to treat her so basely!

'Release them both.' A harsh voice reached her ears.

Elona heard the command without understanding it. Only when her assailant stopped laughing and got up, pulling her roughly to her feet, did she become aware of the man who had spoken. He sat astride a large black horse, his stern face unsmiling as he looked down at her. She gazed up at him defiantly, a glint of anger in her eyes as she saw how insolently he let his eyes rove over her. Her head-rail had slipped, and her head was bare, revealing her flaxen braids. She flushed as she became aware of the man's intense interest in her hair, feeling awkward and embarrassed as she quickly covered her head.

In a moment anger came to her rescue and she tilted her chin proudly, her eyes flashing. 'Tell your men to release Cedric,' she commanded. 'He is but a boy and can do you no harm.'

'Come here, wench.' Raoul de Bainwulf's mouth twisted in a smile as she tossed her head defiantly. By heaven! The Saxon wench had fire in her



veins. 'Your boy tried to kill one of my men—but no matter, he did not succeed. If he had, I should have had no choice but to kill him. For his youth's sake I shall be merciful. Now tell me who you are and where you live. Is your village near here?'

Elona stared at him, surprised that he spoke her own language so easily. Her pulses were racing and she did not believe he meant to be merciful, but she refused to let him see the fear she felt, and her eyes glinted with anger.

'If you had not attacked us, Cedric would not have tried to kill your soldier. Pray let us go about our business in peace. We have no quarrel with you or your Duke William!'

Raoul's eyes grew thoughtful. The wench was proud, and by her dress and haughty manner no ceorle. He noticed the richness of her tunic and the heavy silver jewellery she wore. This was the daughter of some noble lord!

'So you know who we are and why we came,' he mused, studying her more closely. At first he had noticed only her beauty and the proud set of her chin, but now he saw that her eyes were a deep blue which darkened almost to violet when she was angry. 'What is your name, wench?'

'Everyone knows that the Normans have invaded our country,' Elona replied fiercely. 'Just wait until King Harold's army sends you all scuttling back to Normandy!'

Raoul frowned. Everything about the girl proclaimed her quality. Her courage and pride marked her as the daughter of a noble: every ceorle he had yet seen had screamed and fled in terror. TTiis girl had run towards them, though she must have known she had no hope of rescuing the boy. She was intelligent and too well informed to be anything but the daughter of athane, yet it was strange that she should be travelling alone with only a youth to protect her. He looked at her suspiciously.

'What were you doing so close to our camp? Were you spying on us?'

Elona gasped as his eyes narrowed and became cold. Until this moment she had not realised how stern his face was. She gazed up into his face, feeling

little thrills of fear run down her spine. Taking a deep breath, she fought the odd sensation which was turning her limbs to jelly.

'No, my lord, we are not spies but only travelling harpers. We have lost our way and stopped to rest and buy food from the village yonder.'

'Minstrels?' Raoul's icy eyes bored into her as if seeking to penetrate her soul. He sensed that she was lying, and distrusted her. Although the battle of Hastings had been decisively won, there were still pockets of fierce resistance. The girl was possibly being used as a spy. 'What is your name?' he barked suddenly. 'I'll not ask again, girl!'

Elona shivered, lifting her eyes to his. 'It's Elona. And Cedric is my brother.'

Raoul dismounted. Covering the distance between them in two short strides, he seized her wrist. He glared down at her as she shrank away. 'If you are telling the truth, you have no need to fear me,' he said. 'You can ride with me; my men will bring your cart and the boy.'

As he pulled her towards his horse, Elona hung back, her heart beginning to pound with fear once more. 'Where are you taking me?'

'To our camp.' Raoul suddenly bent down and swept her up, depositing her firmly on his horse's back; then he swung into the saddle behind her, his arms closing about her slim body. 'If you are minstrels, you shall entertain us tonight, fair lady. We shall soon know if you have lied.'

Elona glanced at his hard profile, noticing how smooth and brown his skin was. Much of his face was concealed beneath his helmet, but what she could see was enough to make her tremble. Her captor was not a man to trifle with, of that she was certain!

Turning her head, she smiled at him. 'I shall be honoured to sing for you, my lord.'

It took only a few minutes to reach the Norman camp, which was situated just beyond the rise. Elona realised that the smoke Cedric had seen was not from a village, as they'd supposed, but from a fire in the centre of the encampment. She saw no more than forty or fifty men at the most, so obviously this was not the main body of the army, and the girl guessed that they had stumbled upon a foraging party. At one end was a rough enclosure, which had been hastily erected to contain the cattle and sheep they had rounded up. The number of beasts already held there testified to the Normans' considerable success.

Some of the soldiers were sitting on the ground, talking or eating lazily, while others were busy burnishing their armour. Elona noticed that even those who were idling their time away came to sudden attention as their leader rode by, their eyes following his horse through the camp. She wondered just how much of that interest was in her, feeling uneasy as her captor's arms seemed to tighten about her.

Her thoughts were disrupted as the horse came to a standstill and the Norman dismounted, lifting her down. He led her towards a rude shelter which had been built near the animal enclosure, indicating that she should enter through the opening hidden by a leather curtain.

'I'm sorry we have no better accommodation to offer for the present, but this will have to do until we return to the main army.'

Elona stared at him, her eyes opening wide in surprise. 'Do you not mean to let me go when we have sung for you, my lord? I give you my word that we mean you no harm.'

Raoul's brows rose. 'And what would you do if I let you go free?'

Elona hesitated, bewildered by the Norman's manner. He seemed to hint at a bargain, but she did not quite trust him. 'Cedric and I are travelling players—we go whither we please.'

Then it can make no difference where you go,' Raoul replied, a gleam of triumph in his eyes, it will cheer the men to listen to your songs. I think you must travel with us for the moment.'

Realising too late that she had fallen into his trap, Elona bit her lip. 'Am I your prisoner, my lord?'

'A guest, lady; an honoured guest who will be treated with respect and well rewarded. Food, a bed, protection on the road and perhaps a silver coin or two—what more can you hope to earn elsewhere?'

Elona turned her face aside so that his searching eyes should not probe her thoughts too closely. There was something in this man's steady gaze which disturbed her, setting her heart fluttering wildly like a bird caught in a net. Never before had she felt that a man might read her thoughts, finding it only too easy to deceive her father with a pretence of meekness. True, the Norman had behaved nobly towards her thus far, but every instinct warned her against him. He was her enemy and she must not let herself forget it. For the moment she was forced to accept the situation; she had no possible means of escape while he was so determined to keep her with him. Somehow she must disarm him by lulling him into a false security.

Lifting her chin proudly, Elona let her eyes meet his. 'What more indeed, my lord? If you truly mean all you say, fortune hath smiled on us today.'

Raoul suddenly threw back his head and laughed, his strong teeth gleaming whitely against the tan of his skin. 'In truth you puzzle me, lady. I vow there's less meekness in you than you would have me believe.'

'How so, my lord?' Elona veiled her eyes, speaking softly, if I have offended you by seeking to defend my brother, I do most humbly beg your pardon for it.'

The smile left Raoul's face and his eyes narrowed. When the wench pretended to be meek and mild all of a sudden, it aroused his suspicions once more. He liked her better when she spat fire at him.

'You have not offended me, though I believe you have not told me all the truth. Yet I shall not hold it against you. Our peoples are enemies, and you have no reason to trust me.'

'Yet you might have killed me half an hour since,' Elona replied, looking thoughtful. 'Why did you not kill me if you think me a spy?'

Raoul was wondering much the same thing. It would be safer to kill both of them and have done with it, yet he remembered how valiantly they had both fought against impossible odds and he found himself making excuses for them in his mind. Perhaps the girl's story was true . . . Besides, there was something in the way she had first looked at him which stirred him strangely.

'Raoul de Bainwulf makes no war on women or boys,' he declared. 'It is almost supper-time, and I must make sure the guards are posted. Are you hungry?'

Elona looked at him eagerly, forgetting all fear of him as her stomach rumbled. 'Ravenously! I have eaten only a few berries today.'

Raoul's lips curved in a smile, which suddenly made him seem more like a man and less a fearsome warrior. 'Then you shall eat first and afterwards you will sing for us.' His eyes gleamed with mockery. 'You can sing?'

Elona's eyes flashed with pride. 'You shall judge for yourself, my lord de Bainwulf, when we have supped.'

His laughter brought an angry flush to her cheeks so that she glared at him for a full moment before remembering that she was supposed to be meek and obedient.

'I shall look forward to it, my lady,' he said, bowing to her. 'it's a long time since I have heard a woman sing.'

He went away, leaving the flap tied back so that there was no chance for her to wriggle out unseen through the narrow gap at the back which served as a window. Her eyes travelled slowly around her prison: there were no bars to keep her in, only a few wooden poles and walls of leather, yet she was still the Norman's prisoner as surely as the dawn would come next day. Only a fool would try to escape from such a man!

She examined the shelter with interest. Since the camp was by its very nature a temporary affair, there was no furniture of any kind. In the far corner lay a long shield, which was pointed at one end—Lord Sigebert's shield was smaller and rounder, and Elona touched the strange armour curiously. In many ways her father's weapons were more striking, often decorated lavishly with silver and gold. Yet she thought the Norman's shield would offer more protection to its bearer. His sword was longer and lighter, too.

Seeing a blanket rolled up beneath the shield, Elona spread it on the dry earth and sat down. Since she had nothing to do but wait for her captor to come back, she removed her head-rail and began to unwind her plaits. In the purse hanging from her girdle was a small bronze comb which she used to remove the tangles. She hummed a little tune to herself as she methodically divided her long hair into sections and began to weave them in and out.

Absorbed in the familiar task, she was for some time unaware that the Norman had returned and was watching her from the threshold. She was smiling as she glanced up, a small gasp escaping her as she saw him. He was watching her intently, his eyes wearing a strange faraway look that she could not understand.

'Your pardon, lady,' he said stiffly, 'I came to tell you that your cart has arrived. I thought you might be more comfortable with your own things about you.'

Elona stared at him, surprised by this show of thoughtfulness. 'You will let me keep my cart?' she asked. 'Are you not afraid I shall run away?'

He smiled oddly, it will make the travelling easier for you—But your horse will be removed at night and guarded with the others.'

'I understand.' Elona blushed as his eyes were drawn irresistibly to her hair, and she covered her head quickly. 'When are we going to join the main army?'

'Why do you ask?' Raoul's voice had gone cold, and Elona bit her lip as she saw that he was looking almost angry again.

'I—I was just curious, my lord.'

'It is not necessary for you to know where we are bound. Come, you may finish your task in more comfort.' He held out his hand to Elona imperiously.

She took it, trembling a little as she felt his cool fingers close around hers. Glancing up at her captor's face and seeing the stern slant of his mouth, she felt her knees tremble. She was acutely aware of the strength in his hard, muscular body: his shoulders were at least as wide as Oslac's, but there was not a particle of excess flesh anywhere to be seen. As yet she had no idea what colour his hair might be, for he was wearing a leather hood, but there was just a trace of dark stubble on his chin.

For a moment she allowed herself to wonder what he would look like without the protective headwear—was his hair long and curling or short and straight?—then she shut out the thought and scolded herself for being a fool. To let herself think of this man, even for a moment, as anything but a dangerous enemy was madness! From now on she must concentrate on finding a way of escape.

There was certainly no chance of slipping away as the Norman escorted her to her cart. She was aware of the curious stares of his men, lifting her head a little higher as their eyes followed her hungrily. Despite the sheltered existence she had lived, Elona was no fool. She had seen that look in men's eyes before and knew that only the respect in which this Norman's men held him prevented them from taking her for their sport. Had he not been present when she was captured she would certainly have been raped by the man who caught her, and probably by the others as well. She might even have been dead by now.

Whatever their leader planned to do with her, it could not be worse than she would suffer at the hands of his men. Elona realised she would be foolish to antagonise her captor, and she smiled as he helped her into the cart.

'I thank you for your thoughtfulness, my lord,' she said, looking at him almost shyly.

Raoul frowned, an odd expression on his face, 'I shall set only my most trusted men to stand guard over you. Nevertheless, you would be well advised to wait here until I come for you.'

Elona lowered her eyes. 'I understand, Lord de Bainwulf. I shall do exactly as you bid me.'

His frown lightened. 'So meek, Mistress Elona? I wonder if you know how much you tempt me to test your modesty?'

Gasping as she saw the mocking light in his eyes, Elona shrank back into the interior of the cart and pulled down the heavy curtain. Sitting on a small wooden stool inside, she clasped her arms tightly about herself as her limbs began to shake uncontrollably and her courage failed. Suddenly she was overcome with terror, the full realisation of the danger she was in hitting her like a falling log and knocking the breath from her body.

Elona had just come to the conclusion that Raoul de Bainwulf might prove more dangerous than his men!



## CHAPTER THREE

ELONA KNEW not how long she sat there, her shoulders bowed as she gave in to her utter despair. In her mind was only one thought: she had escaped from her father only to become the prisoner of a man whose very eyes sent shivers of fear running down her spine. With a sense of relief she heard Cedric's voice calling to her, and started up with a cry. In her own misery she had forgotten the young harper—at least she was not completely alone in the enemy's camp.

'May I come in, my lady?'

Elona hastened to draw back the curtain. 'Come in, Cedric,' she cried. 'Thank God they have not harmed you!'

'I have nought but a few scratches. Forgive me for betraying your whereabouts to the Normans, my lady, I thought only to warn you.'

'It was not your fault,' Elona reassured him. 'I should have warned you to take care lest it was an enemy camp.'

'It would have done no good—they saw me long before I realised what was afoot. I ran back to you as quickly as I could.'

'I know.' She smiled at him. 'Don't blame yourself, Cedric. You could not have prevented this. Even if you had not approached their camp, they would probably have found us. I am sorry to have made you run away with me. If—if they should decide to kill us, it will be my fault.'

'I do not think they mean to kill us,' Cedric said. 'Lord de Bainwulf has given orders that we are not to be molested, providing we do not try to escape. But I'm afraid he means to keep us prisoners, my lady.'

'Yes.' Elona sighed deeply. 'Lord de Bainwulf seems to imagine we are spies: I cannot think why. You must remember to call me by my name, Cedric. I told him you were my brother, thinking to protect you.'

'Was that wise? If you told him who you really are he might ransom you to your father.'

'Yes, I know—don't you see I cannot do it?' Elona said passionately, her eyes bright with unshed tears. 'I will not go back. I would rather be the Norman's captive than marry Oslac. Besides, I shall find some way of escape.' She made her voice sound more confident than she felt.

'It might be dangerous to try. I do not believe all the Normans would be as merciful as the Lord de Bainwulf. When they caught us, I thought we would be killed immediately. I am sure we should have suffered greatly if he had not come when he did. Besides, the news is bad, and there is no way we could avoid being recaptured.'

'Is there news of the war?' Elona looked at him anxiously. 'Please tell me? I would rather know the truth.'

'We are not the only prisoners.' Cedric frowned and hesitated, as if wondering to tell her all he had heard, 'I met an old man who tends the beasts. He says there was a great battle at Hastings three days ago. Hundreds were slain, and some say King Harold is dead—though others maintain he was carried wounded from the field.'

'The King dead?' Elona paled. 'Oh, Cedric, I cannot believe it! It's too terrible . . .' Her thoughts turned to Lord Sigebert and the men who had marched with him. 'Do you think our people were killed?'

'If the battle took place when the old man says, I doubt whether our men had reached the King in time to fight. Your father has probably returned to the village by now, my lady.'

Elona smiled at the boy. 'I shall pray it is so. I should not wish harm to come to him, despite . . .' She broke off as the tears again stung her eyes. It was so unfair! If her father had only listened to her pleas she need not be sitting in this cart so far from her home—and a prisoner of the Normans!

Cedric touched her hand, understanding what she did not say. 'Perhaps Lord Sigebert would forgive you if you explained why you ran away, my lady. Would it not be better to let the Norman sue for your ransom?'

Elona sighed, but shook her head decisively. 'No. I wish my father no harm, but I shall never go back. The few days of freedom we knew were more precious to me than you realise. If you love me, Cedric, do not betray me, I beg you?'

The boy's smile held a hint of reproach. 'You know I would not, sweet lady. You have ever been kind to me, and I do most truly love you.'

'Then let Lord de Bainwulf believe me to be your sister, and the pair of us no more than travelling harpers.'

'You will sing for the soldiers tonight?' Cedric's eyes were anxious as he looked at her lovely face, knowing full well that her beauty was a temptation to any man, but more especially to rough soldiers who were far from home.

'Yes, I shall sing for them,' Elona smiled, her mind filled with dreams. 'Do you remember how we oft sang together on gloomy afternoons to cheer ourselves? You always said I knew your songs as well as you.'

'And sang them as sweet as any bird.' Cedric nodded, his expression sparkling as he caught her mood. 'It is not fitting that you should perform for these men, but it will be a merry jest to deceive them.'

'This is how I must earn my living from now on,' Elona reminded him. 'As well to sing for the soldiers as for countryfolk in a market town. We shall earn our food and a bed—perhaps a coin or two. Besides, we shall escape as soon as we can. You must watch carefully, Cedric, and tell me all you see. In time we will find a way to slip away unnoticed.'

Cedric knelt to her and kissed her hand. 'I shall never desert you while I live, my lady. Ask what you will of me.'

Elona smiled, ruffling his soft hair gently. He might have truly been the brother she had named him, for he was as dear to her as any she had ever known.

'Leave me now to prepare for this evening, for we must please the Lord de Bainwulf and his men tonight or they may put us to the task of feeding the hogs!'

It was growing dark when Raoul de Bainwulf came to fetch Elona, but he carried a torch to light their way and there were others set up at intervals about the camp.

The smell of meat roasting over the fire mingled with that of the burning pitch and smoke, reminding the girl just how hungry she was. The Norman led her to a place of honour within the circle of soldiers, indicating that she should sit on the rough stool which had been hastily made for her from fallen branches and spread with a thick blanket.

'Eat and drink, lady,' he said, a smile flickering about his lips. 'It's not often we have such company, and we are all anxious to hear your songs.'

'And so you shall, my lord, when we have eaten.' Elona gave him a gentle smile, remembering for the moment that she must behave with due modesty. 'We shall be happy to entertain such a goodly company.'

Raoul bowed, acknowledging her words with a little nod of his head.

A sword sliced through the haunches of a roasting pig and the fire hissed as fat oozed out into the flames. Elona was offered a chunk of piping hot meat on the flat of de Bainwulf's blade, and she tried to take it, laughing as she burnt her fingers in her eagerness. Raoul speared the meat with a small knife, giving her the handle so that she could eat without burning her fingers. She smiled at him gratefully, tearing at the flesh with her strong teeth and cooling her palate with a horn of sweet wine.

Watching her, Raoul smiled a little. She ate with all the natural delicacy of a cat, but a cat who had gone hungry for a while.

'It is but plain soldiers' fare,' he said. 'We shall do better another day.'

'Nothing could taste sweeter than this meat,' Elona replied, licking her fingers clean. 'I was so hungry.'

The Norman laughed, and she thought his harsh features looked almost handsome in the firelight. The yellow glow of the flames made his eyes seem less cold than in the true light of day; and his mouth had a softness about it which had not been there earlier.

'Would you have more? Some cheese, perhaps, though we have no bread to offer you.'

Elona shook her head. 'No, I have eaten enough. Now I shall pay you for my supper.'

She stood up and walked a little closer to the fire so that she was clearly visible to all those watching, the flickering flames turning her skin to a creamy gold. She let her eyes travel round the expectant faces, feeling the strangeness of the occasion. In her village the doors and windows would all be barred against the night, and yet she was here by the campfire about to sing for her enemies. Elona knew she ought to have been trembling with fear, but oddly she felt only a rising excitement as her heart began to beat faster.

Settling her small harp against her shoulder, she ran her fingers lightly over the strings. 'I shall sing you a song my brother taught me,' she said, knowing that the words would mean little to the soldiers. 'It is a warrior's farewell to his love.'

Elona ran her fingers over the strings once more, a smile on her lips and a faraway look in her eyes as she began to sing in a high, clear voice, already losing herself in the sweetness of the music.

O come to me, my sweet beloved,  
For I have loved thee, loved thee, loved thee,  
For I have thee ever loved.

With the coming of the dawn,  
I must leave thee, leave thee, leave thee,  
To follow the warrior's horn.

Great is the pain within my breast,  
Though I no coward be; and yet, I afear'd be,  
Lest I should die never knowing thee.

So come to me, my sweet beloved,  
And let me taste your lips so red,  
For I have loved thee, loved thee, loved thee.

O let me live one night with thee,  
Then I content to die shall be,  
For I have loved thee, loved thee ever.

O send me not away this night,  
For then no heart shall I have to fight,  
Having known thy sweet love never.

Come lie with me, my sweet beloved,  
And let me enter Heaven's gate,  
Lest come the dawn, 'tis too late.

Come lie with me, my sweet beloved,  
For I have loved thee, loved thee, loved thee,  
For I have thee ever loved.

There was silence as Elona finished her song: it was as though the sweet poignancy of her clear voice had touched a chord deep within the soldiers' hearts, reminding them of homes and loved ones left behind. Then, all at once, there was a murmuring in every throat which grew to a great roar as they all began to cheer and bang their shields, calling for her to sing again.

After a while Raoul de Bainwulf held up his hand for silence. 'The girl has paid for her supper; let the boy entertain us now.'

He took Elona's arm, his fingers biting into her flesh as he led her away from the firelight. Cedric had begun to sing a merry ditty, the soldiers humming the tune and laughing at his antics. Although they could understand but few of the words, Cedric had a way of communicating his meaning so that they roared with laughter and cheered him.

Listening to the sound of their merriment, Elona was aware of the coldness in the man who walked beside her. She stole a fleeting glance at his hard profile, wondering what she had done to make him angry—for he was angry; she could sense it.

'We shall keep you from your bed no longer, lady,' Raoul said, propelling her towards the cart. 'We break camp at first light and you will need to rest.'

Elona bit her lip, wondering at the hard note in his voice. 'Did you not like my song, my lord?'

He stopped walking and turned her to face him, a cold glint in his eyes. 'It's as well my men understood only a few words of it,' he grated harshly. 'Think you it was a wise choice, Elona? Your beauty has already made them restless.'

'Oh!' Elona's cheeks flamed, and she could not meet the accusing look in his eyes. 'I did not think . . .' She turned her face aside. 'It's a pretty tune...'

She dared to lift her eyes to his as he remained silent. A tiny pulse was beating in his right temple, and as she looked up at him she saw that a dark flame had begun to glow in his eyes. Elona drew a sharp breath as the Norman's hands gripped her shoulders and he drew her against him. The flinty eyes burned down into hers with such fierceness that she began to tremble, her heart drumming frantically like a bird in a trap. Her lips parted in a sigh as she waited for the inevitable kiss, a curious ache in her breast. She felt that now she was truly his prisoner, her fate resting in the firm hands which held her so securely. Here in the darkness she was aware of tension in

him, a throbbing awareness of her as a desirable woman, and she waited in breathless silence for what must be.

'Your brother shall sleep beneath the cart,' Raoul's harsh voice broke the spell as he suddenly thrust her from him. 'I shall not be far away if you call. And remember, Elona, I am a light sleeper. So think carefully before you try to slip away in the darkness.'

Elona trembled, relief sweeping over her as he turned away. 'I—I shall not try to escape tonight, my lord. I am too weary,' she said, seeing a wry gleam in his eyes as he glanced back at her. 'Good night, my lord.'

'Sleep well,' was the only reply as he disappeared into the shadows.

Elona climbed into the cart, feeling weak and drained of energy. She knew that Raoul de Bainwulf had wanted her in those few moments, and that he had been tempted to take his will of her. Something had made him change his mind, but she knew not what. She could only fall upon her knees and give thanks for her safe deliverance.

It was dark inside the cart once the flap was down, and Elona crept beneath the blankets, hiding her face in the softness of the mantle which she had rolled up to form a pillow.

Outsick^, the singing had long since ceased, and she had heard Cedric's whispered 'Good night' as he curled up underneath the cart some time back, but still she could not sleep.

Lying in the darkness she could yet see the look in Raoul de Bainwulf's eyes as he stared down at her and sent shivers running through her. Elona's shoulders tingled still with the imprint of his fingers, so deep had they dug into her flesh. She had felt herself in imminent danger, and the fear remained with her even now.

Touching the little charm Alfrida had given her, which was sewn inside her tunic, Elona's lips moved in a silent prayer. She was frightened of the



Norman with the cold eyes and fierce moods, though she was not sure why. So far he had treated her with respect, except for that one moment in the darkness, making her feel more like a guest than a prisoner. Yet there was a dark, deep coldness within him. It was like a shield he held against the world, a barrier between him and all others. Elona found herself wondering what lay behind the barrier. She sensed a ruthlessness in him which was frightening, but there was something more, something which fascinated her, yet terrified her . . .

Elona's thoughts were shattered as she heard a bloodcurdling scream, and then shouting and the sound of running feet. All at once the silence of the night was rent with noise and confusion; the shrill whinnying of horses and the clash of iron against iron. More screams and a horrible crackling noise, then the smell of smoke and burning.

Pulling back the curtain to look out, she peered nervously into the darkness of the night. There was a ruddy glow not far from her, and she saw that one of the wagons had been set on fire. The Norman soldiers were running backwards and forwards, beating at the flames and throwing water on the wagon, but to no avail. It was burning fiercely, causing the beasts near by to stampede in fear. Somewhere there was fighting going on, and she could again hear screaming and yelling as swords clashed and resounded against shields.

'Are you all right, my lady?' Cedric's voice called to her.

She scrambled over the edge of the cart and slipped down to join him. 'Yes, what's happening?'

'The camp is under attack. I think they managed to kill one of the guards and set the wagon on fire before the alarm was raised.'

'Then resistance to the enemy still goes on,' Elona said, her spirits suddenly rising. 'Our forces are not yet crushed, despite the battle at Hastings. Can you tell who's winning?'

Cedric's eyes strained through the darkness. 'I cannot see much, my lady, but by the sound of it the attackers are being driven back. The Saxons had the

advantage of surprise, but the Normans are too strong for them now that they are roused. I think there can only have been a handful of them.'

'Then we have no chance of being rescued. Do you think we could slip away in the confusion?'

'On foot perhaps, my lady. We could take what we can carry, but we must leave the cart. The Normans are everywhere now, and someone would be sure to see us if we tried to steal a horse.' Cedric looked at her. 'You would find the travelling hard without the cart, my lady, yet we shall go if you wish it. What would you have us do?'

Elona stared at him, feeling an odd reluctance to flee, now that she had the chance. 'We shall have to wait for another time. We should not get far on foot, and I think Lord de Bainwulf would come after us. I fear his anger if he caught us . . .' Her words trailed away as something moved in the shadows, and then a figure came towards them.

'You are wise to fear it, lady.'

Elona gasped, her eyes widening as the tall Norman moved silently towards them and she saw the anger in his face.

'You—You were spying on us,' she cried. 'Listening to us all the time . . .'

Raoul de Bainwulf inclined his head, his eyes glittering coldly. 'I came to make sure you were safe, and I heard you talking. I listened, hoping to hear something which might give me a clue to your real identity.' His face hardened and his mouth thinned to a cruel line, 'I know you have lied to me. This boy is not your brother, neither are you the minstrel you would have me believe you.'

'What makes you say so?' Elona asked, her heart thumping as her mouth went dry with fear.

'I heard him address you as a servant to a mistress. His words were not those of a brother to a sister.'

'And if it is so?' Elona lifted her head proudly. 'What difference?'

Raoul turned his fierce eyes on the boy, jerking his head towards the fire. 'See what you can do to help,' he ordered.

Cedric hesitated, looking from Elona to the Norman in nervous indecision. 'My lady?'

Elona nodded slightly. 'Do as he tells you, Cedric.'

The boy hesitated, and then ran off to join the line of men fighting the fire.

Raoul was silent for a moment, then he moved nearer to Elona so that she could see the tight line of his mouth and the pulse drumming in his temple.

'I would know who you are, my lady, and the village whence you came. What is your business here? Is it not strange that our camp should be attacked this very night—the first night you are with us?' His eyes glinted like ice as the first rays of the sun heralded a rosy dawn. 'Perhaps it is not I who am the spy, but you.'

Mouth trembling, Elona gazed up at him in silent appeal, feeling the fury in him and fearing it. 'I did not bring those who attacked you, my lord,' she whispered. 'I give you my word—I know not who they are.'

His hand shot out and gripped her wrist, making her wince with pain. 'Tell me who you are!'

Elona shook her head, her face pale but stubborn. 'I cannot, my lord. My name is Elona, as I have said; more I will not tell you. You may do with me as you please, punish me as you will, but I shall not reveal my father's name. Nay, not even if you threaten to kill me.'

'I think pain might change your mind,' Raoul warned, his eyes glinting as she shrank away from him. 'Yet I have never tortured a woman, nor will I do so now. Why will you not tell me the truth? Do you not wish to be ransomed by your family? You must know that it is the custom.'

'I have no family.' Elona's eyes flickered with pride as she gazed up into his unyielding face. 'Kill me, or let me go my way. I am of no use to you. What can you gain by keeping me your prisoner?'

'Ah, now we begin to see what lies beneath that mask of modesty.' Suddenly Raoul laughed, the anger draining out of him. 'Let you go, fair Elona? Nay, I believe you are nobly born and well worth the chest of silver I shall set as your price.'

Elona's chin went up. 'No one will pay such a fool's ransom for me!'

'You think not?' The Norman's lips twisted in an ironic grin. 'Then—what shall I do with you, sweet lady? Answer me that, for I shall not let you go.'

Veiling her eyes with thick lashes, she desperately tried to hide her fear as she saw the glow in his eyes. 'If you will not let me go, I must sing for my supper or work as your servant. I can carry water, and cook, if I must.' She felt a surge of anger against this arrogant Norman and longed to wipe the mocking smile from his face.

'You would rather be my servant than tell me who you are?' Raoul studied her face, tracing the proud slant of her brow and the delicate moulding of her features with his eyes. Her beauty stirred him strangely even when she pretended to docility, but now when he saw the fire in her she lit a flame in him which threatened to consume him. He was tempted to forget the ransom and take the sweeter prize, but something in him warned caution. He felt that this girl might be more important than he yet realised. Whoever her father was, he would not pay a ransom for his daughter if she had been dishonoured. It would be a foolish act to throw away such a prize for what could be only a fleeting pleasure; and yet, as his eyes devoured her soft mouth, Raoul knew a sore temptation to do just that. Suddenly his eyes gleamed with wicked glee as a thought entered his mind, pleasing his wry humour. 'Then I shall take you at your word, Elona. Tomorrow we shall move on, but when we make camp you will help with the fire and the cooking. You will draw water from the stream and serve the men with their food. Since you wish to be a servant you shall have your heart's desire.'

The girl retorted proudly, 'I am not afraid to work.'

'Do not imagine I shall let the boy help you.' Raoul's eyes glittered. 'He will have his own chores. From now on, my men will be on their guard against night attacks. I must warn you that they will be on edge and uncertain of temper. You would be wise to do nothing to anger them.'

Elona bit her bottom lip to stop it trembling. 'Cedric is only a boy, and as gentle as a newborn lamb. He would harm no one, save in my defence. I beg you not to punish him because you are angry with me.'

'If I see him doing the work I have set you, he will be beaten.' The Norman's face seemed to be carved from stone, and she realised how formidable their enemy was. 'Do you understand me, Elona?'

'Yes, my lord.' She clasped her hands meekly before her.

'Very well. I should sleep while you can, for you will find the days long and weary.'

Elona watched as he turned and strode away, her hands clenching at her sides as she smothered the yell of abuse she would have hurled after him. From this moment on, it was to be a battle of wills between them. He would try to crush her spirit, to make her tell him who her father was. But she would never speak. To go back to Oslac now was more than she could bear.

She would die before she gave in!

As she felt Cedric's hand shaking her, Elona groaned, her eyelids feeling as heavy as lead. She stirred as she heard the boy calling her name through the mists of sleep. It couldn't be morning already!

'It's time, my lady. The camp is waking.'

She forced her eyes open, rubbing them with her hands, and sighing as she felt the aching in her limbs begin again. The backs of her eyes felt gritty, and she was so tired that all she wanted to do was to turn over and sleep for a week.

'It cannot be time yet,' she grumbled. 'I feel as if I've only just come to bed. My back aches and my legs are falling off—or they feel as if they are.'

Cedric smiled, sympathising with her despite his own tiredness. 'You rest for a little longer, my lady,' he said. 'I shall gather wood for the fire. Maybe Lord de Bainwulf will not notice for once.'

Sitting up, she threw off the blankets, her mouth firming to a stubborn line. 'No, I must do it. He has forbidden you to help me, and will punish you if you disobey. One of the soldiers carried wood for me yesterday and was put on half rations for a week.' She smiled at the boy. 'I'm all right now that I'm awake. I can manage now, Cedric. Thank you for waking me.'

Cedric looked at her doubtfully, seeing the dark shadows beneath her eyes and the signs of strain in her lovely face. 'It's too much for you, my lady, travelling all day and working so hard. It would try the strength of a man, let alone a lady. Would it not be better to tell the Norman what he wants to know?'

'No.' Elona's eyes hardened with pride. 'I shall work twice as hard before I give in. Go now and tend to your own chores. I shall not be long.'

The boy went off, and Elona began to comb and braid her hair, working swiftly. There was little time to be wasted, yet she was determined to keep herself as clean and tidy as she could, knowing it would give the Norman lord satisfaction if she showed any sign of weakness. She knew he was watching her with the vigilance of a hawk, waiting for her to break.

For the last few days they had marched almost constantly, making camp only when dusk fell. Soon after sunrise they were on the move again, constantly searching for beasts and grain which could be sent back to the main body of the army, which was still encamped in the wooden castle the Normans had erected at Hastings. As soon as the wagons were full, they were dispatched with an escort, returning to join the foragers once they had been emptied of their loads.

It was now Elona's and Cedric's task to feed the hardworking soldiers and the beasts, which were either bought or stolen each day depending on the

attitude of the villagers to whom they belonged. Following with the carts, Elona saw little of the advance party, which rode on ahead to scout and find the isolated villages. But she always knew if there had been fighting during the day, as sometimes she saw smoke when the villagers' huts were burnt as an example to others, and once or twice she had been summoned to tend the wounded. However, more often than not, the villagers drove their kine into the woods to hide them, and they themselves stayed hidden until the Normans moved on; then the soldiers spent hours searching for the beasts and no one was hurt. They simply stole everything they could lay their hands on and burnt a few huts to teach the Saxons better manners.

Leaving the cart this morning, Elona shivered in the chill of late autumn. Curls of mist floated through the woods, and she was reminded of the night she had visited the sacred tree. If she had but guessed how true her vision had been, would she still have left the shelter of her village? Elona believed she would, for she had not yet given up all hope of escaping her watchful captor.

She began to search for dry wood with which to light a cooking fire. Last night she had gathered armful after armful, carting it back to camp before going in search of more, but it had all been burnt. This morning she was forced to walk further afield, searching for fallen branches and twigs.

A rustling in the bushes made her pause. She turned, glancing over her shoulder nervously as she heard heavy breathing and snorting. Then she saw the eyes watching her from a patch of thick bushes: mean little eyes set close together with an evil light in them. Elona gasped with fear, knowing that it was a wild boar. It emerged from the bushes, and she saw the razor-sharp tusks at either side of its snout. Those tusks were capable of killing a man, she knew, and the beasts were unpredictable, often attacking for no apparent reason.

Elona stood perfectly still, her eyes never leaving the animal. She was praying that it would move away, and could only stand where she was until it had made up its mind, not daring to move. Suddenly there were footsteps behind her, and she drew a deep breath. Someone was coming! She hesitated, afraid to call out lest the boar should charge, yet knowing she must warn whoever it was.

'Wait!' she cried. 'Do not come nearer—there is a wild boar!'

The rustling sound behind her stopped, but the boar was pawing restlessly at the ground with its short legs. Then it put its head down and began to charge. She gave a cry of fear and dropped her wood, fleeing in terror before the snorting beast.

A shout startled her, and from the corner of her eye she saw a man rush forward, putting himself between her and the charging boar. She heard a fearsome snorting and grunting, then a pain-filled squeal. Turning, Elona saw Raoul kneeling over the writhing body of the boar to slit its throat. An arrow had pierced the beast's eye, but had failed to make a clean kill.

Trembling, Elona waited until the Norman came to her. She saw the blood on his hands and felt sickness rise in her throat, making her feel faint.

'Are you all right?' His cool voice revived her, bringing her head up sharply. 'It was fortunate that I came prepared to hunt. It is seldom I carry a bow.'

'Yes.' Elona licked her dry lips. 'Thank you, my lord.'

A smile flickered about his mouth. 'It was brave of you to warn me, Elona, knowing that the boar might charge you.'

Her eyes snapped with anger. 'I thought it might be Cedric,' she said haughtily. 'If I had known it was you, I would have kept silent.'

'Would you?' he asked, a challenging light in his eyes. 'Perhaps it would have been the worse for you if you had; the beast might have charged anyway, and I should not have been prepared.'

'The boar could have chosen you, not me!' she retorted. 'Excuse me, my lord, I must retrieve my wood.'

Elona swept by him, picking up her bundle and keeping her eyes averted from the dead animal. In her heart, she knew she would have been torn to pieces by the fierce beast had Raoul not acted so promptly and with such courage. To place himself direct in the boar's path had been to court death.



almost foolishly. By sheer good fortune his arrow had pierced the boar's eye. If it had missed, and struck in any other spot, it would not have stopped the beast; though mortally wounded, a boar could still rip a man's stomach wide open.

Returning to the camp, Elona saw no sign of Raoul, and guessed that he had gone about his business as usual. He was a very thorough man, who let nothing slip past his eagle eye.

Cedric had already cleaned and gutted the fish she was to cook for the men's breakfast. He smiled as she knelt beside him and began to spear the fish on long wooden sticks, turning them over the fire. Her hand trembled a little, but otherwise she showed no outward sign of her frightening experience.

'Are you all right, my lady? You were a long time fetching the wood.'

'Yes, thank you, I'm all right.' Elona smiled at him. 'I was nearly attacked by a wild boar, but I'm not hurt.'

The boy's eyes opened wide. 'What happened?'

'Lord de Bainwulf was hunting with a bow and arrows. He shot the boar through the eye, and then slit its throat.'

'He killed the boar with one arrow?' Cedric stared at her, a look of wonder on his face. Even the bravest of men thought twice before tackling a wild boar. 'It was a miracle that he was there.'

'Perhaps.' Elona's eyes glinted. 'I think he was following me. He often follows me—to make sure I do not try to run away.'

'Or to see that you come to no harm, my lady.'

'You think he would keep watch over me?' she laughed scornfully. 'Have your wits gone a-begging, Cedric? I mean nothing more to that man than a chest of silver!'

'And yet I have sometimes seen a look in his eyes when he thinks himself unobserved. He might be kinder if you tried to explain why you ran away, my lady.'

Elona snorted in derision. 'He would send a demand for silver to my father at once. There is no warmth in that man, Cedric. His heart is made of stone.'

The boy shook his head, but said no more. He knew from long experience that it was of no use to argue when his mistress was in this mood.

## CHAPTER FOUR

THERE WAS an air of activity in the camp. Already some of the soldiers were preparing to leave with loaded carts; they smiled at Elona gratefully as they snatched a few of the cooked fish, eating as they drove before them the sizeable herd gathered the previous day.

When the fish were all cooked, Elona took two buckets down to the stream to fetch water. She knelt on the bank, trailing her hand in the cold water and wishing there was time to wash her hair. She made up her mind that in the evening, after all the chores were done, she would warm some water and slip away somewhere quiet. She could not bear the feel and smell of her hair, all greasy and dirty.

'Dreaming when there's work to be done?' Raoul de Bainwulfs harsh voice startled her. 'The men are thirsty, and we must leave soon.'

A guilty flush stained Elona's cheeks. 'I was just coming.'

She filled both buckets and stood up, her shoulders sagging beneath their weight as she staggered up the bank with them.

As she walked towards him, an angry admiration showed in Raoul's eyes. The Saxon girl's pride continued to both impress and irritate him. Her calmness after he had killed the boar had left him stunned, and his pride wounded, because she had seemed oblivious of the danger they had both been in. He smiled slightly as he admitted to himself that it would have been pleasant to have had her weeping gratefully in his arms.

Seeing Elona stagger, Raoul came up and placed his hand on the rope handles of the buckets. 'Give them to me,' he said. 'You should fill one at a time; they are too heavy for you.'

'It takes too long. I have to fill them both five times to satisfy all your men. By the time I've gathered wood and cooked breakfast, everyone is ready to leave.'

'Show me your hands.'

The command startled her. She looked up at him with a scornful expression. 'Why? So that you can see the blisters for yourself?'

He seized one of her hands, turning it to examine the soft palms, which were red and sore with open blisters. His mouth tightened angrily and she saw the little pulse begin to beat in his temple.

'Why didn't you tell me it was too much?' he demanded. 'I did not mean to kill you, only that you should do your share of the work.' His gaze travelled over her slowly, as he noticed the signs of strain in her face. 'You look tired. I have demanded too much of you. Tonight two of my men will fetch the water, and another shall help you gather wood.'

'I can manage,' Elona began angrily, stopping as his brows rose. 'I—I mean, thank you. I am a little tired. I have not been used to such heavy work. I can spin, sew and weave, and would gladly do so if you asked it of me, but I fear you have scant use for such skills.'

'In supposing that, you are wrong, lady,' Raoul smiled. 'I have a tunic which needs mending, and I'm sure my men can find plenty to fill your time. I would not have you wasting your days in idleness.'

Elona heard the mockery in his voice, and laughed bitterly. 'I can see you do not mean to leave me time for plotting my escape, my lord, despite the generosity of your concessions.'

Raoul's eyes gleamed. 'Tell me what I want to know, and you shall be an honoured guest.'

Elona sighed. 'I cannot. It pains me to defy you, my lord, but I cannot tell you/

'Then you must pay the price for your stubbornness, Lady Elona.' He set down the buckets. 'You are an obstinate wench! I have my own work to do. Tell Cedric to fetch these and be quick about it!'

Elona stood watching as he strode off, puzzled by the sudden change in his manner. She had thought he meant to punish her by setting her so many

tasks, but now it seemed that he had not realised how hard she worked. She sensed that her defiance had angered the Norman again, yet he sought no immediate revenge. Knowing that he need not have decided to lessen her work, she found it hard to understand the working of his mind. If he wanted to break her spirit, why did he not use all the power at his command? There was no doubt that he could have wrung the truth from her by force if he had cared to.

He was simply an impossible man, and there was no understanding him!

Following in the soldiers' wake all day, Elona found her thoughts returning again and again to their leader. Yet she still had no clue to the true nature of this complicated man, and was none the wiser when night came.

Since his orders that she was to be given assistance with her tasks, there were many hands to help gather the firewood. Elona's warm smile had won the soldiers' hearts, and only their leader's strict commands had held them back previously. One or two of them had tried to steal a kiss during the time she had travelled with them, but they accepted her rebuffs with good humour, probably because they dare not risk arousing de Bainwulf's anger. By now, however, they had ceased to bother her, and seemed to treat both her and Cedric as fellows.

Elona had grown used to the jesting and rough comradeship of the camp life, accepting the soldiers' jokes as part of her life. Cedric had settled in even more easily than she had; she knew that his songs and talent for miming had won him many friends among the Normans, who showed him more kindness than had some of his own 'people.

That evening, she finished her work quickly, as she was determined to wash her hair while she had the chance. Fetching a bucket of water, she heated it in a large black iron pot over the fire. When it was warm enough, she tipped it into two smaller buckets and carried them to a thicket at the edge of the camp, where she hoped to be alone. She unbound her plaits, shaking free her long, pale tresses and running her fingers through them. She began to rub the soap in, and was savouring its delicate perfume. It was her own special

recipe: at home she made it in a huge barrel, but had been able to bring only a little of it with her. She rinsed her hair several times, then dried it in a coarse towel as much as she could, singing to herself contentedly the while. A man stood watching her from the shadows.

Raoul had seen the girl disappear into the wood and had followed her, his curiosity aroused. When she removed her head-rail and began to unbind her plaits he had found himself watching in fascination, unable to tear his eyes away from the pale gold of her hair. It was only when she had finished the washing and begun the towelling that he managed to turn away and return to his shelter. The wound he had taken at Hastings was causing him pain and he had meant to ask her to bathe it for him, but now he had decided against it.

After the rough towelling, it would still take a long time for Elona's thick tresses to dry thoroughly, and she meant to build a small fire near her cart to sit by. To reach the cart, she had to pass by Raoul's shelter. Nearing it she paused, wondering once more about the man inside. Sometimes he seemed to be almost approachable, and she wondered if Cedric was right. If she explained why she did not want to reveal her identity, he might understand. Perhaps he would even let her go free. She hesitated, trying to gather her courage to speak to him. Then she realised how foolish her thoughts were. Why should this man listen to her? He was her enemy, and he held her captive in the hope of a rich reward. It was useless to let herself believe even for a moment that he would consider her feelings of more importance than a chest of silver.

About to walk on, Elona heard a stifled groan from within the shelter. She paused, listening intently. Another moan, louder than the first, made her turn round and go back. Without stopping to consider what she was doing, she lifted the leather flap and went in.

A tallow candle was burning in the corner, its yellow light sufficient for Elona to see that the Norman was naked to the waist, his tanned, muscular back turned to her. He was kneeling on the ground, his head bent, and she could see an ugly gash across his shoulder. It was obvious that he was trying to cleanse the wound and meeting with scant success. The girl drew a deep breath to steady herself as she approached him. 'Let me do that for you, my lord. I have a little water left in my bucket.'

She saw the startled look in his eyes as he spun round. 'How came you here?' he demanded.

'I was passing and heard you cry out. That wound needs attention. Will you let me bathe it for you?'

His eyes narrowed and she thought he meant to refuse, then he nodded once. 'Thank you. It's awkwardly situated: I cannot manage it myself.'

Elona put down her bucket. Taking the cloth he had been using, she rinsed it in her clean water and began gently to wipe away the blood and pus. She felt the deep shudder run through him as her hands touched his flesh, and she stopped.

'I beg your pardon, my lord. I meant not to hurt you.'

'You did not,' he replied harshly.

Elona frowned and went on with her task, her hand trembling slightly. The feel of his smooth skin beneath her hand was disturbing.

'This is not a fresh wound,' she said, to break the silence which had stretched between them.

'No, I received it some ten days ago now. It is not deep, but my hauberk rubs against it.'

'You should wear a protective pad, my lord. I have a salve in my cart which will ease it. I shall go and fetch it.'

He turned his head to glance at her over his shoulder. 'I am grateful for your help—but it will not win your freedom.'

Elona's hand trembled. She turned her head aside and would not look at him. 'I did not expect anything, my lord. I do only as much as I would for any other wounded man.' Getting to her feet, she picked up her bucket. 'I shall be only a moment.'

Returning to her cart, Elona quickly found the pot of salve. A piece of cloth was needed to apply it with, so she tore a strip from her only linen shift, then ran back to the Norman's shelter. She saw to her surprise that he was wearing a light wool tunic.

'You must remove your tunic if I am to bind your wound, my lord.'

'I shall do it myself,' he replied brusquely. 'Leave the salve, and go.'

'But you cannot reach . . .' Elona began, gasping as she saw his eyes spark with anger.

'Do you mean to tempt me beyond all bearing?' he demanded hoarsely, his eyes glittering with a strange light. 'Go, before I lose all sense and keep you with me. And cover your head, girl; to see your hair thus exposed is to hear the devil's voice in my ear. I have cast him out, but my men may not have the strength to do likewise.'

'I—I have been washing it,' Elona faltered. 'I—I meant no harm . . .'

'Go!' he croaked, his hands clenching at his sides. 'Will you drive me to madness with your clacking tongue?'

Elona dropped the salve on the ground, gave a cry, and ran from the shelter, scrambling into her cart as fast as she could. Trembling from head to foot, she crept beneath the blankets and covered her face with her hands. This morning she had thought Lord de Bainwulf was softening towards her a little, to the extent that she had almost decided to tell him her secret. Now she knew that to do so would be folly indeed. She had seen something in the Norman's eyes tonight which told her he would never let her go. Only the chest of silver he meant to demand as her ransom kept him from extorting an even higher price from her!

Somehow she must escape before it was too late, but she was carefully watched day and night. If she went at all, it must be on foot, carrying only a few of her possessions. It would make her escape that much harder, but she felt she no longer had a choice. She decided the best time to leave would be when they were all eating supper. The soldiers would be tired and hungry,



and she had noticed they took scant notice of her at this time. Tomorrow night she would hide her things in the woods, one by one, then slip quietly away with Cedric.

Convinced that this would be her only chance, she relaxed and drifted into a deep sleep.

Elona woke later than usual. Surprised that Cedric had not roused her, she hastily combed and braided her hair, remembering to don her head-rail before getting out of the cart. She noticed at once that there was something different this morning: the soldiers all seemed especially busy, and she heard them laughing and talking to one another. They smiled as she passed, but seemed preoccupied.

Finding Cedric preparing some birds he had snared for their breakfast, Elona knelt down and began to help him. 'Tonight we shall slip away when everyone is eating,' she whispered. 'I've decided we must leave the cart and take only what we can carry.'

Cedric stared at her. 'It is too late for that, my lady.'

Elona felt a cold start of fear. 'What do you mean?'

'I heard the soldiers talking earlier. A messenger reached the camp late last night. Duke William has occupied Dover Castle, and we are to join him there before nightfall.'

'Is that where we are going?' Elona shivered, knowing it would be almost impossible for them to escape once they had joined the main army within the castle walls. 'Then we must leave now—At once!'

Cedric frowned, and she sensed a reluctance in him she had not noticed before. 'How can we leave without being seen? Would you go with nothing to keep you warm at night? The winter snows will not be long, my lady, and we should die of cold. Without our harps we could not earn enough to feed ourselves, let alone get a bed for the night.'

Elona stood up, her eyes wild. 'But I must get away. I must!'

'Keep your voice down, my lady, you are being watched. Here comes Lord de Bainwulf,' Cedric warned, lowering his own voice to a whisper. 'We can slip away on the road, maybe. We must watch for our chance.'

Elona nodded, her face pale as she turned to meet the Norman lord. 'Good morrow, my lord. How dost thy shoulder?'

'Better, I thank you, my lady.' Raoul's cold eyes seemed to look through her. 'I beg your pardon if I in any way offended you last even. I had a fever and was not myself.'

'Oh . . .' She breathed a sigh of relief as she saw that his eyes were cool and calm. 'You were indeed a little strange.'

'I believe I was most ungrateful for your kindness.' He smiled at her. 'Of late I have had little time to spend as I would wish. Today I shall ride with you, my lady, and perhaps you would play your harp for me?'

Elona's heart sank. If he meant to ride with her, she would have no chance to slip away. She lowered her thick lashes to hide her eyes from his knowing gaze.

'You must not waste your time with me, my lord. I would not have you neglect your duties for my sake.'

His eyes moved slowly over her face, noticing the unusual pinkness in her cheeks. 'My duties are done for the present; we now have sufficient supplies. Besides, Duke William commands that we make all speed to join him.'

'At Dover Castle?'

Lord de Bainwulf spoke gruffly. 'I see you have learned enough of our language to glean the gist of careless talk. Still, it matters not now. Yes, we shall rest at Dover this night.'

'And for how long will you keep me there?' Elona looked at him tensely, digging her nails into the palms of her hands as she waited for his answer.

He smiled slightly. 'Until you tell me who you are.'

'Then nothing has changed, my lord.'

'Nor will it, my lady.'

Elona set her mouth stubbornly. 'I shall never tell you.'

'Then you shall never leave me.'

The satisfaction in his voice brought Elona's head up, her eyes sparkling with anger. 'Do not be so sure of that, my lord.' She saw that startled look on his face and smiled a secret smile. 'You would not be the first to believe you had me fast.' With that parting thrust she walked away and left him staring after her.

Throughout the day Raoul de Bainwulf rode beside Elona's cart. Oft-times she caught him glancing at her with a puzzled look, and sensed that he was wondering about her.

It pleased her to know she had made him uneasy, and she smiled to herself. A taunting, secret smile which made him frown when he saw it.

'Why do you smile so?' he asked at last, unable to hold back longer.

'Would you have me weep, my lord?' Elona's eyes gleamed with defiance.

'No.' An answering glint flared in his grey eyes. 'I would have you sing for me.'

Elona tipped her head to one side, studying his face. He had not asked her to sing for the soldiers since that first night, though Cedric did so regularly.

'What would you have me sing?'

'The song you gave me us your first night in our camp.'

'I thought it displeased you?'

'You did not sing it for me alone that night.'

Elona's heart jerked as she saw the burning look he gave her. 'And I will not sing it for you now,' she said, a tone of pride in her voice.

He laughed. 'Methinks you would exact payment for my rudeness last even. Come, do not be churlish, lady. I shall sing it with you. How did it begin? Ah yes, it was thus: O come to me, my sweet beloved . . .' His eyes moved over her in a lingering caress. 'Please sing it for me, Elona.'

Her heart twisted as she heard the coaxing note. 'You do not deserve that I should sing for you.'

'And yet you will.'

Elona flicked down her lashes as her heart began to beat wildly. 'If you command me, my lord,' she whispered.

'I do command you, Elona.'

She drew a sighing breath. Reaching into the back of the cart, she took up her harp. 'Then I must do as my lord commands, for I have no choice.'

'No choice?' His brows went up and a mocking smile played about his sensuous mouth. 'She wears that meek face again, but her eyes betray her. Sing to me, sweet lady. Sing because you wish it.'

Compelled by something in his eyes, she ran her fingers lightly over the strings, her eyes drawn to his by a stronger force than her own will.

O come to me, my sweet beloved,  
For I have loved thee, loved thee, loved thee,  
For I have thee ever loved.

His deep voice joined with hers, sending a shiver down her spine.

With the coming of the dawn,  
I must leave thee, leave thee, leave thee,  
To follow the warrior's horn.

Elona's fingers trembled, and she touched the wrong string. Raoul's lips parted in a wolfish grin. 'Do I make you nervous, my lady? Then I shall let you sing alone.'

Elona drew a deep breath, avoiding his eyes as she began again. He let her sing alone until she reached the second from last verse. Her eyes flew to his face as he suddenly joined in again.

Come lie with me, my sweet beloved,  
And let me enter Heaven's gate,  
Lest come the dawn, 'tis too late.

Elona stopped playing abruptly, her face pale as she looked at Raoul. His mouth curved in a wry smile, and she knew he was taunting her to pay her back for what she had said earlier.

'Have you forgot the last verse, my lady?'

'No. I do not wish to sing any more.' Her voice was low with anger.

'Does your throat hurt?'

'No.'

'Perhaps you have no breath left?'

Elona's cheeks began to burn. 'I wish you will not question me so, my lord.'

'Ah, then, it was my voice which upset you. I vow I did not think it was so very bad.'

'You sing well enough.'

'A pretty compliment, my lady. I do thank you for it.' He laughed suddenly. 'Well, I shall not press you longer,

Elona. Chance has saved you for now at least. Look, there lies Dover Castle: our journey's end.'

Elona looked in the direction he was pointing. Seeing the dark, forbidding walls of the fortress, she shivered, a feeling of desperation descending on her. Once inside, there would be little chance of escaping her tormentor.

Her eyes flew to his, terror leaping in them. The mockery faded from his face. 'Why so frightened, my lady?' he whispered. 'You have only to tell me who your father is, and your ordeal is at an end.'

'Never!' Elona's eyes flashed fire. 'Tease me how you will, my lord; taunt me and threaten all manner of vileness; and still I shall not speak.'

'And if I did more than threaten?' His face hardened all of a sudden. 'What then?'

'You would lose that which you most desire.'

'Maybe.' He looked at her strangely. 'Yet since I am no longer sure what I most desire, Elona, I may be tempted to forgo one to claim the other. Take care you do not arouse the devil in me, for if you do I know not what may come of it.'

'Then I must take care to obey you, my lord/ She looked down meekly. 'Would you have me sing for you again?'

'Another time, my lady. I must ride on ahead now.' He bared his teeth in a grin. 'Lest you think to slip away even now, I shall take young Cedric with

me. I doubt you would care to leave him to my tender mercies if I found you had fled!"

With that, he spurred his horse forward, stopping by the youth who walked ahead of them to catch him up on his horse. He paused to throw a glance of triumph over his shoulder at Elona before riding on towards the castle.

Elona ground her teeth in frustration. If Raoul knew her so well, what chance had she of ever winning free? He had the Devil's own cunning, seeming to read her mind with ease. He had guessed that she might make a desperate attempt to escape at the last moment, and had made sure she could not.

As the cart-wheels rumbled over the wooden bridge leading into the castle, she felt her spirits sink. Now she was really a prisoner of the Normans. Oh, why had she not seized her chance to run away earlier? There had been times when she might have managed it if she had been prepared to leave most of her possessions behind. And yet somehow she knew that even if she had, Raoul de Bainwulf would not have let her go. He would have pursued her, caught her, and brought her back.

The only way to be free of him was to let her father ransom her and return to Oslac. Yet even as her mind went round and round in frantic circles, she knew that she would rather die.

Life in the castle was very different from the days Elona had spent on the road with Raoul de Bainwulf and his men. They had been carefree and pleasant, despite the hard work and constant travelling; now there was only work and the misery which kept her from sleep even when she crawled exhausted into her small corner of the kitchens.

It was almost a week since she had passed through the huge wooden gates which guarded the castle. Sent with the other Saxon captives to work in the kitchens, Elona had experienced bitter humiliation. Here there was none of that easy camaraderie of the road; instead there were harsh words and blows if she was slow to carry out an order from those set to watch over the Saxon

slaves. In all this time she had scarcely seen Lord de Bainwulf, catching only glimpses of him in the great hall when he sat at the high table next to Duke William.

Like many other Saxons, Elona waited on the tables, but she had not been put to serve the Duke's board. She could only glance towards Raoul for fleeting moments before someone cuffed her ear and sent her scurrying back to the kitchen for more food. Yet she knew it was he who made sure that the food Duke William and the other nobles ate was not poisoned by making one of the servants taste every dish brought to the table. So far the device had been enough to prevent any attempt on their lives.

Elona was not sure what she had expected to happen when they reached the castle, but it was certainly not to be totally ignored by her captor. As well as the other servants, she had almost complete freedom within the castle walls, and she thought it might be possible to slip away if she watched for an opportunity. No one seemed in the least interested in yet another Saxon kitchen wench, except to find her work to do whenever she caught their eye. Yet Lord de Bainwulf's cunning had made her as much his prisoner as ever.

Now she knew just why he had taken Cedric on ahead of him. He had given the boy to Duke William as a gift. Pleased with the young harper's delicate looks and sweet voice, the Duke kept him always at his side, feeding him with the choicest meats and fruits from his table. He was the prisoner, though he dwelt in a gilded cage, and without him Elona dared not leave.

Watching Cedric singing for the Duke, Elona was not aware of the man until he spoke to her. She jumped guiltily as she realised she had been dreaming, expecting to be boxed about the ears.

'Take this wine to the Duke's table.' A large pitcher was thrust into Elona's hands by a servant she had not seen before, and she was pushed forward. 'Be quick about it, wench!'

Elona glared at him with indignation. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him to take the wine himself, but just in time she recalled her lowly position in this place.



As the hall was so crowded, she could make her way only slowly, and her heart was thumping. She could not look at her captor as she went down on one knee before him to offer the wine. Then, knowing that the servant had to taste whatever was brought to table, she lifted the pitcher to her lips.

'No!' he said harshly. 'Wait. You!—come here and taste this wine.' He pointed at the servant who had given the pitcher to Elona. 'Yes, you! Come here, I say.'

The man turned pale, his eyes rolling as he silently backed away.

'Seize that man!' de Bainwulf's roar stunned the nobles to hushed silence as every eye turned upon the luckless servant. In a moment he was surrounded, his arms seized by a dozen hands. 'Bring him here to me.'

The man was dragged struggling and swearing towards the high table, then pushed roughly to his knees before de Bainwulf. He stared up at the Norman lord, his skin turning a ghastly grey as he began to sweat with fear.

Raoul took the pitcher from Elona and thrust it at the servant. 'Drink!' he commanded, his eyes glittering like black ice.

The man shook his head, renewing his struggles in a desperate attempt to break free. A soldier struck him on the back of his neck and he sagged forward, groaning.

'Drink!' Raoul repeated his command as a deathly silence descended over the hall and everyone craned their necks to see what was happening.

The servant was almost fainting in his terror, his eyes bulging from their sockets as the pitcher was forced against his mouth. 'Have pity, my lord,' he cried at last. 'It was not I who poisoned the wine. I was forced to do it!'

'Drink, or tell me who paid you to do this filthy work!'

Raoul tipped the pitcher so that the wine spilt out and ran over the man's lips and down his chin. The servant clenched his teeth, writhing frantically as he tried to twist his head away. In his desperation he managed to break free

from those who held him, scrambling on his knees in an effort to escape certain death. But before he had gone more than a few feet, one of the soldiers plunged a sword into his back and he fell to the ground, blood bubbling from his mouth. Within seconds he was dead.

'God curse the fool,' Raoul muttered as the servant's body was dragged away, 'I could have made him talk in time.'

'His death will serve as a warning to those who sent him,' Duke William seemed unconcerned by the whole affair. 'Perhaps the girl knows something.'

'No! She had no part in this.' Raoul's denial was swift and certain. 'She meant to drink the wine herself. Besides, I know the wench, and can vouch for her innocence.'

Duke William's brows went up as he heard the sharp note in de Bainwulf's voice. 'So sure, my friend? Well, have it your own way. With your sharp eyes to protect me I need not start at shadows. I was thinking . . .' His words trailed away as a commotion at the other end of the hall drew his eyes. 'In God's name, what . . .?'

A man came striding through the hall towards them. His tunic was torn and there was blood seeping from a wound in his right arm. Reaching the high table, he fell on his knees before the Duke, bowing his head.

'We were attacked, my lord,' he said in a voice weak from loss of blood and exhaustion. 'We traded with the villagers as you bid us, paying for what we took in good silver. It was as we returned that they fell on us, coming out of the wood at dusk so that we knew not what was happening.'

Duke William's fist crashed into the table. 'That's the second time of late. Who are these men who strike like thieves in the night and then slink into their holes to hide like rats by day? Why don't they come out and fight in manly fashion?'

'It must be the same band who attacked us,' Raoul said thoughtfully. 'We drove them back, but they may have grown stronger now. This rumour that

Harold lives and is in hiding keeps the spirit of resistance alive, though it is false, as we know. His body was claimed by his mistress and identified as the King.'

'There was nigh on a hundred of them.' The wounded soldier looked eagerly at de Bainwulf. 'But we took one of them alive and he told us their leader's name—after some persuasion. It is a Saxon thane by the name of Sigebert . . .'

Elona's sharply indrawn breath was noticed by no one but the man closest to her. His grey eyes narrowed as he saw her face turn pale, but he said nothing for the moment, turning once more to the soldier.

'And is your captive still alive?'

With a sigh, the soldier shook his head. 'Alas, my lord, he died soon after giving us the information we wanted.

De Bainwulf shrugged his shoulders. 'A pity. I should have liked to question him myself.'

'Nevertheless, you have done well,' Duke William said to the soldier. This news you bring will no doubt prove of use. Go now and tend your hurts.'

'Thank you, my lord Duke.' The soldier got to his feet, bowing as he walked away.

'What think you of this news, de Bainwulf?' The Duke's expression was thoughtful. This thane is a thorn in my flesh. He pricks, and blood flows. Shall we send a raiding-party and burn down every village we find until we flush him from his lair? It would teach these churlish knaves a lesson.'

Raoul frowned, it would cause much ill-feeling among those who have done us little harm, my lord. Besides, he would flee into the forest and we could search for days and never see a sign of him or his men. I think there might be another way to put an end to the Lord Sigebert's games.'

'How so? I can treat with those fainthearts who hide and tremble in their stockings behind the city walls of London; those fools who would have that weakling Edgar Atheling as their king. If need be I will take London by force and burn it to the ground—but these nightbirds are a festering wound I would fain have cauterised.'

Raoul turned to look at Elona, who had risen to her feet and stood silently waiting. Her heart had slowed right down and she knew he could see the fear in her eyes, but she could not turn away. He had guessed her secret, and no lies would deceive him now. She tasted bitter gall in her mouth and her throat felt as if it would close entirely.

A smile of triumph curved Raoul de Bainwulf's lips as his fingers curled about her wrist and he pulled her forward to face the Duke.

'My lord Duke,' he said quietly. 'May I present to you the fair Lady Elona—daughter of the Saxon thane Sigebert.'

## CHAPTER FIVE

ELONA GASPED, her eyes widening in terror as she felt the Norman's fingers tightening about her wrist, bruising her soft skin in a cruel grip.

'No! No, you are wrong,' she whispered, knowing her lie to be useless. She could not deceive this man with the fierce, cold eyes who seemed to see deep into her mind. 'Please, my lord, I beg you will let me go. I have no part in this.'

Raoul de Bainwulf's eyes glittered with a cold anger. 'Don't lie to me, Elona; I know who you are, now. Remember I could have you beaten just by lifting my hand.'

'Nay, my friend, you frighten the wench with your black looks.' Duke William's calm voice made Elona look at him, her face ashen. 'Come, lady, you have no need to fear us if you speak the truth,' he said, with a slight smile on his thin lips. 'As the daughter of a noble, you shall be shown the respect due to your rank. Though your father has chosen to defy me, I shall not ill-use you.'

Elona looked from the Duke to de Bainwulf: similar in looks with their cold eyes, proud faces and short dark hair, she knew there was little to choose between them. They were both hard, powerful men who would not hesitate to use her as they pleased. As the pressure of de Bainwulf's fingers increased, she knew she was beaten. She could defy him no longer. Looking down at the floor, she fought to hold back the tears which would shame her before her enemies.

'Yes, I am the daughter of Lord Sigebert,' she said quietly. Then, lifting her eyes to Raoul's with sudden pride. 'But if you think to bargain with my father for my life you had as soon kill me now. He will not listen to you, neither will he pay a ransom for me.'

'Your courage pleases me, Lady Elona. Spirit is always admirable in a woman if it is mixed with beauty.' The Duke smiled suddenly. 'My Lord de Bainwulf, I give this lady into your charge. Find our guest suitable accommodation and something better than those rags to wear. It is not fitting

for Lady Elona to sleep and work in the kitchens with the ceorles. In future she shall sit beside me at table.'

Elona raised her head in relief. The Duke's soft words did not deceive her, and she knew he meant to try to break her father's resistance by threatening her life. Yet in the meantime he would treat her gently : it was but a measure of the man. A man who had dared to come across the sea to claim a right he held as sacred.

She scarcely looked at Raoul as he took her arm and led her from the hall. In her heart was burning a fierce hatred for the man who had betrayed her to his duke.

'Duke William shames me,' Raoul said as they left the hall together. I have neglected you since we came to the castle. My duties were such that it did not occur to me to wonder where you slept.'

'A corner of the kitchen was Paradise if it kept me from your sight,' she hissed. 'Why should you care what became of me? I am your prisoner—your hostage.' Her eyes blazed at him with savage fury. I thought myself fortunate not to be thrown into the deepest cell you could find.'

Raoul looked at her, realising the deepness of her humiliation. 'Have we Normans been so cruel, Elona? I believe you have not been beaten or tortured here.'

Elona kept her face averted, not really understanding herself why she felt so betrayed by what he had done. 'Cruelty is not always in the form of a beating. You could have ~~le~~ me go, my lord. You need not have brought me here—you need not have told your master who I am.'

'Ah, so that's why you hate me tonight, sweet Elona.' Raoul gave her an odd look. 'Could I have let you go? I wonder if there was ever a choice . . .'

A twist of pain tore at her heart as she looked at him. How could he betray her so lightly and then look at her in that way?

<sup>k</sup>'I do not understand you, my lord. You speak in riddles.'

'Perhaps I do not understand myself,' he said softly, his mouth curving at the corners. 'Do not be too bitter, my lady, you have no need to fear.'

'Have I not?' Elona stared at him, her eyes bright with tears. 'You do not know my father. He will pay you nothing forme.'

'You would have me believe he values you so little? I think you would mislead me, fair Elona, but it is no matter. Only time will tell.' He stopped and threw open a door. 'Here are your quarters, my lady.'

Raoul stood aside to let her enter a small chamber. It was quite dark inside, for there was only an arrow-slit in the rough stone wall to let in a shaft of moonlight. He took a taper and lit a torch, fixing it into an iron bracket on the wall. As the room came to life in the yellow flare, Elona saw there was a bed, a carved wooden chest and other signs of occupation. Suspicion glinted in her lovely eyes as she turned to look at him.

'This is your chamber!'

' Yes.' He smiled wolfishly, a touch of sharp humour in his voice. 'No, my lady, I do not mean to share it with you— yet. I shall send a servant to fetch my things.'

Elona shivered as she heard the note of warning. He was telling her that she still belonged to him, no matter what Duke William planned for her.

'And where will you sleep?' She turned away so that he could not see her face.

'I shall find a corner somewhere. Pray do not disturb yourself on my account.'

'My—my possessions were taken with the cart when we arrived. I was allowed to keep nothing. I have no clothes but these . . .'

Raoul frowned. 'Those were not my orders.' His eyes darkened with anger as he noticed that she was no longer wearing the heavy silver jewellery which had first warned him of her rank. 'Who took your bracelets from you?'

'A tall man with dark hair—I know not his name. It was not one of your own men. Pray do not trouble about them, my lord. It's my clothes, soap and a comb I need most.'

'You shall have everything you need within the hour.'

'Could I have a bucket of warm water, please?' Elona asked eagerly, her anger forgotten for the moment, 'I would willingly give all I own to feel clean again!'

Raoul laughed, touching a smear of dirt on her forehead. She looked up into his grey eyes and saw that they were clear of mockery for once. Her heart jerked oddly, her lips parting as a little sigh escaped her.

'I shall not demand so much,' Raoul said, bending his head so that she felt the warmth of his breath on her face. 'Yet surely I deserve some reward?'

Her heart began to thud as she gazed up at him. 'What— what would you ask, my lord?'

'One kiss, fair Elona.'

Elona's mouth trembled. 'And if I will not yield so much?'

it is not so much to ask.' His eyes seemed to be pleading with her, their softness melting her heart and turning her limbs to water.

She swallowed hard, fighting against the heady sensation which would rob her of all reason. Forcing herself to remember all her causes to hate him, Elona brought her chin up defiantly.

'And will one kiss satisfy you, my lord, or will you take more?'

'Methinks you do not trust me, lady.' His mockery made anger flare in her heart once more.

'Should I trust a man who brought me here as his prisoner? A man who betrayed me to my enemy?'



Raoul laughed suddenly, his teeth gleaming whitely in the gloom. There was something about him then that made Elona think of a wild dog she had once seen in the village. It had been about to spring on the back of a sheep when the men attacked and killed it. It had died slowly, still snarling at its enemies with its last breath.

'Your caution is wise, fair Elona; I think you know me too well. You are right, it is foolish for a thirsty man to take a sip from the cup, for once he hath tasted the wine he must drink it all.' A wry smile played on his lips. 'A servant will bring the water. Good night, my lady.'

Elona made no answer, avoiding the mockery of his eyes which seemed to challenge her. Why did this man strike such terror into her heart? It was strange that she should fear him so when he had never harmed her physically. For Oslac she had felt distaste and a cold dislike, but he had never caused her limbs to turn to useless jelly. Indeed, except for that last night when he had drunk too freely and insisted on kissing her, she had always been able to keep the thane at distance with nothing more than a disdainful glance.

The Norman noble would not be cowed by a woman's frown, Elona knew it instinctively. It was a dangerous game he played with her, taunting and pressing her to the very edge of the precipice. Now she believed he had deliberately ignored her these past few days, letting her taste the humiliation of working in the kitchens like a ceorle so that she would know him for her master.

She wondered what would have happened had she agreed to his bargain a moment ago. There had been a hungry look in his eyes that Elona found frightening; a fierce yearning which sent chills winging through her body and made her heart beat crazily. Somehow the girl knew that his kiss would have been only the beginning. Had she not resisted, he might be with her even now, consuming her with the fire she had seen in his eyes.

Suddenly she went down on her knees. Head bent and hands clasped in fervent supplication, she prayed for an end to the torment which possessed her mind and body.

A restless night ended with the dawn and the sound of birds singing sweetly somewhere near by. Elona rose and began to braid her hair. It felt clean and fresh against her skin, for de Bainwulf had kept his word despite her stubborn refusal to accept his bargain, and all her needs had been swiftly provided for.

Not only had the servants brought her water and sweet-smelling soap; her clothes, her harp and most of her jewellery had been recovered. Grateful for the comfort of the Norman's bed, Elona had still found it almost impossible to sleep, lying wakeful as she watched the play of moonbeams on the stone flags beneath the narrow window. And when she had at last drifted into an uneasy slumber, her dreams were haunted by a man's face which seemed to float bodiless through the air towards her. Her dreams were so similar to those visions which had terrified her on the night of the moon's waning, when she had visited the sacred tree, that she awoke shivering with fear, convinced she was in the Devil's power.

Now, hearing a knock at her door and a voice calling her name softly, Elona paused in her task, her heart thumping nervously. 'Who is it?'

'It is I, Cedric. May I speak with you, my lady?'

She went quickly to the door, opening it to let the youth enter, and glancing up and down the narrow hall to see that no one was watching. 'Cedric, how glad I am to see you!'

Cedric knelt to her, kissing her hand. 'Forgive me for disturbing you, my lady. I had to come.'

'I was already awake,' Elona replied with a smile, sitting on her stool and beginning to plait her hair once more. 'How did you manage to find me here?'

Cedric's face turned pink and he stared at the floor. 'The servants were gossiping. I heard you had been brought to Lord de Bainwulf's chamber . . .'

He broke off in embarrassment. 'Some believe you are his mistress. I know it's not true, my lady, but it's being said.'

Elona bit her lip, and then replied. 'Lord de Bainwulf gave up his chamber to me, Cedric. I slept here alone last night.'

'It's all foolish gossip.' Cedric frowned. 'I came not to tell you of this nonsense, but to warn you of my mission . . .'

'Your mission? What mission is this, Cedric?'

'The Duke sends me to your father, my lady.' He stared at her With sorrowful eyes. 'Forgive me, I have no choice but to obey my master. I love you dearly and would fain refuse this task, but alas, I am not brave enough to deny him.'

Elona touched his bowed head, guessing the pain and shame he was feeling. 'It's not your fault, Cedric. This is Lord de Bainwulf's work. I see his mind in this scheme. He knows you are the only person the Duke could send whom my father would not kill at once.'

Cedric looked at her with misery in his liquid brown eyes. 'I am to say that Lord Sigebert must surrender with all his men and swear an oath of fealty to the Duke if he would see you again.' The boy drew a sobbing breath, choking as he struggled to hold back his emotion. 'Forgive me, my sweet lady. I had rather die than betray you but—but I am afraid of pain.'

Elona smiled sadly as she saw the shame in his delicate face. 'Do not be ashamed, Cedric. I know well what threats they have used against you. It is no matter. If you refused to do their bidding, another would be sent in your place. Nothing you can do could save me.'

The boy lifted his face to hers pleadingly. 'Then you will not hate me for this betrayal of you?'

Elona knelt beside him. Raising his chin in her hands, she gazed deeply into his eyes and smiled as she saw the love he bore her. Then she kissed him very gently on the mouth.

'You are as dear to me as a brother, Cedric. Do what you must. I shall always love you . . .'

The door of her chamber stood ajar. Becoming aware of a long shadow across the floor, Elona glanced up to see Raoul de Bainwulf standing on the threshold. He was frowning, his face hard as he watched the tender scene he had chanced upon.

Elona got to her feet, her eyes cool and clear as she looked at him. 'Yes, my lord, did you want something?'

The Norman's eyes fixed on Cedric. 'You are needed by the Duke, boy. Go to him quickly!'

Cedric scrambled to his feet, darting an uncertain glance at Lord de Bainwulfs face before hurrying away, and the Norman turned his chilling eyes on Elona.

'No doubt the boy came to tell you of Duke William's decision to send him as his emissary to your father.'

Elona addressed him defiantly. 'He came to beg my pardon for what your Duke would force him to do.'

De Bainwulf frowned, studying her pale face thoughtfully. 'Lord Sigebert would kill any man I sent with such a message. The boy is the only one with a hope of succeeding.'

'He will not succeed.' Elona's voice was calm as she met his gaze. 'Had you asked for money, Oslac might have paid you, but my father will not surrender his sword for my sake. It is a waste of time to send to him.'

Raoul's brows rose. 'Who is Oslac?'

'The man whom I was to have wed.'

He felt the thorn of jealousy prick him as she spoke. 'You were promised to him?'

'Yes.' Elona sighed. 'My father had agreed the price. I should have been married now if the King had not sent to the village for help.'

Raoul's eyes narrowed. 'Then why would you not tell me your name when I asked? You might have been free ere this.'

'I did not want to return to Oslac. Oh, you men!' Elona cried, stamping her foot in a sudden passion she could not control. 'You all think a woman is just another chattel to be traded for the highest price she will fetch. My father sold me to Oslac, but I will die rather than wed him!'

'So it was not to protect him that you kept silent,' Raoul said, a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. 'You do not love him.'

'I hate him!' Elona snapped, her eyes flashing. 'I ran away from my home rather than wed him. Now *you* will send me back to a life of slavery and humiliation. I hate you for making me your prisoner. You are no better than my father or Oslac!'

The Norman's grey eyes were serious as he looked at her. 'I have not offered to sell you to Oslac yet.'

'But your duke would use me to force my father's surrender,' Elona cried, her eyes accusing as she met his angrily. 'You told Duke William that I was Sigebert's daughter.'

'I do not deny it. Your father's resistance will lead others to do the same if he is not stopped. All attempts at defiance must be crushed if William is to have his throne. King Harold is dead, yet there are constant rumours that he lives and was carried wounded from the field to a place of sanctuary. There are still many who hope he will return to lead them to victory. It is a false hope, but while some believe in Harold's return we shall not have peace.'

'What care you for peace?' Elona flung at him. 'You came here to murder and plunder, seeking a throne for your duke and riches for yourself. What matter to you how many men and women die to satisfy your lusts? You will take what you can by force and care naught for the suffering you cause. Oh, why, why, did you come?'

Elona turned away, her shoulders shaking as she fought to hold back her tears. There was silence for a moment, and she thought he had left her alone, then she felt the touch of his hand on her shoulder and shivered.

'You hate me,' he said, his voice harsh with emotion. 'If I told you I did not come here to plunder and seize lands for myself you would not believe me. Why should you? Yet believe me when I say I would have peace between our peoples now, if it were possible!'

Elona turned to gaze up at him with tear-blinded eyes, her mouth trembling. 'You would have our total surrender, my lord! You would make us all vassals of your duke.'

'And would that be so terrible?' he asked softly. 'The Duke is a just and strong ruler. He has a right to the throne, and he takes what is his, that's all.'

'What justice does he offer me?'

'There is much at stake, Lady Elona.' A tiny pulse began to beat in Raoul's temple. 'If you will but trust in me, all may yet be well.'

'What do you know of me or what I want? My thoughts, needs and wishes are naught to you,' she cried furiously.

'Are they not?' he asked with a rueful smile. 'I know only that you would be rid of me if you could. I came to know if you would care to come hawking with me. It's a clear, fine day and I thought you might enjoy a ride in the fresh air—but I see you find my company irksome. I will leave you to amuse yourself as you please.'

Elona's eyes widened in surprise. The prospect of riding across the grassy stretches of open land she had seen from her window was a pleasant one. Hawking was a pastime her father had oft-times enjoyed, but had never allowed her to share, telling her that it was not a woman's place to ride with the men.

She stared at him eagerly. 'You would take me with you?'

'Does the idea please you?' Raoul's brows rose.

'You would really let me ride with you?' She could not keep the excitement from her voice. 'You would trust me not to try and escape?'

Raoul threw back his head and laughed loudly. 'You may try, Elona, but I think you have too much sense. I should catch you on the wing, just as my hawk catches a songbird.' His eyes challenged her, sending little prickles of excitement up and down her spine. 'Well, shall I have a horse saddled for you?'

'Oh yes,' Elona breathed, her face aglow with pleasure. 'I thought I should die shut up in this gloomy old fortress. Please, please take me with you!'

'Come, then, the day is wasting. Stay a moment—the wind is chill and you will need your thickest mantle.' He waited as Elona ran back to fetch it. 'Here, let me help you.' He took it from her, placing it round her shoulders as she smiled up at him, breathless with excitement.

'I have oft watched the hawks fly after the lure, but I have never ridden out with them before.'

As Raoul gazed at her, he was aware that, the signs of strain having gone, she was more beautiful than ever. Her youth and eagerness stirred him, and he wondered how many summers she had seen. He did not think it could have been more than sixteen or seventeen at the most. Now in his thirtieth year, Raoul had never thought to find a woman who could rouse him as this one did.

'In Normandy, my sister always accompanies her husband. She can ride as well as any man, and she has her own hawks.'

'Your sister?' Elona stared at him. She had never before thought of this fierce warrior as having a family.

He read her thoughts, and laughed. 'Yes, I have a sister, Elona, and I once had a mother. I was not brought forth from the earth by the stamp of the Devil's hoof.'

She blushed, lowering her eyes swiftly. 'Sometimes I have thought you the Devil's spawn. In truth I do not understand you, my lord.'

'Then we are of one mind, sweet lady, for I find you a most troublesome wench.' His smile mocked her. 'Be careful lest you begin to trust me, fair Elona. It's best you remember I am the gaoler and you my prisoner.'

'I am not like to forget it.' Elona's eyes glittered as her anger returned briefly.

'Come, then, for the hawks are waiting.' He offered her his arm in courtly fashion, smiling as she laid a trembling hand upon it. 'We shall talk further of this another day.'

It was so good to feel free again, even if the sense of freedom were only an illusion. Riding across the downs and through the woods with the wind on her face and Raoul de Bainwulf at her side, Elona felt intensely happy. The excitement of watching the hawks set loose to chase and catch their prey was but a small part of her pleasure. She felt that she would have been content simply to ride for ever with her companion.

He had chosen two of the soldiers who had been with them on his foraging expedition to accompany them. They greeted her with warm smiles, laughing and jesting as if they were all friends. It was difficult at times to remember that these men were her enemies and she herself a prisoner.

Elona saw her companion looking at her, and smiled at him warmly, finding it impossible to feel angry with him while she was enjoying herself so much. The tension between them had eased as soon as they had left the castle, as though they had both cast off their cares once the shadow of its forbidding walls no longer held them in thrall.

Somewhere a meadowlark was singing its sweet song. The sun had forced its way through a bank of cloud, making the brown waters of a trickling brook leap to sparkling life. The trees had almost all shed the last of their leaves, and were beginning the long winter sleep, yet in Elona's heart it was spring.



She held her face up to the sun, feeling its welcome warmth despite a cool wind. The movement of the horse beneath her made her feel as if she could fly to the heavens above. It was a moment of such intense joy that she laughed aloud.

'You look happy, my lady.'

Elona turned to the Norman lord with a little laugh. 'I am happy. I have seldom enjoyed anything so much!'

His stern features relaxed into a smile, and for the first time Elona was aware of how handsome he really was. Or perhaps she had always known it, but denied it, even as she had denied that his smile had a certain charm.

'Then I am glad I did not let your scolding tongue drive me from your chamber this morning. It would have been a shame to miss such a day as this.'

Elona saw the sparkle in his eyes, but let the challenge pass. 'And I am glad I came, despite your unkindness, my lord.'

'You call me unkind, Elona?' His brows rose.

She flushed. 'No, not today, my lord. Forgive me, that was ungracious. It was thoughtful of you to bring me with you this morning. It's only that you taunt me so.'

'I taunt you? I swear your moods would drive a weaker man to madness! You are at one moment a meek dove, the next a vixen with sharp fangs you would fain plunge into my throat. And you say I taunt you!'

Elona laughed, enjoying a brief moment of triumph. She had never known that a man could be such a pleasant companion. No one had ever teased her like this, and only Cedric had ever spoken to her kindly. It was a heady sensation to be courted in this fashion, and he seemed to be behaving almost like a lover.

'Fie on you, my lord! I am but a weak woman, and your prisoner. You may beat me if my temper displeases you.'

'Perhaps you will drive me to it yet.' Raoul laughed as he saw her eyes spark. How beautiful she was when she was angry! 'Look, Elona, see how the hawk soars through the sky. Ah, that a man might be as free . . .'

Elona stared at him, a strange tightness in her breast. 'You envy the hawk, my lord? Are you not free to come and go as you please?'

He frowned, his eyes darkening. 'A man is sometimes bound by duty, Elona.'

'Your duty to the Duke?'

'The Duke is my sovereign and my friend. I am bound to him by ties of duty and friendship while he needs me.'

The sun had disappeared behind the clouds and a chill wind had suddenly turned bitter. Elona shivered, her eyes clouded with doubts that filled her mind and took all the joy from her heart.

'You are cold,' Raoul said, sensing the change in her at once. 'It is time we returned to the castle.'

'Yes.' She turned her face from him, unable to keep the bitterness from her voice as she said, 'You must not stay away too long—Duke William may have work for you.'

'Ah, now you hate me again.' Raoul smiled oddly, a curious expression of regret in his eyes. 'For a little while you had forgot it. It was unwise of you, Elona.'

'No, I had not forgotten.' Elona looked up into his face proudly, dismissing the sharp pain around her heart as foolishness. 'I shall never forget you are my enemy, no matter how your smile may charm me.'

Seized by a sudden madness, Elona spurred her horse to a gallop as if she must escape him or die. Her reckless dash was foolish and doomed to failure

from the start—she knew it even as she kicked her heels into her horse's flank and urged it on. The Norman would only chase her and catch her. Hearing the thunder of hooves behind her, she accepted the inevitable, even though she continued to plunge on madly, tears of pride and temper stinging her eyes.

Raoul's horse raced beside hers, but he made no attempt to stop her headlong flight; almost as though he understood her need for speed and would let her have her head until the madness cooled. In the end it was she who eased her mount to a more sensible pace.

Turning to glance at her companion with defiance in her eyes, Elona saw him smile and blinked away her tears of angry frustration. How confident he was; how sure of his ultimate triumph—and how she hated him!

Seated between the Duke and one of his nobles, who spoke no more than a few words of her language, Elona let her eyes stray further down the table to Raoul de Bainwulf. She saw he was staring moodily into space, his face a hard mask which revealed nothing of his inner thoughts. She had noticed he was drinking more wine than usual this evening and wondered at it. 'Why so sad, Lady Elona?' Duke William's question interrupted the flow of her thoughts. 'Do you not enjoy our music?'

'Why yes, my Lord Duke,' Elona replied with a little smile. 'I miss Cedric, but your minstrel hath a sweet voice.'

'It is time the boy returned with Lord Sigebert's answer.' The Duke frowned, his lips forming a stern line, and Elona wished she had not spoken. It was folly to remind him of something which angered him.

'Cedric will return as soon as he is able, my Lord Duke,' Elona said quickly. 'It was not his wish to go. He—He has learned to enjoy his life at the castle.'

Duke William's frown lightened. 'And what of you, Lady Elona? I believe you have not found your stay with us too unpleasant?'

'Oh no, my lord,' Elona replied warmly. 'You have welcomed me with all honour to your table. I could ask for no more, were I truly your guest and not—not a prisoner.'

His eyes regarded her thoughtfully. 'It is as a guest we would have you with us, lady. If it were possible I would reconcile all our differences and see an end to bloodshed between our peoples.'

Elona held her tongue. It was not her place to argue politics with the Duke, though she had done so with Raoul. Besides, despite her fears, she had begun to find her life at the castle pleasant enough. The Normans took the lead from their duke, treating her with respect. She found their manners gentler and more cultured than those of her own people. She would not have admitted it openly, but in her heart she knew that these past few days she had been happier living as Raoul de Bainwulf's prisoner than she had ever been as a free woman in her own village. If it were not for the shadow hanging over her, she could have been content to stay as she was for ever.

In the castle there was always something happening; life flowed all around her, stimulating her mind and interest. Every day she saw jugglers performing in the courtyard, or soldiers training with their swords and shields; once there was even a troupe of tumblers with some dancing dogs.

Pedlars came regularly, playing their wares; and Elona enjoyed buying ribbons for her hair or small trinkets, like a comb of intricately carved bone, with the few coins she had left.

Often she spent part of each day either walking or riding with Raoul. Sometimes he told her about his homeland, and she was fascinated by his stories and legends of the Norsemen who had settled in that part of France which was now called Normandy. Occasionally he asked her to sing for him, but she never sang the song she had given the soldiers on her first night in camp.

He had taken to giving her small gifts: a large shoulder brooch of enamelled silver, bone pins for her hair, and a roll of heavy silk in a deep blue shade which exactly matched the colour of her eyes. She had never before owned anything so fine, and was spending every spare moment sewing a new tunic

for herself. Her days were so full that had she not been anxiously awaiting Cedric's return she would have been completely happy.

There was always a shadow hanging over her, however, and she could not quite forget that she was a prisoner, although Raoul had been so kind to her of late. She fought against her own feelings with all her strength, refusing to admit that she was shown more respect by the Duke than she ever had been by her own father. She told herself it was wrong to like men who were her enemies, fuelling the fire of her hatred for de Bainwulf despite the pleasure she took in riding out with him. His new concern for her welfare was but another trick to put her off her guard!

Glancing towards Raoul once more, Elona felt her heart begin to beat with the slow, thick strokes which sent her blood coursing wildly through her veins. It was something she had noticed of late whenever she saw him coming towards her: a sudden warmth which spread over her and brought a flush to her cheeks. She had begun to notice more and more the clean lines of his profile and the sensual softness of his mouth. Now, when she was with him, Elona could not help remarking his proud bearing and the lean hardness of his body as he walked beside her. Her eyes were inevitably drawn to him as he walked through the hall at night, though there were other men as tall and broad-shouldered as he. It was a certain vitality, an eagle-eyed awareness of life itself that set him apart from the rest and made her pulses start to flutter when he looked at her.

He was staring at her now, a hot hungry glow in his eyes which terrified her while it sent tiny thrills winging through her body. Why was it, Elona wondered, that she was so fascinated by this man, while at the same time she feared him? No matter how often she told herself that he was cold and ruthless, no matter how often she denied him in her heart and swore she hated his very name—still he drew her eyes whenever he was near. It was as though he dominated her by his will-power alone.

Looking away from Raoul's face with a supreme effort of will, Elona felt tears building inside her. What was it she yearned for so desperately that it threatened to destroy her? Ashamed of the weakness she felt stealing over her limbs, she knew she must fight this unknown sensation with all her

strength. If she once submitted to the dictates of her own body, she would be for ever lost!

Turning to the Duke, she forced a smile to her trembling lips. 'I—I feel a little unwell, my Lord Duke. Have I your permission to retire to my chamber?'

The Duke frowned as he saw her pale face; he toyed with the silver drinking-horn before him. 'Your illness is not serious, Lady Elona?'

Elona drew a deep breath, feeling the throbbing in her temples intensify. 'Oh no, my lord. It's but a headache.'

He looked concerned. 'I trust it will be better soon? I would have you with us when we ride to London.'

Elonla knew that his words were mere politeness. When the Duke was ready to leave for the city, she would be taken along, even if she were on her deathbed. She had no idea why Duke William had delayed his march on London, but realised he was only waiting for the right moment, which might be at any time.

'I am sure it is only a headache, my lord. It will be better in the morning. I pray you will forgive me and give me leave to retire. I mean no discourtesy.'

'Very well, you may go.'

The Duke waved his hand to dismiss her, and she walked swiftly from the hall. It was true that her head ached, but the ache around her heart was the reason for her request to be excused. She needed to be alone for a while to try and understand why she had felt so hurt because Raoul de Bainwulf had not come near her all evening, or even returned her smile when she first saw him.

She hated the man, so why should she care if he chose to sit drinking all night alone?

## CHAPTER SIX

OPENING THE door of her small chamber, Elona gave a cry of alarm as she saw a shadowy figure hunched up on her bed.

'Don't be frightened, my lady, it's only me,' a familiar voice reassured her swiftly.

'Cedric?' Elona felt relief wash over her as she went in and closed the door. 'Oh, my dear Cedric, how I have missed you! I am so glad you are safely back.' She ran towards him. 'When did you arrive?'

The boy stood up as Elona reached him. She flung her arms around him in a warm embrace, drawing back uncertainly as she heard his indrawn gasp of pain.

'What's wrong?' she asked anxiously. 'Are you ill?'

Cedric turned his face aside, afraid to look into her eyes even in the dim light of the chamber. 'I—I have been beaten, my lady.'

'Oh, Cedric, wait a moment.' Elona left him to light a candle, bringing it back so that she could see his tear- stained face more clearly. She realised that, until she had come, he had been sitting weeping in the darkness. 'My poor, poor Cedric, let me tend your hurts for you. The pain will ease if I apply a salve to your bruises.'

He shook his head. 'It is already done, my lady. Lord de Bainwulf tended me himself some hours since.'

'Lord de Bainwulf?' Elona asked, her eyes widening. 'Then he knows you are here? Why has he not told the Duke?'

Cedric looked away from her. 'My lord sent me to wait for you. He said I must see you first.'

Elona frowned. 'Then it was not the Normans who used you so cruelly?'

Cedric shook his head again, but still he could not look at her. 'It was on Lord Sigebert's orders that I was beaten . . . Three times.'

'My father had you beaten three times!' Elona stared at him in horror, sickness turning in her stomach. 'But why? Why should he do that, Cedric? Was it because you ran away with me?'

He gave a muffled sob. Dropping to his knees before Elona, he hung his head in shame, his shoulders shaking as he wept.

'I refused to bring Lord Sigebert's reply to the Duke's demands.' Cedric seized her hand suddenly, looking up at her with a desperate appeal in his eyes. 'Forgive me, sweet lady, I could stand the pain no longer.'

Elona laid her hand gently on his head, tears of pity for him spilling down her cheeks. 'It is not your fault, my friend. I always knew my father would not surrender to save me. Please, tell me what it was you were so loath to repeat to Duke William?'

'Your father bade me bring this message to the Duke of Normandy,' Cedric paused and drew a deep breath. 'Let it be known that the Lord Sigebert has sworn to resist the rule of the bloody usurper unto his death. If it be true that the Lord Sigebert's daughter is held hostage by his enemies then let it be understood that the father will see his child in Heaven or Hell but never in this life. There will be no surrender.'

Elona's breath was expelled in a sigh. 'It is much as I expected.' She clasped her trembling hands together, knowing that this meant the end of her sojourn as an honoured guest of the Duke. Her father's reply would make him so angry that he would seek some revenge. 'I am not afraid to die, Cedric, but I hope the Normans will be merciful and do it swiftly.'

Cedric looked up at her, tears streaming down his cheeks. 'Forgive me, lady. I should have died rather than- bring such news.'

'Another would have brought it if you had not.' Elona smiled sadly.



There was a faint expression of hope, as he said. The Duke likes you, my lady. Perhaps he will spare you, despite your father's defiance.'

Elona shook her head, gazing into the darkness above his head. 'If I have no value as a hostage, what further use can he have for me?'

'Oh, my lady.' Cedric suddenly began to weep even harder. He prostrated himself at her feet, hiding his face in his hands. 'Forgive me, forgive me . .

Elona knelt down to raise him gently in her arms, sensing that there was more to come. 'What is it, Cedric? Is there something you fear to tell me?'

He stared at her, a deep misery in his face. He was torn between his love of her and his fear. Slowly, he reached inside his tunic and took out a tiny vial which hung about his neck on a silver cord. He held it in the palm of his hands, unwilling to give it to her even now.

'What have you got there?' Elona asked curiously. .

'Lord Sigebert made me bring this to you,' Cedric said haltingly. 'He made me swear on the holy relics of the saint's bones that I would give it to you. He said you must drink it rather than let yourself be used by his enemies.'

Elona's eyes widened as she saw the dark liquid inside the vial and knew that it was poison. 'My father has sent me poison?' she whispered, her mouth dry with fear.

'Yes.' Cedric wiped a hand across his eyes. 'For a long time I refused to bring it to you but—but in the end he broke me . . . '

'Because of this, you were beaten?' Elona understood suddenly why he was so upset, not because he feared to bring her father's reply but because he had been forced to take a holy vow to give her this. She held out a trembling hand. 'Give it to me, Cedric.'

The boy's fingers tightened around the glass vial. 'No, my lady, I—I had to tell you, but please don't take it. Please don't kill yourself. It would be a terrible sin to take your own life.'

'Give it to me, Cedric. You have done your duty; the rest is up to me.'

'If you die, then I shall die too,' Cedric declared passionately, holding on to the vial.

'And rob the world of your songs? No, you must live for me. I wish it. Don't you see, this is now my one chance of escaping a painful death? At least it will be swift and easy. I shall not suffer long, nor will I be humiliated by my father's enemies. Besides, like you, I must obey my father. It was my wilful disobedience which sealed my fate. Had I remained in the village as he bade me, I should not be here now.'

'Surely Lord de Bainwulf will save you,' Cedric said. 'Will you not let me go to him and beg him to intercede for you with Duke William?'

'No.' Elona turned away so that the boy should not see the tears in her eyes. 'Lord de Bainwulf lives only to serve the Duke. I cannot ask him to betray all he holds dear for my sake. Duke William must make an example of my death—to warn all those who still resist his rule that he will not rest until the throne is his. He must show them that all resistance will be crushed. Do you not understand that I cannot let myself be used in this way? I must take my own life and thus rob him of this small victory.'

'The Duke is England's rightful king,' Cedric cried, almost in tears again. 'Why should you die because your father is too stubborn to admit defeat? You owe him nothing—he never showed you a moment's kindness!'

'Give me the vial, Cedric. That's an order!'

The boy looked up into her face, weeping as he saw the pride there. He could not refuse her. Releasing the tiny vial into her hand, he drew a sobbing breath. Then he got to his feet and rushed from the room.

Elona stood very still for a moment. The glass vial felt cold and hard in her hand. She shivered as she realised how cruelly her father had condemned her. She had always known that he had wanted a son to succeed him, and was angry because Elona was his only child. Yet it was hard to accept the extent of his dislike. It almost seemed as if he hated her. Falling to her knees,

she clasped her hands in prayer. She felt so lost and alone. If there were only someone to whom she could turn in her distress. Someone with the strength to save her from a painful and lonely death.

A picture of Raoul de Bainwulf's face entered her mind, taunting her. If she had not known how deep was his regard for the Duke, she might have begged him to ask for her life; but her certainty that he would refuse had made her more determined to obey her father. It was the only way. She could not let her enemies kill her and thus gain advantage from her death. One swallow, and all her doubts would be resolved. She would no longer feel this torment in her heart every time a certain man looked her way. She would be free at last.

Elona removed the tiny stopper. She looked at the dark liquid for a moment, fear of the unknown making her hand tremble as she held it to her lips.

'God forgive me,' she whispered, closing her eyes.

'No!' An angry roar from the doorway stayed her hand. Elona looked up and saw Raoul de Bainwulf standing there, his face as black as thunder. Before she had time to realise what was happening, the Norman was beside her. He dashed the vial from her hand, crushing it beneath his foot and grinding the glass into the floor.

Elona saw the rage in his face, and her heart began to beat wildly. 'Why did you stop me?' she whispered, her face pale, it would have been a swift death.'

'Did you think to cheat me?' Raoul's eyes were icy cold as he glared down at her. 'Cedric told me what was afoot. I could not believe you would be so foolish or so wicked!'

'Wicked?' She shivered and shrank away as she saw his furious countenance, it was my father's command . . .'

'And a sin against God,' Raoul thundered, his hands working at his sides as if it were taking all his strength not to strike her in his anger. 'Have you no care for your immortal soul?''\*\*

'I—I prayed for forgiveness. God understands what is in our hearts.'

'But I do not!' His voice was harsh. 'Do you want to die so much, Elona? Have you no faith in me?'

Tears stung her eyes, blinding her. She turned away lest he should see them and guess what was in her heart. 'I could not ask you to beg for my life. I know your first duty is to the Duke.'

'You think I would let you die? Yes, by heaven I see it is so!' Raoul's voice was tinged with bitterness. 'Look at me, Elona. Look at me, I say!'

Elona felt his hands on her shoulders as he swung her roughly to face him. She swallowed her tears, lifting her head proudly to gaze up into his face and drawing a sharp breath as she saw the chill in his eyes.

'I am no longer of any value as a hostage,' Elona said in a tone of accusation. 'Why should you care what becomes of me? I am not worth even so much as one piece of silver.'

A muscle twitched near Raoul's mouth and his expression grew sterner. His fingers bit deeply into the girl's shoulders and she winced with pain, but he seemed not to hear her. Driven beyond the limits of endurance, he was conscious only of a red mist building in his brain. Staring at Elona's beautiful, proud face, he felt his anger reach boiling-point and suddenly erupt, spilling out in bitter words he could not control.

it is true you have no value as a hostage,' he croaked. 'You are a proud, stubborn, wilful wench with more temper than sense, and you deserve that I should abandon you to the fate you would embrace so willingly. Yet I can still find a use for you, fair Elona.'

She felt a thrill of horror run through her as she looked into his eyes and saw the hot, blind anger there. She shrank away from him, her hand flying to her throat as she realised he was beyond rational thought. His fury touched a raw savagery deep within him that she had never suspected.

'Don't touch me,' she whispered, the colour draining from her face. 'Don't come near me!'

'You do well to fear me,' he muttered feverishly, his eyes glittering. 'At this moment your life hangs in the balance. I swear you will drive me to madness yet with your doe eyes and your witch's smile!'

'Kill me, then!' Elona cried wildly, her eyes darting nervously about the room as if she sought a way of escape. 'You can break my neck with your hands—do it now and have an end to this!'

'By heaven—You beg for death!' Raoul's cry of despair went unrecognised by the frantic girl, as she glared at him. 'Why do you hate me so? What have I done that you should look at me like that?'

'You are my master,' Elona said bitterly. 'I am only a woman, no more to you than your horse or the bed you lie in. Beat me, kill me—do with me as you please. I shall not beg for mercy.'

'You have always thought me a savage,' Raoul said between clenched teeth. 'So be it, lady. I will be the brute you think me. As you say, you are my property to do with as I will. I cannot sell you for profit, yet I will have some good of you.'

His voice was a rasp of pain, but Elona heard only the threatening words. She shivered and recoiled as his hand reached out for her, seizing her wrist and swinging her close against his iron-hard chest. His hand caressed her white throat lingeringly, making her tremble. Shutting her eyes, the girl stood passively as she waited for his strong fingers to close round her neck.

Then she felt the heat of his breath on her face and her eyes flew open. She gave a cry of protest even as his mouth covered hers, silencing her with the smothering passion of his kiss. Finding his arms clasped about her like a band of iron, Elona began to struggle wildly, twisting her head in a frantic bid to escape the demands of his searching tongue which invaded her mouth.

As she tried to pull away from him, Elona cried out in protest. 'No, my lord. Kill me if you will, but do not dishonour me, I beg you.'

Raoul held her fast. The pulse was drumming in his temple; his eyes black with a fierce desire. She saw the tight, blind passion in his face and drew back with a cry of fear.

'It would be a pity to waste such beauty,' he muttered hoarsely. 'I shall not kill you, Elona. I will keep you as my bed-woman. A soldier needs the comfort of a woman in his bed—as well you as another.'

'No! I would rather die than lie with you!'

Elona tore free of his hold, desperately trying to dart past him. Raoul lunged at her, catching her wrist again and jerking her back to hold her prisoner against his chest. She screamed and beat at him with her fists, shaking her head and twisting like a wild thing.

'You shan't escape me.' Raoul's mouth was hard, his face determined. 'I've waited for you and I mean to have you, wench. My beautiful, stubborn Elona.'

'No! No, leave me be,' she cried, curling her nails to strike at his face. 'I won't let you use me like a wanton!'

He deftly twisted her wrist behind her back so that she was trapped and could not fight him. Then he swept her off the ground and slung her across his shoulder like a sack of wheat-chaff ; he laughed as she beat at his back with her fists and screamed abuse at him.

'Animal! Vile, hateful beast,' she yelled, kicking out viciously as he slapped her buttocks. 'I hate you, Raoul de Bainwulf. I hate you!'

Raoul tipped her none too gently on the bed, grinning down at her as she screamed defiance at him and drummed her feet on the bed in a fury. He watched mockingly as she squirmed and screamed, wearing herself out in useless temper.

'I'll kill you, you vile beast,' she threatened, baring her teeth at him. 'I'll tear your eyes out with my nails and feed them to the hogs.'

'At last the barriers are down and your true nature is revealed,' Raoul said, his eyes beginning to glint. 'What a sweet, womanly creature you are, Elona! No meek dove, but a vixen with bared fangs and claws.'

Elona's eyes shot darts of fire at him. 'Touch me again, and those fangs will sink into your throat,' she warned.

'Not a vixen but a she-devil.' Raoul bent over her menacingly, seizing her wrists as she went for him and forcing her arms up above her head. Holding her pinioned to the bed he straddled her, laughing as she twisted and tossed beneath him, spitting her defiance in glorious futility. 'Yet, fierce as you are, my proud beauty, I believe there is a way to tame you. In a little while I will have you purring like a kitten, sweet Elona.'

'Never! You may force yourself on me but you will never break me,' Elona panted, her breast heaving as she found it difficult to breathe. 'I shall fight you to the last.'

Raoul bent over her, brushing his lips across her smooth brow. 'Perhaps! Yet it will be an even contest, my sweet dove. My strength against your stubborn, wilful spirit.'

His mocking face loomed closer so that she could feel the warmth of his breath tickling her. He kissed her brow, his lips like the touch of a feather against her skin. She hissed like a serpent and tried to bite him. He laughed and covered her mouth with his own, bearing down hard at first to quiet her. Then, when he felt her lips soften beneath his, Raoul began to tease and caress them with tiny kisses which sent her senses spinning; kisses so light and sweet that she felt her own lips parting eagerly beneath them. Kisses which went on and on, leaving her breathless and shaken, her defences crumbling.

Elona closed her eyes, feeling the hot sting of shamed tears behind her lids. She had ceased to struggle, and Raoul cautiously released one of her wrists, his hand moving down her arm to the soft whiteness of her throat. His fingers stroked her skin, pushing aside the heavy silk of her tunic to caress her shoulder. He bent his head to kiss the satin smoothness of her skin, letting go of her other wrist as he did so.

It was a careless move on his part. Finding her hands free, Elona went for him with a furious vengeance. She tore at his hair, pulling it so hard that a tuft of it came out in her hand and he yelled with pain. He jerked back and looked at her in surprise.

Elona laughed triumphantly as she saw the astonishment in his eyes. So he thought he had tamed her with one kiss, did he? Well now he would learn that she was not so easily broken. Curling her fingers like talons, she struck at his face. Raoul caught her wrist before she could inflict more than a small scratch, a gleam of unwilling admiration in his eyes as she fought him with renewed fury, bucking beneath him like an unbroken filly.

Elona fought hard and long, but his strength was too much for her. At last she lay back panting, exhausted but still defiant.

'Are you ready to accept me as your master?' he asked at last, a glint of amusement in his eyes.

'No!' Elona glared at him. 'I hate you, Raoul de Bainwulf, and I shall hate you more after you have done with me.'

The laughter died from his eyes and she tensed, expecting a fresh attack. Instead, he released her wrists and lifted his leg so that she could move away from him.

Elona rolled to the side of the bed, getting to her feet to stare at him suspiciously. 'What new trick is this?' she asked bitterly.

'No trick, Elona.' His face had become a stony mask, but the hot, blind passion she had seen earlier had gone from his eyes, leaving them cool. He slid across the bed and sat for a moment with his back turned to her. 'I have ever admired courage, no less in a woman than a man. Since you hate me so, I shall not force you to yield. I thought. . . But no matter, I was wrong.' Raoul stood up, his back straight beneath his tunic.

Elona trembled, feeling chilled of a sudden and empty of all emotion. 'Where are you going?' she whispered.



Raoul turned towards her, smiling oddly. 'To ask Duke William for that life which means so little to you.'

'To ask the Duke for my life?' She stared at him, a curious weakness spreading through her. 'Why?'

'I owe you this much,' Raoul replied coldly, the smile fading as he looked at her. 'I do not forget that it is my fault you are a prisoner here. I will do what I can to make amends, Lady Elona. It was a fair fight we had, and the victory was truly yours.'

Elona watched in silence as he strode from the room. Then she flung herself across the bed and began to weep.

Duke William looked at Raoul's face and then at the young harper.

'Why have you only now seen fit to tell me of the boy's return?' he asked, anger in his face as he looked at de Bainwulf. 'Well, will you answer me?'

'I waited until the right moment.' Raoul replied haughtily, his hands clenched at his sides. 'I knew the thane's reply would anger you.'

'Did you hope to find me mellowed after I had supped?'

The Duke's brows rose. 'Did you think the wine might dull my wits?'

Raoul's eyes narrowed with temper. 'I am not such a fool, my lord. I know well you drink little, nor would I try to fool you.'

'What, then?' Duke William glared at him. 'I like not this secrecy in you, de Bainwulf.'

'I was afraid.' Raoul met the Duke's eyes fearlessly. 'I was afraid of your anger—just and right as it must be.'

'Afraid? You?' the Duke stared at him incredulously. 'By heaven! I've never heard those words from you before, de Bainwulf. Pray explain this mystery, for I had fain know what hath you shaking in your shoes—It is not fear of me, I'll warrant!'

Raoul's mouth twisted. 'I was afraid you would demand Lady Elona's death, my lord. Her father has defied you yet again. It's plain that an example must be made to these rebels—her death would show you mean to crush all resistance.'

'It is true, an example must be made.' The Duke's mouth quirked and his eyes began to sparkle. He turned his gaze on Cedric. 'It might be that the boy would serve as a lesson to these rebels, since this woman means so much to you . . .'

Cedric flung himself on his knees before the Duke, clasping his hands together in supplication. 'Spare my lady, and I will gladly take her place, my lord Duke.'

The Duke's eyes glinted darkly as he looked from the boy to Raoul. 'What say you, my friend? Shall we hang the boy and let the lovely Elona live? It would be a pity indeed to lose such beauty—and yet the youth sings like a nightingale. What say you—Which shall it be?'

The tiny pulse was beating in Raoul's temple. 'I would ask for mercy for them both, my lord.'

'You would have me spare both the boy and the woman?' The Duke's brows shot up. 'Come, de Bainwulf, where are your wits? Methinks the mists of England have turned your blood to water—or at least addled your brain. This is not the fighting talk I expect of one of my bravest nobles!'

'Let me be their champion,' Raoul said, the muscles rippling in his shoulders as he clenched his hands into tight balls. 'I will fight three men of your choice. If I win, the boy and the woman go free.'

'And if you die, I lose one of my best men and ablest officers.' Duke William shook his head. 'No, Raoul, I cannot risk your life, it's too valuable to me.'

'We shall ask the Lady Elona what must be done.' He turned to Cedric with an odd smile. 'Fetch your mistress to us, boy, but say naught of what you have heard here, or it will be the worse for you.'

Cedric bowed to the Duke and then to Raoul, and hurried from the room. The Duke had no need to warn him to keep silence, for Cedric knew that if Elona understood it was her life or his, she would ask for him to be spared.

As soon as the boy had left the chamber, Duke William laughed, and turned to look at his companion.

'Well, I never thought to see this day, Raoul.'

Raoul frowned. 'What mean you, Sire? I do not understand you.'

'No? I believe you understand well enough, but I shall not plague you.' His eyes sparkled with amusement. 'I shall test you anon, my foolish friend, and I doubt I shall find you wanting . . .'

Elona sat up as she heard the knock at her door and Cedric's voice calling to her. Wiping her eyes on the sleeve of her tunic, she swallowed hard.

'What is it, Cedric?'

'The Duke bids you come attend him, my lady.'

'So it is time, then.' She breathed deeply to steady herself. Her wretchedness was such that death could only be a welcome release, she thought. 'I am coming. Give me but a moment to tidy myself.'

'I shall wait outside, my lady.'

Elona poured cool water from a bronze ewer into a bowl, splashing her face to wash away the stain of her tears. She straightened her tunic and tucked her hair beneath her head-rail, holding her hands out in front of her. They were

shaking, so she took another breath, forcing them to stop. Lifting her head proudly, she went out to join the boy in the narrow passage.

Their footsteps echoed loudly on the stone flags as they returned the way Cedric had come, neither of them speaking. It was dark, the gloomy passages and winding stairs lit only by an occasional flickering torch set in sconces on the walls. Some of the walls were crumbling and damp to the touch. It was cold, and Elona could not stop herself shivering as she pulled her thick wool mantle closer round her. It felt cold enough for snow.

'Do not be afraid, my lady. I shall not let you suffer. If you must die, it will be swift, I promise you.' Cedric showed her a tiny dagger he had hidden in his tunic sleeve.

Elona smiled, not guessing his intention to use it on himself and thus save her by his sacrifice.

'Thank you,' she said softly. 'But you need not be anxious, Cedric. I am no longer afraid to die.'

They had reached the small, round chamber where the Duke and Raoul de Bainwulf waited. Cedric hesitated, his face turning pale as they hovered on the threshold, but Elona's eyes were proud and cool as she curtsied to the Duke.

'I am come, my Lord Duke, as you commanded.'

The Duke came towards her, extending his hand to her in a courtly gesture. She took it, allowing him to help her to rise, and then he led her over to the fireplace.

'You are cold, Lady Elona. Warm yourself. I would see some colour in your cheeks.'

Elona gazed at him. 'Thank you, but I am not cold, my lord.'

He smiled oddly, a hint of amusement in his face. 'Are you not? Then I fear you still have a headache. I beg you will pardon me for disturbing your rest—but it seems that we are in a quandary.'

Elona looked at him in surprise, sensing that he was enjoying himself. Then she glanced at Raoul, whose expression was unreadable. She saw a slight tensing of his neck, as though the muscles were taut, but no other sign of emotion.

'I fear my wits are gone awandering, my lord Duke,' she replied. 'I do not understand. How may I help you?'

'It seems I must speak plainly, Lady Elona. Lord Sigebert, your father, has refused my offer of a truce between us. My Lord de Bainwulf feels an example must be made, and I fear he is right. I must and shall teach these fools who is the rightful King of England.' Duke William smiled at her obliquely. 'Raoul thinks you must die, yet he asks for mercy. So you see my problem, Lady Elona. What am I to do?'

'I see you have little choice, my lord.' Elona looked back at him proudly, refusing to let the Normans see the fear she felt inside, although her eyes were full of unshed tears. 'Your enemies would seize on any sign of weakness—so you must do your duty, however painful.'

'You do not beg me for your life?' The Duke frowned. 'Yet I believe you have found life pleasant enough of late. You are not my enemy, Lady Elona?'

She raised her eyes to his, looking into them without flinching. 'No, I am not your enemy. I would willingly swear an oath of fealty to you, my lord Duke. Yet it would not solve your problem.'

The Duke's eyes narrowed. 'Supposing the boy dies in your place?'

'No!' Elona stepped back in horror, her hand flying to her throat, 'I would never swear fealty to you then! Let me die and have an end to it.'

'It would be a pity to lose one so fair,' mused the Duke, a wry expression on his face as he darted a glance at Raoul's face and saw the tightness there. 'And the boy sings sweetly—I should be sorry to lose him. Yet an example must be made.'

Elona waited in terrified silence while the Duke deliberated, her heart beating with painful intensity. Her eyes were drawn to Raoul's of their own volition. She saw him clench his hands at his sides, and wondered at it. Why should it matter to him what Duke William decided? His debt to her, if any, was repaid by the act of asking; she could expect no more of him.

'Listen to this, Lady Elona, and see whether you think it wise or foolish.' Duke William watched her face with anxious excitement. 'Does a clever man seek to rule his enemies by the sword alone, or does he find ways of bending them to his will which will bind them faster than any net? Would it not be better to set a good example that other men may follow than strike out in blind revenge?'

'What mean you, my lord?' Elona stared at him in bewilderment, the beginning of hope in her heart.

'It is easy to take life, but what is one death when men are at war? Nothing. I could kill twenty men, and still the lesson would go unlearned.' Duke William's eyes narrowed, piercing her. 'No, sweet lady, I shall not make an example by wantonly taking your life or the boy's. Instead, I shall show my wisdom and mercy, proving my right to rule as a just king. You shall wed one of my nobles in all honour. Now, how say you?'

The Duke beamed at her as if expecting her to cry her joy and relief aloud.

'Marry a Norman noble?' Elona paled, and she took another step back; but, before she could say more, Raoul strode forward and took her hand, the pressure of his fingers warning her to stay silent.

'Lady Elona was my prisoner,' he said in a clear voice. 'I claim her as a right. I shall take her as my wife.'

Duke William slapped his thigh and roared with laughter, the tears starting down his cheeks. 'And I give her to you rightly gladly, de Bainwulf. I imagine you will appreciate the gift. I swear the lady hath bewitched you. It is the merriest jest I have known in many a month.'

Raoul's mouth tightened into a thin line. 'If it pleases you to mock me, Sire, I must endure it with a good grace. Lady Elona is a brave and a worthy bride for any man. I make no claim to love, for I am but a soldier and know nothing of such emotions. And I know well the lady hath no warm feelings towards me—yet I shall honour this marriage, if she will accept it.'

'Well, Lady Elona, wilt thou have this man for thy husband?'

Elona's heart was beating wildly. She found no help in Raoul's expression. She tried to speak, but her lips were dry and stiff. No sound came out and she could only look at him in helpless appeal.

He came towards her once more, taking her hand firmly in his own. Then he smiled slightly.

'Lady Elona accepts, my lord. She will be content to do your bidding and to take an oath of fealty.' His fingers caressed the back of Elona's hand. 'Is that not so, my lady?'

Elona licked her lips nervously. 'Yes . . .' she managed at last. 'I shall wed Lord de Bainwulf . . .'

## CHAPTER SEVEN

ELONA'S WEDDING was delayed by Duke William's decision to move on towards London. Since King Harold's death and the defeat of the English army, the city had been in a state of arms; the people's determination to resist the invaders strengthened by the arrival of two powerful Earls, Edwin and Morcar. An assembly of the English nobles had decided that as Harold's sons were too young to be king and both his brothers had died with him at Hastings, Edgar Atheling, the grand-nephew of King Edward the Confessor, should rule.

This news had reached Duke William soon after his great victory, but he resisted the temptation to move on the defiant city at once, waiting patiently at Dover Castle until fresh troops and supplies reached him from Normandy. Now the time was right.

In all the necessary confusion of moving a large army, together with its weapons, stores and baggage, Elona found herself with a great deal of free time. Raoul was too busy overseeing the preparations for departure to walk or ride with her, and though he had seen to it that she had women to wait on her and care for her needs as befitted her rank, she was often alone for long periods. She filled the lonely hours as usefully as she could by sewing and embroidering a new tunic for her wedding, but the days dragged and she had too much leisure for her peace of mind. She found her thoughts dwelling more and more on the man she was pledged to marry, and becoming ever more confused about her own feelings. It was strange how the ache about her heart was eased whenever he smiled at her, despite the doubts which tormented her every waking hour. What kind of man was this fierce warrior who had come from far across the sea to make her his captive? For Elona had no doubts that she would belong to him completely once he had her bound to him by the sanctity of marriage. She would be his wife, his property to use as he would, and sometimes that knowledge frightened her. And yet there was a part of her that perversely wanted it to happen.

Elona no longer considered escaping. Having given her word to marry Lord de Bainwulf, she believed herself bound as she had never been to Oslac. No one had ever asked for her opinion before or given her a free choice. And although the Normans were in the middle of a war, they had shown her



glimpses of a different way of life, a gentler, happier life, which appealed to her. There were moments when she believed she could find peace and contentment in the future, if only ... It was at this point that her thoughts met an insurmountable barrier, for she did not know what she wanted.

Impossible dreams flitted through her mind like elusive sunbeams, bringing a warm flush to her cheeks and making her heart thud in her breast. Dreams of being held in a man's arms and kissed with the tenderness which turned her limbs to water and brought feelings to life she had never known existed until the other night. Then she had fought Raoul because to give in would have shamed her, but when she was his wife there could be no shame in surrender, could there? She began to wonder if these dreams meant she was falling in love with her captor, but she had no way of knowing. Having never experienced tenderness from a man before, she dare not trust her own judgment. Perhaps men used lovemaking as yet another weapon to humiliate and subdue their women into a state of submission. How could she know the truth—she who had found kindness only in an old woman and a boy?

Several times Elona took out the talisman Alfrida had given her and held it in her hand. So far it had protected her from real harm, but was it strong enough to stand against the tide of feeling Raoul could rouse in her? She scolded herself for being weak and foolish. All her experience of life had taught her that men considered their wives as merely another possession to be used, and to be ignored when it suited them. To imagine a different kind of existence with a man who not only loved her but respected her, delighting in her company for its own sake, was to reach for the stars and beyond. Yet what happiness such a marriage might bring! To love and be loved in return without fear of being hurt was something so wonderful that her mind could not quite encompass it.

But there were fleeting moments when Elona believed that her future husband might just be such a man. Certainly, since she had promised to wed him, he had treated her with a gentle courtesy which brought a flush of pleasure to her cheeks and a sparkle to her eyes. Yet, try as she would, Elona could not forget why he had claimed the right to wed her. It was simply to save her life; a debt of honour to be repaid because he had brought her to the castle as his prisoner and held himself responsible for her fate. So perhaps she was foolish to imagine his smiles promised the happiness of her dreams.

When the doubts returned to plague her, she remembered that, cheated of the ransom he had thought to exchange for his hostage, Raoul had made it clear he had but one use for her. Elona's courage had won his respect, and because of this he had asked the Duke for her life. She knew this must be the reason he had interceded for her. Recalling the anger in his eyes when the Duke had jestingly suggested otherwise, Elona realised she could not sensibly look for love from him. Raoul had said plainly that he did not love her, and she must not be misled by the foolish behaviour of her own heart. And yet perhaps it would be enough to know herself to be the wife of an honourable man.

Since the night when she had fought so hard to preserve her honour, Raoul had kept a distance between them. It was as though he knew he had but to lay his hand upon her arm to set her heart thumping wildly, and deliberately refrained from doing so. Yet why should he show such restraint now, when she was more his captive than ever before? In her confusion she sought an answer to the questions which tormented her.

She could find none that pleased her. It seemed as if Raoul had decided to treat her with the respect due to a woman of her rank, but had lost all other interest in her. Perversely, now that he left her alone so much, Elona had begun to long for his company. She wished they could spend more time together so that she might come to understand this man who was so soon to be her husband, to know what place she would occupy in his life and heart. But her hopes were vain, for Raoul's time was never his own.

At last the day dawned when Elona was due to leave Dover. The castle yard was swarming with soldiers, horses, carts and oxen, and all was confusion and noise as they jostled for position. Some of the men had ridden ahead to scout the way and find a suitable site for that night's camp, and Raoul was among them. Although he had many duties, he had found time to bid her a hasty farewell the previous evening.

'I leave at first light with the vanguard, Elona. You will travel with the baggage at the rear. So we shall not meet until tomorrow night.' Raoul gave her a preoccupied smile. 'I have arranged for Cedric to travel with you, so you will have pleasant company on your journey; a score of my own men will protect you.'

Elona gazed into his eyes searchingly, looking away again as her heart began to beat with those slow, thick strokes which turned her limbs to water. It was not fair that his nearness should make her so weak while he remained calm. He would not have been thus only a short time ago. She wondered sadly if it had been merely her defiance which held his interest in her. Now that she had promised to wed him, his mind seemed to have turned elsewhere.

She lifted her chin higher, determined he should never guess what was in her thoughts. No doubt he would find it amusing to know that he had succeeded in breaking down her defences at last.

'I thank you for your care of me, my lord,' she said, her voice cool. 'I shall pray that God will ride with you and protect you on your journey.'

'Will you, Elona?' Something in Raoul's husky voice brought her eyes swiftly to his face, as she tried to read his unreadable expression. The Duke is anxious that we should be wed as soon as possible—and I too am impatient for the day which will make you my wife.'

Elona lowered her thick lashes. Was it possible he did care for her a little, after all? Or was she foolish even to hope for some sign of affection from this man of strange moods? Perhaps his eagerness was only to please the Duke. Because she did not know how to answer him and was afraid to probe too much, she took refuge in inconsequential words.

'Is there news from London?' she asked, avoiding his intent gaze. 'Will the city surrender, now that Duke William is on the march?'

Raoul frowned. He was aware of her uneasiness, but this was not the time to speak of personal matters. When they were wed he would find a way to quiet her fears, for which he could see no reason. For now, he must follow her lead and control his impatience.

'As yet we have no word from Ansgar,' he said, answering her question with perfect truth. 'Our spies tell us he has the respect of the people and that they will follow his lead. If he chooses to come over to the Duke, the war is ended.'

'Ansgar?' Elona looked at him curiously. 'Is he not the esquire of Edgar Atheling? I have heard he cannot walk and must be carried everywhere in a litter.'

Raoul's brows rose to find her so well informed. 'That is so, yet he has the military authority and regularly inspects the city's defences. The Earls Edwin and Morcar have left London and gone home, declaring that they will not serve a weakling boy who aspires to be called king but cannot rule; but Ansgar has the city walls well fortified and it will take a brave assault to breach them.'

'Then there may yet be a battle to take London?' Elona looked at her future husband with anxiety. The thought that he might die in battle suddenly made her afraid. She felt that to lose something as fragile as this bond between them before it had had a chance to strengthen and grow would be very sad. And she would go to her own grave never knowing if happiness might truly have been hers.

Raoul smiled at her as she looked up into his face, seeking reassurance. He sensed a part of what was in her mind, realising it could not be easy for her to be a hostage in the camp of her own people's enemies.

'Do not distress yourself, Elona,' he said gently. 'William will try to win the people to him by persuasion if he can.'

'Then I pray God he succeeds,' Elona said, looking down so that he should not read what was in her mind. 'It is time there was an end to war and bloodshed between our peoples.'

'Amen to that, my lady.'

Raoul took her hand, kissing it briefly before he left her to resume his duties. Elona stared after him, wondering why she suddenly felt so lost and alone.

Arriving before the gates of London, Duke William found it well defended, as he had expected from the news brought him by his spies within the city.

He called a council of his most trusted nobles and began to plan a course of action which was calculated to bring the city to its knees as swiftly as possible.

'A direct assault on the city would mean much bloodshed on both sides,' he said. 'I have no desire to shed the blood of either English or Norman nobles. We shall send an emissary to Ansgar and demand the surrender of London. I ask only my right, which is to be crowned King of England; I shall leave the English to govern themselves, once the title is mine. This is my solemn promise in exchange for a peaceful surrender of the city.'

'But will they listen?' Raoul de Bainwulf asked, frowning. 'The fortifications are stout and could withstand a siege for months.'

'We shall not be idle.' Duke William's eyes glittered as he let them travel slowly round the assembled nobles, who were the flower of his army. 'We shall disperse ourselves in the neighbourhood, and burn and plunder the villages to bring them to a state of submission. In this way we shall make certain that no supplies can reach the city. How long then will Ansgar hold the will of the people against us?'

It was a brilliant concept. With the main body of resistance to William bottled up within the city walls, it would be only a matter of time before hunger drove them out. Neither their consciences nor their stomachs would let them remain long inside the city while the countryside about them was ravaged by the Norman army. Yet William's emissary offered a way of escape from their predicament which would allow them to keep their honour.

The nobles agreed to his plan and dispersed to set all in motion. Raoul was about to follow the others when the Duke called him back.

'And now, de Bainwulf, we shall delay your wedding to the Lady Elona no longer. A wedding will be an excellent way to pass the time while we wait for some reaction from Ansgar. You shall be married in the church of that village which surrendered peacefully to us yesterday; I spared it so that we might have some comfort ourselves until we move on. My own chaplain shall conduct the ceremony and I myself shall give the bride to you.'

Raoul bent his knee, kissing the Duke's hand. 'Your wish is my command, Sire.'

Duke William snorted with laughter. 'Fie on you, de Bainwulf! You are hot for the wench, only a fool would deny it when it's plain to see. I vow she hath bewitched you with her beauty.'

Raoul got to his feet, an odd smile on his lips. 'Perhaps you are right, my lord. I know only that I have had no rest since I first saw her.'

'You must bed the wench, it's the only cure for what ails you, my friend. Then you will be your own man again.' The Duke grinned at him and Raoul smiled.

'I wonder.' His eyes held a hint of self-mockery. 'There are times when I wonder if I shall ever be at peace again. My lady hath a mind and a temper all her own!'

Elona's eyes travelled round the great wooden hall, which was so like her father's that she might have been at home. Abandoned by the Saxon thane to whom it had belonged, who had fled before the Normans, leaving his ceorles unprotected, it was for the moment the temporary headquarters of the Duke. Today it had been given over to Elona so that she could prepare for her wedding in comfort.

Wrapped in a thick woollen mantle to keep out the bitter cold, Elona sat patiently while one of the servant-women combed her freshly-washed hair and dried each silken strand carefully with a towel. When that was done, Elona rubbed perfume into it, humming an old ballad, and began to braid the pale tresses, tying them with silver cords.

She was desperately trying to control her nerves, which kept sending little tremors running through her and made her stomach churn. If only she could believe that Raoul cared for her just enough to be kind and gentle, then she would go to her yedding with a smile on her lips and eagerness in her heart.

Standing up, she allowed the servant-woman to slip a heavy silk tunic over her head, fastening it about her waist with a wide girdle of embroidered leather, twined about with silver cords. The woman touched the softness of the silk tunic reverently, an envious look in her eyes as she exclaimed over its fineness. Then she helped Elona to put on a mantle of crimson wool trimmed with dark fur, securing it at her shoulder with a large brooch of gold set with garnets.

'I've never seen such fine cloth,' she said, stroking the sleeves of Elona's under-tunic. 'It feels so smooth to the touch.'

'My lord had it sent specially from Normandy,' Elona replied with a touch of pride, her mouth curving in a smile of pleasure. She glanced at herself in a mirror of burnished bronze, feeling a warm glow spread through her. Surely Raoul would think she looked pretty today. 'The colour matches my eyes, do you not think so?'

'You look beautiful, my lady.' The servant brought a pair of heavy gold bangles, which were also a present from Raoul, and a thick collar of twisted gold given her as a bride-gift by the Duke himself. Helping her to fasten the necklace, the woman smiled up at Elona. 'You must be very happy to wed such a fine man as the Lord de Bainwulf. Such a man would pleasure any bride.'

Elona blushed, flicking down her lashes to hide the sudden glow in her eyes. Her heart began to thunder as she saw the woman's sly look. Tonight she would lie beside Raoul in their marriage bed and feel again those drugging kisses which had so nearly stormed her defences once before.

'Lord de Bainwulf is a noble man, is he not?' she said, lifting her head proudly.

'And so handsome,' the servant said with a coy glance at her. 'Alfwen will cry bitter tears into her pillow tonight, now that she must sleep alone.'

A cold chill crept along Elona's spine and entered her heart as she stared at the woman. 'Who is Alfwen?'

The servant turned pale, her eyes starting with fright. 'Forgive me, Lady Elona, I thought you knew. I should not have spoken. My foolish tongue hath betrayed me.'

Elona's eyes narrowed, the coldness spreading through her body and turning her into a marble statue. 'Who is Alfwen? Please tell me the truth at once.'

'I dare not.' The servant knelt before her, wringing her hands in distress. 'Lord de Bainwulf will have me beaten if he discovers it was I who told you about Alfwen.'

'And I shall have you whipped if you do not,' Elona threatened. 'Speak, and I shall say nothing to my lord. I give you my word.'

The woman could not meet her eyes. She hung her head and mumbled chokingly, 'She—She is his bed-woman, my lady. I thought you knew—Everyone speaks of it . . .'

Elona felt the knife-point turn in her heart. Her lips were stiff and frozen as she stared unseeingly into space. It could not be true. Oh, please let it not be so! she prayed silently. And yet it would explain Raoul's strange restraint towards her of late. What was it he had said to her that night? 'A soldier needs the comfort of a woman in his bed—as well you as another.' Now Elona was to be his wife because the Duke had decreed it, and Raoul had sought his pleasure with another. And her name was Alfwen!

'How do you know this?' she asked stiffly. 'Why should I believe you?'

'Alfwen—She told me it was so, but everyone in the village talks of it. They wonder why Lord de Bainwulf should seek the bed of a common camp-follower when he is to wed a lady as beautiful as you.' The servant trembled as she saw Elona's eyes harden suddenly. 'Forgive me, Lady Elona! I did not mean to hurt you.'

Elona turned away as she fought the urge to strike the woman's face in revenge. She wanted to scream aloud and weep as the pain ate deep into her, but she was too proud to let the world see her humiliation.



'It doesn't matter,' Elona lied, digging her nails into the palms of her hands so hard that they broke the skin. 'My marriage is an alliance between two peoples, an example of Duke William's justice. I do not love Lord de Bainwulf, nor do I expect him to love me. Alfwen may not need to weep tonight after all.'

There was bitterness in Elona's voice, the bitterness of broken dreams. What a fool she had been to let a few smiles deceive her. Or perhaps she had deceived herself because she craved some warmth, a little affection to ease the ache inside her. It seemed as if it were her fate to be used by men for their own ends. Her father, Oslac, the Duke—and now Raoul! It was he who had succeeded where all the others had failed, for his wound went the deepest.

'My lady, I am sorry . . . ' The servant's voice trailed away as there was a flutter among the other women, and Duke William entered with two of his nobles.

'Lady Elona, I have come to escort you to your wedding.' He smiled at her benignly. 'You are beautiful, fair lady. A fitting bride for one of my truest knights. Raoul de Bainwulf is a fortunate man.'

His mouth curved as if at some secret jest, then he offered Elona his arm and she laid her hand upon it. She lifted her head proudly as he led her from the hall, but inside her the coldness was gaining ground, forming a band of ice around her heart. How stupid she had been to let herself believe even for one moment that Raoul de Bainwulf was truly a noble man. He was no better than Oslac or the lowest of his soldiers. How false were his smiles and his concern for her comfort; how empty his talk of impatience for their wedding day! He was so impatient that he had taken a servant-girl to his bed.

Overhead the sky was a dull grey, preventing even a wintry sun from peeping through, and the wind was almost as bitter as the gall in her throat. Elona thought it was a fitting setting for a wedding which could bring her only pain now that she knew how cruelly her future husband had betrayed her. Beneath her feet a path of rushes had been strewn to keep her slippers from becoming muddy, but she hardly noticed what had been done for her comfort.

She knew it was a very great honour to be given in marriage by the Duke himself, but in her bitterness she decided it was simply a show of magnanimity to impress the English nobles who were attending the ceremony.

Elona hardened her heart, telling herself it was only her pride which had been hurt by the servant's revelation. She was the daughter of Saxon nobles, so it was impossible that she should have given her heart to a Norman; a cold, cruel, invader who cared little what pain he inflicted so long as he got what he wanted.

Her face was very pale as she walked through the village with the Duke beside her, conscious of the eyes watching her and knowing that the ceorles were laughing at her because of Alfwen. It was unforgivable of Raoul to humiliate her so openly before her own people. Anger rose in her like a great tide, hammering at her brain so that she thought her head would burst. As she entered the church, her feelings were so intense that for a moment she thought she would faint, but her pride kept her upright.

The congregation was a small one; just a score of Norman nobles chosen by Duke William, and a scattering of Saxon thanes who had decided to join him. Noticing them, Elona's mouth tightened as she realised that her suspicions were correct. It was all an elaborate sham, staged to win the English nobility to William's cause.

As the service proceeded, she stared straight ahead, watching a sudden shaft of sunlight turn the stone cross above the altar to a glorious pink. Not once did she look at the man to whom she was being married, though she was vaguely aware that today he was wearing not his armour but a soft woollen tunic in a shade of blue that complemented her own. The sound of his deep voice repeating the sacred vows sent shivers coursing through her, but still she kept her face averted.

When Elona had taken her vows, speaking in a low voice which was almost a whisper, there was another simple ceremony. Kneeling before the Duke, she kissed his ring and swore loyalty to him as her sovereign. Raoul helped her to her feet, his hands closing about hers possessively. She permitted herself a fleeting glance at his face then, anger flaring in her heart as she saw

the false smile on his lips. Then, head held high, she allowed him to lead her from the church, the Duke and his nobles following in slow procession as they all walked back to the hall.

The feasting lasted well into the night. Duke William was determined to make it a memorable occasion, and from somewhere he had found a troupe of travelling players who entertained the company with cymbals and trumpets. Two women danced with slow, stately steps, while a third sang. Then, to Elona's great delight, a young boy brought in a performing bear which did a series of tricks for his young master.

Forgetting her heartache for the moment, she clapped her hands and laughed. 'Oh, how funny he is,' she cried, turning to Raoul unthinkingly.

'I thought the bear might please you,' he said, his smile seeming to caress her.

Raoul's deep voice brought her to sharp awareness. She clasped her hands, which had begun to shake, beneath the board.

'It's funny, yet a little cruel, to keep such a noble beast on a chain,' she said quietly, avoiding his eyes.

The bear is strong; the boy less so. Yet the bear performs its tricks willingly enough. What seems cruel is not always so. I have seen the boy caring for his beast; he does so with the tenderness of a lover.'

'Yet the bear is not free,' Elona replied, her mouth setting stubbornly. 'It cannot choose whether to dance, but must do so when its master pulls the chain.'

'What is freedom but an illusion? Even the highest among us has his duties, Elona.' Raoul's eyes studied her face as he wondered at the anger in her, which had not been there of late. He had thought her content with the bargain they had made, but now he was not sure. Was it possible that she found the ring which bound her to him a weighty chain?

Elona turned away. Why was it that this man had only to look at her to cause this confusion in her heart? Why was it that at one moment she chafed at the bonds which tied her to him, and, at the next, felt that her very bones would melt at his touch?

The evening wore on in a haze of merriment, but Elona noticed that the man at her side drank very little, and it made her more and more nervous of the moment when she must at last be alone with him. Since there was no privacy in the hall, the bedchambers being but curtained alcoves, Raoul had had a hut specially prepared for their wedding night. She had not yet been allowed to see inside it, but she was grateful for this sign of thoughtfulness. Yet it made her no less fearful of what was to come. Even had she been certain of Raoul's love, she would have been nervous of the moment when she must submit to him, but the knowledge that he cared nothing for her made her coming ordeal seem almost unbearable.

When the servant-women came to lead her to the bridal couch. Elona went without a glance at her husband. She wanted to cry her protest aloud, but knew she could not. Lifting her chin, she hid the pain in her heart and managed to smile at those who called to her with good-natured jests. As she walked through the darkness, which was lit only by the smoky flares of torches, she felt the tenseness spread through her. Yet she could not help a cry of surprised pleasure as she entered the bridal hut and saw how pretty it was.

The floor had been freshly strewn with rushes and dried flowers, which perfumed the air. A small table of beaten bronze was set with toilet articles of silver and gold. A wooden stool was covered with a rug of sumptuous fur, which flowed out on to the floor so that she could wriggle her toes in its warm pile. But it was the bed which drew Elona's eyes in breathless wonder. Where had Raoul managed to find such a bed in the middle of a war?

It was made of wood, its ends high and elaborately ornamented with swags of carved leaves and fruits. The covers were of quilted silk, and it was piled with cushions that dimpled softly at the touch of Elona's finger. A pale light shone from a small lantern, which was made of bronze with panels of oiled horn.

'Oh, how beautiful,' Elona breathed.

Her eyes glowed as she looked round her. Surely Raoul must care for her a little to go to so much trouble to please her? Then a servant came to help her to disrobe and the joy faded from her eyes as she suddenly remembered. The woman was the same one who had told her of Raoul's bed-woman.

Elona stood stiffly as the servant slipped a thin silk nightrobe over her head. Removing the cords which bound her pale yellow hair, the woman combed her long tresses and then placed a coronet of dried flowers twined with silver threads on her head.

'You look beautiful,' she said. 'Lord de Bainwulf will surely come swiftly to your bed tonight, my lady.'

'Am I as beautiful as Alfwen?' Elona's eyes were hard and cold.

'Please forgive me, my lady. It was a slip of the tongue,' the servant apologised again. 'I meant no harm, believe me.'

'You may go,' Elona said, her face frozen in angry displeasure. 'I wish to be alone. Go—all of you!'

The woman who had helped her hurried from the hut, closely followed by most of the others. Elona noticed that one girl of a similar age to herself had stayed behind.

'I told you to go,' she said sharply, feeling the prick of tears behind her eyes.

'Forgive me, Lady Elona. I must speak with you alone.'

Elona's eyes narrowed. 'Who are you?'

'Don't you recognise me, my lady? I am Ealdgyth. I came from Lord Oslac's village to be present at your wedding to him.'

'Ealdgyth?' Elona frowned as she looked at the girl's pretty but sullen face. She vaguely remembered seeing the girl the night before the two thanes had

marched out to join the king. Her frown cleared as she suddenly recalled the scene to mind. 'Yes, I do know you—You were with Oslac that night. Well, what is it you would say to me?'

'I have brought you something from Lord Sigebert.' The girl's thick lips curved in a sneer and something like hatred glittered in the dark eyes.

'From my father?' Elona stared at her, a chill of suspicion running through her as she read the hostility in the girl's face. 'Has my father sent me a wedding gift?'

The girl could barely conceal her triumph as she took something from inside her tunic and held it out to Elona with a defiant gesture, as if daring her to take it. 'Lord Sigebert sent you this, my lady.' Her tone was bold and openly insolent.

Seeing a little vial similar to the one Cedric had been forced to bring her, Elona gasped and recoiled in horror. 'No! I won't take it. Why should I?'

'It is your father's command that you die rather than accept this disgrace they have forced upon you. Lord Sigebert says you must remember that you are the descendant of Saxon kings and do your duty.'

'No . . .' Elona shook her head, backing away from the other girl in disgust. 'Lord de Bainwulf has honoured me with this marriage. How can my father do this—how can he believe it is better for me to die?' She lifted her bewildered eyes to her tormentor's face. 'What kind of a father would send his only child such a wedding gift!'

Ealdgyth's mouth curved in a scornful smile. 'Are you too innocent to see that the Norman lord makes a fool of you, my lady? He pretends to honour you by making you his wife and thus showing it is possible for Saxons and Normans to live in peace: but it will be an empty mockery. In public you will be his wife and he will show you courtesy, but Alfwen will lie in his bed on cold nights. It is Alfwen the Norman loves, not you.'

Elona turned away swiftly to hide the pain in her eyes. The girl must be trying to hurt her for some reason of her own, and if it had been only

Ealdgyth's word, she would have dismissed the story as lies. But this was the second time Elona had been told that Alfwen was her husband's bed-woman, and there could be no denying the servant's distress earlier when she realised that she had inadvertently betrayed Lord de Bainwulfs secret. And the knowledge that Raoul had not even tried to hide his affair with this girl had been hurtful from the start. He must know that Elona would be humiliated when she discovered Alfwen's existence. The full extent of his perfidy struck her like a knife in her breast, and it was all she could do to hold back the bitter tears.

'There is wine in the pitcher, Lady Elona,' Ealdgyth's voice was softly persuasive now, like the purring of a cat. 'With this poison you could kill the Norman first, and so avenge your honour. In dying thus, you will live on for ever in the legends of our people.'

'Go away,' Elona said stiffly, keeping her face averted.

'I shall leave the vial here on the table. Kill him, my lady, before he drags you down to the level of a slave. Farewell, Lady Elona.'

Was there a note of triumph in Ealdgyth's voice? Elona thought so, but could not understand why the girl seemed to gloat over her despair. As far as she knew she had never even spoken to her until today—so why should she hate her? It did not matter: the girl was not important. She had merely done as Elona's father had commanded, though it had apparently given her pleasure to carry out the task.

Elona felt confused and bewildered, her bruised emotions a tangle of hopes, fears and superstitions. What must she do? Was it her duty to obey her father? She had always believed so until the night she had visited the sacred tree in the forest, and even then she had been very conscious of her wickedness in flouting his orders. And when she had run away, she had done so only out of desperation. Yet she could not believe it was right to blindly obey an order to take her own life, for that would be a most terrible sin—a sin she had held back from even in her darkest moments until the night Sigebert had sent her the first vial of poison. Raoul had saved her then—but had he saved her merely to make her suffer more? Was he really planning to

humiliate her by flaunting his bed-woman before the world? Was the whole affair a cruel plot to drag her and her family into the mire?

The doubts tore at her, going round and round in her head until she thought she would go mad or die from the pain. Falling to her knees, Elona prayed for guidance, but after several minutes she rose to her feet with her questions unanswered. Prayers could not help her now. It was already too late. She was Raoul's wife, and nothing would ease the agony she must endure if Ealdgyth's taunts were true. It would indeed be better if she died.

She suddenly realised that it was some time since she had left her wedding feast, yet Raoul had not come to her. Had he been the eager bridegroom he had claimed, he would have been with her long before this. Was he—could he have gone to Alfwen first?

Elona groaned aloud. It was as though a dagger had been plunged deep into her heart. To realise that her husband had gone first to his true-love's bed was the bitterest blow she had yet received. It was but the start of what must be a lifetime of regret and shame. Walking slowly to the table, she stared down at the little vial of dark liquid as if in a nightmarish dream. She reached out and picked it up, holding it in her hand to stare at it with bleak eyes. Was this to be the end of all her dreams? Tears blinded her as she removed the stopper, hesitating a moment more before pouring the contents into the wine. It was done—and in a little while her life would be ended.

'Elona,' Raoul's voice from the doorway stopped her heartbeat for one terrifying moment. 'Are you not in bed? You will take cold, my love.'

Hearing the note of tenderness in his voice, Elona was filled with bitter anger. How could he still pretend to care for her when he had come to her straight from the clinging arms of his lover?

She poured some wine into a drinking-horn and turned to greet him, willing her stiff lips to a smile of welcome. Why should she not be as false as he?

'I was waiting for you, my lord. You have been so long that I feared to fall asleep before you came—and this is our wedding night. Or had you forgot?'



'Ah, you do right to chide me for my neglect on our wedding night.' Raoul smiled and came towards her. 'A bride should have precedence on her own special night. Will you forgive me, sweet Elona? Only matters of great importance could have kept me from your side, I promise you.'

Elona's eyes were very bright. She felt an unnatural calm, as if she were walking in a dream. 'Matters of State, my lord? Or was it something else which delayed you, something warmer and sweeter perhaps?'

Raoul frowned as he heard the sharp note in her voice and sensed the anger she was hiding. 'Nothing but my duty to the Duke would keep me from your arms. Surely you know how I have longed for this night, Elona?'

Elona stared at him uncertainly, her heart jerking as something in his voice set her senses spinning. She could feel a slow fire seeping through her veins, and her will was bending gradually like metal in a furnace.

'Is the wine for me?' Raoul smiled, reaching out to take the drinking-horn from her. 'We shall drink together, Elona, to seal the bond of our marriage. I wish you great joy and a life of content, my lady. For my part, I shall do all I can to make it so.'

Raoul lifted the horn in a toast to her, then put it to his lips; but, before he could drink, Elona gave a wild cry and dashed it from his hands. He stared at the wine as it spilled on the ground and then at her, a puzzled expression on his face.

'Why? What have I done?' he asked, bewildered.

'The wine was poisoned.' Elona's voice was calm but inside her head she was screaming. 'My father sent it with a servant-girl. I was to kill you and myself, and thus avoid dishonour.'

'Dishonour?' He stared at her, his eyes narrowing. 'But you are my wife, Elona. I understood why you fought me before, and I admired your courage. I knew you hated me then, but I thought this marriage would set things right between us. Can you not forgive me for what I did that night? I know it was brutal and cruel of me—but I was angry because you tried to kill yourself.'

Elona's lips were white. 'No, I cannot forgive that or—or your betrayal. You have tricked me into marrying you, but I'll be no wife to you, my lord. I will never lie with you in that bridal couch—or in any other bed!'

She saw the anger flare in him, but she was past caution. 'Yes, it would dishonour me to lie with a treacherous, cowardly Norman! I have the blood of Saxon princes in my blood and I'll not mix it with . . .'

'By heaven! I've heard enough of this. A plague on your tricks, woman. You lead me on with false smiles to wreak a petty vengeance that only a base Saxon would stoop to.' Raoul's face was tight with fury. 'A treacherous, cowardly Norman am I? Well, my lady wife, you shall learn to know me better!'

Elona backed away from him, aware now of the terrible rage she had aroused in him, and beginning to fear it. 'Do not touch me!' She held up her hand to ward him off. 'I shall fight you.'

'Fight me, will you?' Raoul's mouth settled in a grim smile. 'Scratch and bite all you will, little she-devil; this time it will avail you nothing. I was lenient with you last time and it seems I made a mistake. You are my wife now, and I mean to teach you obedience.'

'Beast! Vile, lying Norman dog!' she screamed, her eyes flashing fire. 'Touch me, and I shall hate you to my dying day.'

'Then you must hate me, Elona.' His quiet voice frightened her more than all the threats that had gone before, and she backed away from him.

Raoul swooped on Elona, catching her wrist and jerking her so that her breasts were pressed hard against him, and she could feel the tautness of his muscles through the thin silk. Winding his fingers in her long hair, he tipped her head back so that she was forced to look up into the murderous hell of his eyes.

'I shall teach you well, my fair one! So well that you will come crawling to me on your knees and beg me to take you into my bed.'

'Never!' Elona cried, her eyes throwing darts at him. 'You may possess me by force but you will never make me beg for your favours.'

'Your words are meaningless,' Raoul muttered, his eyes glittering almost feverishly now as he held her pressed against him. His breath came hot and fast as if he were swiftly losing control of himself. 'I think it is your false heart that lies, Elona. Your body speaks more truly. You tempt a man past bearing, and now we shall discover wherein lies the truth. Are you the virtuous maiden you protest to be, or a scheming wanton who hath trapped me into marriage with a pretence of meekness?'

'Me—trap you?' Elona cried furiously. She gave a scream of indignation and beat against his chest with her fists, but her fury only made him laugh. His mouth came down to wrest possession of hers, searing her with the burn of his demanding kisses. Bending down, he caught her up in his arms, his lips still holding hers captive as he carried her struggling and kicking to the bridal couch.

Tossing her down, he leaned over her menacingly, a gleam of mockery in his glittering eyes. 'Aren't you going to scratch my eyes out and feed them to the hogs, Elona?' he taunted. He trailed his fingers through her hair, playing with it idly as he watched the frustration in her eyes. 'Are you ready to begin your lessons now, sweet vixen?'

She gave a strangled cry and bit his hand, sinking her strong white teeth deep into his flesh. He curled his fingers in her long hair and jerked it sharply once.

'Don't force me to hurt you, Elona,' he warned. 'Why fight me when you know I shall win in the end?'

She lay staring up at him, breathing hard, knowing that his superior strength would eventually overcome her, no matter how hard she fought. Last time he had let her go, but she knew she would not escape so easily tonight. She had unleashed a raw savagery in him: it lurked just beneath the surface, and if she pushed him too far he would wreak a cruel vengeance upon her. Grinding her teeth in a snarl of fury, she felt the tears sting her eyes and cursed her own weakness. He was an arrogant, unfeeling brute and she hated

him with all her heart! But, in a moment, the sudden surge of anger drained out of her, leaving her weak with misery. Of what use to fight him when her resistance only amused him? She could see the laughter flicking in his eyes, and it destroyed her.

Seeing the fire die out of her eyes, Raoul bent over her with a smile. He smoothed the fair hair back from her brow, kissing the pale skin beneath.

'How glorious your hair is,' he said, moving his lips caressingly over her brow so that his hot breath sent little shivers running through her. 'It bewitched me from the start. I have longed to touch your tresses like this, to feel the silken softness beneath my fingers. You are so beautiful, Elona. It's a pity such beauty should hide a heart of stone. Yet I believe there is passion in you. Shall I bring the hidden fire in your heart to life, my sweet lady? Shall I teach you the pleasures of being a woman?'

Elona closed her eyes, shutting out the seduction of his handsome face and sweet, coaxing words. She had feared him less when his anger raged. There was desire in his eyes now—a fierce desire to possess her, body and soul. And once he had made her his, she would no longer have the strength to resist him. She could not bear it! She turned her face away to the pillow as despair washed over her. Was there no way to reach his heart?

Suddenly she knew there was but one way to defeat him. If her struggles only aroused his passions, she would freeze his blood with her coldness. She could not prevent him taking his will of her, but she would give him nothing.

Refusing to answer his teasing questions, Elona lay very still, clenching her hands at her sides. His kisses touched her forehead, her nose, her throat, her eyelids; the sweetness of them was almost unbearable. She felt a stirring in her blood as a slow tide of molten fire began to burn somewhere inside her, trickling along her veins to reach every part of her body. She fought it with all her strength. She would not, must not, let him destroy her will with this seductive persuasion! She dare not listen to the clamouring of her own body: she knew him for the false-hearted betrayer he really was.

She lay unmoving, her face cold and white as Raoul's lips moved lingeringly down her slender throat, trailing a flickering ribbon of fire over her cool

skin. She moaned softly, clenching her hands so tightly that her nails brought blood to the surface of her flesh as she willed herself to resist the slow throbbing of her own heart. Her limbs had turned to fiery liquid, making her want to press her body close to the man who was tormenting her with his skilful lovemaking.

'Do not fight me,' Raoul murmured close against her ear as he gently nibbled the lobe. 'Give yourself to me willingly, my beautiful Elona, open to me like the sweet flower you are. Give me your lips, do not make me take them.'

'No—Never,' Elona whispered in a voice stifled by the throbbing of her heart.

She felt his strong hands push away the silk of her nightgown, uncovering the rose-tipped peaks of her smooth breasts. His tongue moved in little teasing motions, firming the nipples to erect awareness and making her gasp with the exquisite pleasure this aroused in her. She felt a wild churning in her stomach as it flattened beneath the firm caress of his hand, which slid down still further to lose itself in the silky sweetness of her. Her blood had turned to warm honey, moving with a slow thickness through her pliant limbs as her will to fight him began to melt like ice before the sun. A groan broke from her as his other hand cupped her breast, caressing it gently as he again whispered words of tender love into her ear.

She felt the lean, hard length of his thighs along hers as he moved against her, his face twisted and caught with passion as he too groaned with the intense longing inside him. Her lips parted softly beneath his as he teased and coaxed her mouth into aching submission, his tongue entering and seeking out her sweetness.

Elona cursed the betrayal of her own body as it began to respond eagerly to his caresses and false lies. While her mind still stubbornly resisted him and she told herself he was a treacherous liar, her limbs had developed a will of their own. Her belly tautened and arched beneath the touch of his straying hand; her legs parted and opened of their own volition, responding to the gentle searching of his fingers.

Now the throbbing of her heart spread through her entire body and she became a mass of living, breathing, flame. She began to writhe restlessly beneath his demanding caresses, no longer able to control her actions. There was a growing demand in her for the complete mastery of his body, as her own cried out to him. A sigh escaped her trembling lips as he bent to kiss her once more, and she felt her mouth reaching eagerly, greedily for his and her nails dug deep into her palms to stop her crying out his name.

'Ah ... Do not,' she begged, panting wildly, 'I cannot bear it . .

Raoul's eyes glinted with a mixture of laughter and glorious triumph, 'I think you are ready to accept defeat at last, my sweet wife,' he whispered teasingly. 'Control your impatience, my love, while I get rid of this.' He pulled at his tunic with feverish haste, his movements clumsy and hampered by his own impatience, laughter flickering in his eyes as the offending garment stuck over his shoulders and refused to budge. 'Confound the thing!'

Stung by the laughter she thought was meant to mock her, Elona pushed away from beneath him as he wrestled with the tunic. Raoul had succeeded in breaking down all her defences one by one and she knew she must yield to him at last. From now on there would be no denying him, for her body clamoured insistently for his and she knew that in another moment she would have broken and flung her arms about his neck, begging him to make her his own. Even now every part of her ached for his touch. Once she had tasted the full delights of his loving she would be his willing slave. He would make her crawl to him just as he had threatened—as Ealdgyth had said he would! Already Elona knew the power he held, and it terrified her. This man would be her master, bending her to meek submission with his kisses as all her father's brutality had not been able to do. It could not, must not, be!

Tumbling from the bed in frantic haste, she ran across the room, panting and sobbing in her desperate attempt to escape. Her only chance was to leave now, to run into the darkness before she tasted the bitterness of her final humiliation. She would seek oblivion in the cold, deep waters of the river, where not even Raoul could find her.

Raoul was a heartbeat behind her. He caught her as she reached the door, jerking her round into his arms and holding her crushed against his naked chest, his breath hot on her upturned face as he glared down at her in anger.

'And where do you think you're going?' he demanded hoarsely. 'Do you think to cheat me at the last? If I were not a soft fool I would beat you until you wept for mercy.'

'Let me go!' Elona screamed, beating at his chest with her fists. 'Let me find peace at the bottom of the river! Let me die—or kill me—but do not shame me by making me your slave. Befect me if you will, plunge your sword into my heart, but do not break it slowly. Let me go, my lord, I beg you! Go back to Alfwen . . .'

Raoul's face darkened with rage, his eyes gleaming with dark flashes of light. 'Who is this Alfwen?' he demanded icily. 'What new trick is this, Elona? I warn you, my patience is almost at an end. I shall beat you if it's the only way to bring you to your senses.'

Elona's eyes blazed back at him, enraged by his blatant lies. How could he deny all knowledge of the woman who shared his bed? She saw the whiteness about his lips and the slight flaring of his nostrils, but she was beyond caring. Let him do his worst!

'Liar! You know well who she is. You were with her before you came to me tonight—on our wedding night!' Her voice almost broke with emotion, but she faced him with defiant pride. 'Alfwen is your bed-woman!'

His fingers bit deeply into her shoulders, making her cry out with pain; for a moment she thought he would strike her and she lifted her head to receive the blow, refusing to let him see her fear.

'My what?' Raoul roared. He stared at her in stunned disbelief, his glittering eyes reading the jealousy in her face without really registering what they saw. Then, quite suddenly, the anger died from his eyes and he felt relief wash over him. 'I see! You think I have another woman. You fought me because you were jealous of Alfwen, not because it shames you to wed a treacherous, cowardly Norman dog.' His mouth began to curve at the corners

and his eyes danced with laughter. 'Is that the truth, Elona? Are you jealous, my sweet vixen? Were you vexed because you thought another had kept me from your bed? I did not know you were so impatient. Had I realised the heat of your ardour not even the Duke's business could have kept me from you.' He brushed his lips against her hair. 'Come back to bed, my love, and I shall show you that you have no need to be jealous.'

Elona felt her throat closing as he mocked her, reading the triumph in his eyes and taking it for male arrogance. This is how it would be from now on—he would use her love as a weapon to prick and wound her gentle heart.

'No, it's not true,' she lied, turning her face aside to hide her tears. He was hurting her so badly. Oh, how could he be so cruel when she loved him so desperately? He had not even denied that Alfwen was his whore. 'Why should I care whom you choose to bed with? Indulge your lust with as many as you wish, but leave me alone. I hate you, Raoul de Bainwulf. Do you hear me? I hate you!'

His mouth moved in a teasing smile as if it, too, had a will of its own. 'You have said it so many times, my Elona. Yet you are my wife, my own, my property, and I will have obedience from you. I can see I have many things to teach you, my wilful beauty. Now, fight me no more. Come back to bed and accept your duty with the proper meekness fitting in a wife.'

There was something in his tone that made Elona look up at him with suspicion. She saw he was trying not to laugh, and felt he was deliberately goading her. Why? Unless it was to tease her? Not cruel mockery, but the teasing words of a friend and lover. Yet even as her heart cried out to him and her hand moved restlessly at her side as if seeking his, she held back. She dare not trust her own instincts. What if she were wrong, and it was cruel mockery after all? She felt the persuasive stroking of his hand on her back and knew she was weakening as she swayed towards him, then stopped. What if Ealdgyth had been telling the truth and he was lying?

'No, I will not let you persuade me,' she said, her face white but stubborn, denying him even as her body begged for his and she longed to be back in his arms. 'I shall never be a meek and docile wife.'



'Then I really shall have to beat you.' Raoul tipped his head to one side, his eyes bright as a hawk's. What a stubborn wench she was; but how her beauty stirred his blood! He was at a loss to know what to try next, bewildered by his inability to reach her. 'But you would bear it all and still scream defiance at me, wouldn't you, my sweet dove? What am I to do with you? Would you have me crawl for your favours, I wonder. Perhaps one day, if you plague me long enough, but not yet, I fear, Elona. Perhaps I should behave like the tyrant you seem to think me—maybe I should beat Cedric instead of you. That might bring you to a proper state of submission . . .'

Elona's pupils dilated with horror. She backed away from him, feeling sick. 'You—You would not be so cruel!'

His brows rose as he saw the fear in her eyes. What kind of a man did she imagine he was? To his discredit, her show of fear raised the devil in him. He could not resist the temptation to test her further.

'Would I not?' he asked, a wry twist to his mouth. 'Am I not the cowardly Norman dog you named me, Elona? Is there any baseness to which I would not stoop to have my way? Why should I spoil the softness of your skin, which pleasures me, when I can whip the boy instead? I think you would soon beg me to stop and come weeping to my arms like a little lap-dog. Is that what you want me to do?'

'Oh, you are cruel!' Elona sobbed, unable to hold back her tears now. 'You know—you know I love Cedric. How can you hurt me so?'

'Such tenderness for a mere stripling?' Raoul's face hardened as he felt a twist of jealousy. Her heart was not so stony where the boy was concerned. 'If he were a little older I would wonder if there was good reason for your tears. But I will not insult you—though you have questioned my honour. Have you treated me fairly, Elona? I believe I have behaved towards you as an honest man, even if I have sometimes been harsh. In the circumstances it could not have been otherwise. I think I have done you no real harm. Why can you not spare a little tenderness for me?'

Elona stared at him, bewildered by this new tactic. It was almost as if he were pleading with her to love him, yet it could not be so! He had never

given any sign that he might love her. Lust was not love—and yet was that merely passion she saw in his eyes? She was about to speak, but something warned her to be careful. She was aware of a throbbing tension in him, and her own heart was beating wildly. Her eyes opened wide and she licked her lips nervously.

'I—I do not understand you, my lord. How have I been unfair to you? You have always been the conqueror and I your prisoner . . .'

For a fleeting moment Elona thought she saw disappointment and a flicker of pain in his eyes, and her heart contracted. This might be a turning-point, and she wished she had spoken more truly of what was in her heart. Perhaps it was time now to surrender if she were not to lose all she most desired in life.

'Do you truly not understand, Elona? If you think of me as a barbarian who wants only to inflict pain on you, then there is no more to be said . . .'

He broke off as though he found it too difficult to go on. In the tense silence which stretched between them, the sound of shouting outside reached him. He stiffened, listening for a while, his eyes narrowing in concentration. 'Something is wrong. Wait here while I investigate. Stay inside the hut and don't move until I come back. Do you hear me? That's an order.'

Elona looked up and saw his face was hard, his eyes like black ice. A chill entered her heart as she saw him pull on his tunic and seize a sword. 'Are we being attacked?'

'I do not know.' His lips twisted bitterly. 'Who knows? You may yet be a widow before ever you're a wife, Elona!'

He turned away and went out without another glance in her direction, leaving Elona with his chilling words ringing in her ears.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

ELONA SHIVERED, her teeth chattering with cold. Realising suddenly that she had been standing motionless for several minutes, she went to the bed and dragged off one of the covers, wrapping it around her shoulders and snuggling into its softness. Then she sat on the stool, wriggling her toes in the warmth of the fur rug, and sighing. Now that she was alone, her heart ached and she longed to give way to the tears which burned behind her eyes. Only her fear that Raoul would come back and see her weakness kept her from giving way to despair as she remembered his bleak look and heard again his bitter words. Oh, why had she been so stubborn and proud instead of confessing her love for him? If he should die . . .

She was not sure how long she sat wrapped in the coverlet, her whole body taut, her mind steeped in the misery of self-doubt. It seemed hours, but could in reality have been only a matter of some twenty or thirty minutes, before Raoul returned.

She stood up, staring at him uncertainly, unsure of how to greet him. 'What—What is wrong, my lord?' she whispered, her eyes a dark smudge in the pallor of her face.

He paused, frowning as his eyes went over her ashen face, sensing the tenseness in her. Was it fear of him that made her look almost ill? He felt a sharp pang of regret, and his voice was gentle as he answered.

'Nothing which need worry you, Elona. Some of our men were attacked earlier this evening. It seems that the rebels have been cornered this time, and we are sending reinforcements to flush them out.'

'Oh . . . ' Elona stared at him. He seemed so cold and withdrawn, and she knew he must be very angry with her.

She wanted to say something to bridge the gap between them, but did not know how to begin. 'Are you going?'

'Yes.' Raoul hesitated, wondering whether to tell her the whole truth, but not knowing how she would react. Matters were already so bad between them

that he was afraid to do or say anything which might hurt her more. He was conscious of having made mistakes this evening, and was puzzled by her new mood of docility. Somehow he had to find a way to break down the barriers she had erected and discover the reason for her fear of him, but now was not the time. This is something I must see to myself, Elona, but it should not take long. If all goes well, I shall return tomorrow or the next day.'

So he was going. He would leave her alone on their wedding night with nothing settled between them. He did not love her, and her wilful stubbornness had cooled his passion for her; it was most certainly her own fault, but it showed the shallowness of his interest in her. She was merely a plaything to fill his leisure hours.

'I—I wish you a safe return, my lord.' Elona turned her face aside so that he should not see how close the tears were.

'Do you, Elona?' Raoul gave a sigh of exasperation. There was no understanding this beautiful girl who was half child, half woman. 'Perhaps I was wrong to marry you. It might solve our problems if I did not return, but we shall settle this another day.' He turned to leave, paused, and came back to her, gazing down at her with a curiously sad expression. 'Think carefully about what I've said, Elona. You are my wife now, and I cannot let you go, so we must find a solution to this dilemma as best we can.'

'Yes/ Elona closed her eyes, feeling unable to meet his gaze. Raoul's grave look tore at her heart in a way his mockery never had, wounding her deeply and making her feel vaguely guilty. Yet why should she feel that his sad look was her fault, when he was the betrayer?

When she opened her eyes again, he had gone. Alone and worn out with emotion, she crept into bed and curled up beneath the covers, but the desire to weep had gone. The pain she felt now was too harsh and too raw to be eased by tears. There was a deep sadness in her and regret for what might have been.

Despite her exhaustion, she could not sleep. Her thoughts went backwards and forwards as she tried to make sense of all that had just happened. Where in all the tangled maze was the truth? Raoul had said many hurtful things to

her tonight, but the quiet, sad look he gave her at their parting stuck in her mind. It was obvious that he now regretted having taken her as his wife, for he had said it was a mistake and that it might be best if he did not return. What could he mean? If he had at last realised there could be no happiness for either of them in a marriage which was not based on love, why had he still insisted he could not let her go? Unless it was simply that his pride would not allow it . . .

As the dawn light filtered through the slit in the wall that served as a window, Elona finally came to a decision. She had been wrong to marry Raoul knowing he did not love her; it could bring them both nothing but unhappiness. She should have refused to go through with it, even if it meant she must die. No matter what the truth of Raoul's intentions towards her, it was clear that he did not love her, and she knew now that she could not live with him without love.

Throwing back the covers, she jumped out of bed and shivered in the cold air. She dressed quickly in the tunic and mantle she had worn for her wedding, her face pale but determined. She must leave the village at once. It should be easy, now that most of the men had ridden out with Raoul during the night; the others would be too busy to see her. Even if they did, they would take no notice now that she was the wife of a Norman: it would not occur to anyone that she might try to escape on the morning after her wedding.

She fastened round her slim wrists the bracelets Raoul had given her, gathering up her other trinkets to tuck into the leather purse hanging from her girdle, and not forgetting the little talisman bestowed upon her by Alfrida a lifetime ago. She added the gold collar—the Duke's present—after some deliberation: since she had no money, she would need to sell her jewellery to buy food.

Suddenly, as she was about to leave the hut, Elona realised she could not go without Cedric. Raoul would be furious when he discovered that she had run away, and he might carry out his threat to punish the boy in her stead. She was almost sure he had made the threat only to frighten her; although she had been a witness to his fierce temper, she could not quite believe he would be as cruel as that, but she dare not put her conviction to the test. Her father

would beat Cedric without hesitation if he believed it would punish her, so how could she be sure that Raoul would not? She could not risk it. No, she must take the young harper with her, although she knew he would be reluctant to leave the camp because he had made many friends among the Normans.

Glancing outside the hut, Elona saw a servant-girl carrying a leather bucket of waste food for the hogs; she beckoned to her urgently, and the girl put down her burden and came running.

'Can I serve you, Lady Elona?' she asked with a friendly smile.

'Do you know the young harper, Cedric?'

'Yes, my lady.' The girl blushed. She had noticed the boy several times, sending him shy smiles across the hall and flushing with pleasure when he returned them. T—I have spoken with him a few times.'

Elona was too tense to notice her coy look. 'Can you find him and ask him to come to me at once?'

'Yes, my lady.'

The girl ran off, her steps eager at this chance to seek out the youth she admired. Elona went back inside, pacing the floor impatiently. Now that her decision was taken, she was in a fever to be gone lest Raoul should return and prevent her flight.

After what seemed an eternity, she heard a slight noise and flung open the door of the hut, drawing Cedric quickly inside. His smile of welcome turned to a look of dismay and disbelief as Elona explained why she had sent for him and stressed that Raoul had married her only to humiliate her.

'I am sure you are wrong, my lady,' he said at once. 'I have heard no rumours of this Alfwen.'

'You would not tell me if you had,' Elona replied crossly, her eyes a little too bright. 'Oh, I know you like it here, Cedric, but you don't understand. My

lord will punish you in my stead if I leave you, so you must come with me. Do you not see it is the only way?'

Cedric frowned with uncertainty. 'The Lord de Bainwulf has shown me only kindness, my lady. Surely you have misunderstood his intentions towards you? I cannot believe he would deliberately set out to humiliate you—it is not his way.'

'Oh, why will you not listen to me?' Elona cried in exasperation. 'You do not know him as I do, Cedric; you have seen only the face he shows to the world. I tell you he is ruthless, and will force me to obey him by inflicting pain on you. He has threatened to make me his slave. And even if it were not so, I must still leave . . .' She swallowed hard as tears caught at her throat. 'You do not understand: he loves me not.'

'Perhaps he was jesting. Could it—Could it be that you have displeased him in some way?' Cedric gave her a nervous look, knowing of old how stubborn she could be, but not daring to suggest that the quarrel could be her fault.

Elona stamped her foot in temper, guessing what he dare not say openly and knowing that much of the blame was indeed hers. 'You foolish boy!' she snapped. 'I see he has won your heart from me. If you will not come, I shall go alone.'

Cedric shook his head, reaching out to detain her as she flounced away from him. 'Nay, I could not let you go alone, my lady. Your husband's enemies might try to capture you. I know there are spies even here in the village. Besides, my lord would beat me, and rightly so if I let harm come to you.'

Elona looked at him in annoyance. He made it sound as if she were a wilful child crying over nothing, but he did not know why she could not stay with a man who did not love her. No one could understand what was in her heart or why she struggled against her own feelings so fiercely: no one who had not experienced the bitterness of humiliation as she had for so many years. She could not suffer the pain of rejection again; it was too much to ask of her.

'If you mean to come with me, Cedric, you must fetch your things quickly. We must leave at once, before everyone is awake.'

There is no need to hurry, my lady. An emissary from London came last night after you had retired. The Duke and the Lord de Bainwulf were enclosed with him for some time; then Duke William rode out with some of his nobles to meet an important person in secret. Since most of the other men left with your husband, there are only the servants and a few guards to watch the gates. They will be too busy to notice us if we slip away quietly.'

Elona stared at Cedric, an odd catching sensation about her heart. If Raoul had been with the Duke, he could not have gone to Alfwen. For a brief moment she wondered if she had misjudged him, but then she remembered how close she had come to surrendering her whole self to him, and the threat he had made to have her crawling to him for his favours. No, it was impossible! Raoul did not love her. and she would not stay to be hurt and humiliated. She would not become a colourless drudge like her mother had been!

Remembering the silent woman who had walked about the village like a ghost, Elona hardened her heart against the man she had married. It was foolish to believe he was any better than her father or Oslac. Even if his kisses did turn her limbs to molten fire, it did not mean that he cared for her. No doubt her father had wanted her mother in that way when she was young and lovely: it was the way of all men to use a woman for their pleasure and then discard her when she no longer pleased them.

She was almost in tears, but spoke defiantly. 'I am ready to leave. I shall wait for you only if you are quick.'

'Wait just a moment while I fetch my harp, my lady,' Cedric begged. 'Without it, I am lost.'

'Very well.' She smiled at him, knowing that she would be lost and lonely if he did not go with her. 'This is what we always planned—to travel the country as minstrels. We shall be as free as birds.'

Cedric smiled as an idea came to him. 'Yes, my lady. I shall be swift, never fear. Do not leave without me, I pray you.'



Elona stared after him. It was, as she had said, the life she had planned when she ran away from her own village. Then it had seemed a great adventure; now the future loomed cold and empty before her. She wondered why the thought of freedom no longer held the same appeal, but when the answer came to her she dismissed it, shutting the truth out of her mind.

As his horse thundered through the night, Raoul's thoughts kept returning again and again to the woman he had left behind. He knew he had had no choice but to lead this expedition to capture the Saxon thane who had been harassing their foraging parties with such success. With Duke William gone to a secret meeting, which might lead to the bloodless surrender of the City of London, it was clearly his duty to seize this chance to be rid of a troublesome rebel. Yet he had hated to leave his bride with so much misunderstanding still between them.

The memory of Elona's pale face haunted him, pricking his conscience like a thorn. It seemed that he had been wrong to try to bend her to his will with threats against the boy she loved. Yet he believed her nature was such that she would laugh any sign of weakness to scorn. He was afraid to speak too plainly, afraid of the unknown emotion she aroused in him. And so he had taken refuge in anger and mockery, thinking to arouse that tempestuous spirit he so admired in her. Now he was torn and haunted by the look of pain he had seen in her eyes.

'God! was ever a man plagued with such a woman,' Raoul muttered to himself. 'William was right; she hath bewitched me. I am run mad . . .'

His thoughts were interrupted by a warning shout from the soldier who had brought the news of the Saxon attack. Ahead lay the woods and the marshes into which the Saxons had been driven. Intent on harassing the Norman foraging party, they had miscalculated, and, finding the Normans too strong for them, had retreated further and further into the deep forest. However, having been drawn on by their leader's fierce desire to attack and harass the Normans as much as they could, the rebel Saxons found themselves far from home. They did not know that the woods bordered an area of dangerous marshland, and had retreated until they suddenly realised they were in a trap.

Driven back by the enemy, they had tried to cross the deep bog, only to see several of their number sink and disappear. With nothing except murky death at their backs, they had no choice but to turn and fight.

But the Norman leader was too wily for them. Instead of risking his small party in an open fight, he had sent an urgent message to the Duke while keeping the Saxons under fire from his archers. A shower of arrows every time they showed themselves was enough to make sure that the Saxons stayed exactly where he wanted them until help came.

As de Bainwulfs men approached in the dim light of dawn in the forest, a cheer went up from the Norman ranks who had spent a cold night in waiting. Their leader drew a sigh of relief and hurried to greet his superior.

'We have the Saxons trapped, my lord,' he said eagerly. 'Knowing the marshes were here from past experience, I told our men to drive them in that direction. It is the thane who has plagued us so.'

De Bainwulf nodded. 'You have done well, soldier. What is your name?'

'Robert of Bayeux, my lord.'

'Well, Robert of Bayeux, you shall be well rewarded when the Duke hears of this night's work.' His cordiality faded suddenly. 'Does the Lord Sigebert still live?'

'Yes, my lord. You cannot mistake him. A big man with a black beard and flowing locks.'

'Black hair, you say? Tell the men to mark him well. He must not escape, but I would have the Lord Sigebert taken alive.'

'Yes, my lord. Shall I give the signal to advance on the enemy now?'

De Bainwulf considered the lie of the land. 'We shall give them a chance to surrender their arms, but if they prove stubborn, we shall crush them. Pass on my message, and then return. I would learn more of our situation here . . .'

'I'm here, my lady.' Elona heard Cedric calling to her softly from outside the hut and gathered up her possessions, wiping her tears hastily as she slipped out to join him.

'You were such a long time that I thought someone had caught you,' she whispered, her eyes holding a hint of accusation as she looked at him. 'What kept you?'

Cedric showed her his bundle. 'I thought we would need food, so I stole this from the kitchens. I had to be careful; the cook is a light sleeper and he beds down near the fire on cold nights.'

Elona shivered, pulling her mantle closer about her shoulders. The earth was covered with a crisp white frost and tiny icicles hung from the branches. She glanced back at the hut she had just left, regretting the fur rug which had been so warm to her toes, and ran back to fetch it.

Smiling, she showed the rug to Cedric, who was patiently waiting. 'This will keep us from freezing until we can find a village to give us shelter.'

Cedric nodded. 'It's a fine rug, my lady, but heavy. Let me carry it for you.'

She shook her head. 'You have enough as it is, Cedric. I shall wrap it round my shoulders; it will help to keep me warm.'

She was glad of its warmth in the bitter chill of the winter's day, and a threatening heaviness in the sky might mean snow before morning came again.

Passing by the shuttered huts in the village, Elona heard the sounds of voices coming from inside. The soldiers were stirring, but reluctant to face the bitter cold. In the absence of the Duke and his nobles, security was lax, the men lingering by their cooking-fires instead of going about their work. Even the two guards posted at the main gate were huddled over a small fire, warming their hands and complaining about the bitter weather. They did not bother to turn their heads as Elona and Cedric slipped by them, uninterested in anyone leaving the village.

Beyond the village was a meadow which had lain fallow all the past year, its unploughed surface hard with frost as they ran across it. To the right lay a wide river which they knew wound eventually by the walls of London, and a stone bridge leading to the highroad commonly used by travellers and pedlars. Even though the morning was so cold and the wintry sun barely breaking through a leaden sky, Elona could see a cart drawn by two oxen trundling towards the village.

'Which way shall we go, Cedric?' she asked, unsure of what to do now that she had escaped the confines of the Norman camp.

'If we take the highroad we shall be seen. If we follow the river bank we may meet up with the Duke's party, for it was in that direction that they rode.'

'So it must be the forest.'

Elona looked doubtfully at the thick stretch of woods which lay some way to the left of the village. In the forest it would be colder, for the weak winter sun could not penetrate its density sufficiently to take the chill from the day. There might be dangers there too: wild boars and maybe the evil spirits which lurked unseen in the marshes to prey on unwary travellers. Remembering the wise woman's tales—oh, how long ago it seemed since she had sat in Alfrida's little hut!—and her frightening experience on the night she had visited the sacred tree, she felt a tiny prickle of fear run down her spine.

'The forest is safe enough, my lady.' Cedric smiled as he saw a flicker of apprehension in her eyes. 'It is many years since a wolf was last seen in these parts. The taking of their pelts for reward hath driven them to the lonely reaches and wild crags of the north and west—if any be left alive.'

Elona lifted her head proudly, her courage returning. 'I am not afraid of wolves; only of becoming lost in the woods. We could wander round in circles for ever.'

'No, we shall not get lost,' Cedric replied confidently, with a little smile. 'I have worked out a plan to help us. As we go, we shall mark a notch on a tree

every now and then; thus we can follow our trail back again if we come to a marsh and cannot cross it.'

Elona did not notice the odd look in his eyes. She laughed and touched his arm companionably. 'How clever you are, Cedric. With such a plan we cannot lose our way.'

Cedric's smile deepened. 'Come, then, my lady, we must be on our way, for I see a band of horsemen yonder and I think it's Duke William and his nobles returning.'

'Where?' Elona cried in alarm, her heart thumping as she looked in the direction he pointed. Far in the distance she could just make out a cloud of dust and knew it must be a large party of horsemen. 'Oh, I see them! Hurry, Cedric, for the Duke will make us go back with them if he sees us.'

Elona turned and fled towards the woods with Cedric close behind her. Her heart was beating wildly; her fear of being discovered by Duke William and forced to return to the village to await Raoul's return made her forget the dangers of the forest.

Seated astride the great black horse, Raoul de Bainwulf looked down in silence at his prisoner, his brow creased in thought. Despite the thick ropes that bound his wrists and ankles, the Lord Sigebert struggled violently to throw off his captors' hands, and it needed three men to hold him. The Saxon was a powerful man, and he fought with the fury of a mad wolf. De Bainwulf felt a stirring of admiration for his courage in the face of desperate odds.

'Let him stand free,' he commanded, his stern face hard and cold as the prisoner glared insolently up at him. 'You are defeated, Lord Sigebert. Your men are slain or our prisoners. It is time to cease your struggle, brave though it has been, and accept what must be. Soon London will yield to Duke William, and the throne of England will be his, as it should have been from the day of King Edward's death. Come, sir, give me your word that you will make your bow to your rightful king, and I shall have your bonds cut. You

shall go in all honour to offer your sword to Duke William, not as a prisoner bound hand and foot.'

'Never!' Sigebert's eyes reflected the deep hatred he felt for all Normans. He spat on the ground defiantly, his lips curling in a sneer of derision. 'That for your duke, Norman dog!'

De Bainwulf's mood of leniency left him at once: he would allow no one to insult the Duke of Normandy in his presence. His mouth thinned to a hard line and his eyes became slits.

'By heaven, I should kill you for that!' he cried, fury sparking out of him. In truth the dog deserved to die; yet even as his soldiers moved menacingly towards the Saxon thane, he held up his hand, preventing them from seeking vengeance for the insult. 'For your daughter's sake, I shall spare you this time. Duke William himself shall decide your fate.'

Lord Sigebert's lip curled in a sneer. 'I have no daughter,' he snarled. 'She married a Norman, and thus forfeited her right to bear my name. Better she had died before disgracing her Saxon blood.'

'Be careful how you speak of the Lady Elona, lest you push my patience too far.'

Anger rose up in him like a great tide as Raoul remembered the cause of the quarrel between Elona and himself on their wedding night. At the time he had had other things on his mind, and it had not occurred to him to question what kind of a man would wish to see his daughter in an early grave rather than have her make an honourable marriage. It was perhaps this man's attitude which had poisoned her mind against him. Looking down at Sigebert then, he felt an urge to wreak his fury on the stubborn fool. His hand grasped his sword-hilt, and it took all his strength of will not to plunge it into the Saxon's black heart. If this was the father she had known, it was little wonder his wife distrusted all men.

'You will have your chance to make your peace with the Lady Elona, whom I have the honour to call my wife,' Raoul said in a voice of dangerous calm.

'For her sake, I pray you will come to your senses and take an oath of fealty to Duke William.'

Sigebert spat on the ground again, and Raoul turned his horse aside in disgust, signalling to his soldiers to take the prisoner away, which they did with none too gentle alacrity. As they dragged the struggling, swearing thane to join the other prisoners, the Norman glanced round at his own men.

They were resting now, a mood of elation sweeping the tiredness from their faces. A few had flesh wounds, but he was thankful to see that none had been killed, and only two would need a litter to carry them back to camp. It had been a fortunate action. The fighting had been furious, but over swiftly once he arrived with the reinforcements. Already demoralised by the Noripan superiority of numbers, many of the Saxons had thrown down their weapons after a few minutes, as if they knew they could not hope to win. It was clear that they were sick of fighting and weakened after the bitter coldness of the night. Some, driven by a stronger hatred or an inner determination, had fought defiantly to the last, preferring to yield their lives before their swords. They had died for their bravery and would be given a warrior's funeral. About five or six of the rebels had managed to escape into the woods by pretending to surrender and then slipping away in the confusion of the half-light. Lord Sigebert had refused to surrender, roaring like a wild bull as he was encircled by a score of his enemies, and they had finally taken him with the aid of a net.

Sigebert's magnificent defiance had at first won de Bainwulf's respect, and, had he acted nobly in defeat, the Saxon would have been accorded the honours due to great warrior. But the thane's sullen refusal to accept a parole and his insults to the Duke and Elona had hardened the dislike he instinctively felt for him. Studying the Saxon's coarse features, Raoul could see no likeness of any kind to Elona, and wondered that such a man could sire a creature as lovely and delicate as she.

As his mind conjured up a picture of the girl he had so lately wed, he became impatient to return, chafing at the routine tasks which kept him from her. He felt an aching longing inside him, and the desire to hold her in his arms was almost more than he could bear. This time he would find a way to reach her heart, he vowed. This time she would surrender to him that sweetness which,

the night before, had so nearly been his. She would surely be pleased because he had spared her father's life. But even if she set her mind stubbornly against him yet again, he would find a passage to her heart. He must, for he could not let her go, not if it meant losing her for ever.

Calling his men to mount up, Raoul spurred his horse forward eagerly. His temples had begun to throb as he recalled the moment when Elona had so nearly been his, and his mouth curved in a wry smile of self-mockery. One more second, and the battle would have been won. He had made a mistake by leaving her to remove his tunic. He would make no mistakes next time!

Dusk fell early in the forest, and with it came a creeping silence which made Elona's spine tingle with fear. Throughout the day the sun had scarcely penetrated the gloom, and now it was swiftly growing dark: stifling darkness pierced by sudden noises which broke the eerie silence and then faded into nothingness. The trees were so dense that there was little undergrowth, and the ground was hard with frost beneath their feet. Elona's toes felt so cold inside her thin leather shoes that they hurt. Her hands were numb, and from time to time she had to blow on them and rub them together to instil a little warmth into her fingers.

Hearing an owl hoot in a tree near by, Elona jumped and shivered. She knew it was just a bird, but the darkness had made every sound menacing. The leafless trees looked stark and bare, their branches like skinny fingers clawing at her as she passed, catching her hair and clothes as if in spite. She was reminded of the night she had visited the sacred tree in the forest near her home. It had seemed to her then that evil spirits lived in the woods, and she had never forgotten her terrifying experience when the great wind rose and held her at its heart.

Her trembling fingers sought the talisman in her purse, and her lips moved in silent entreaty. If ever she had needed its magic, it was now. She was tired and cold and her heart ached. Only her pride kept her plodding miserably behind Cedric as he led the way deeper and deeper into the forest.



At long last he stopped. They had reached a small clearing made by fallen trees, and he suggested it might be a good place to spend the night. Elona agreed numbly, and the boy set about collecting sticks for their fire. She watched for a while, then pulled herself together and prepared the ground by setting large flat stones at angles, which allowed air to pass beneath and made a good fire without too much smoke. Cedric rubbed a flint against a stone to produce a flame; it was not long before he had a satisfying blaze going and they huddled together on the fur rug, eating the bread and cold meat he had brought.

'I'm so hungry,' Elona said, tearing at the meat with her strong teeth and smiling at him gratefully. 'How wise you were to think of bringing food. I was so impatient to leave, that I didn't even consider it.'

Cedric grinned at her, knowing her words were meant as an apology for her show of temper earlier in the day. He looked at her pinched face and threw more wood on the fire to make it give out extra heat.

'I was not able to bring much.' He frowned. 'Tomorrow we must set snares for rabbits and small game. It is much colder than when we left our own village, and it will not be as easy to find food. I have seen few enough creatures today. Even the birds stay hidden in the thickets in this weather.'

Elona nodded, now unable to raise even the ghost of a smile. She knew their situation was difficult at best, and could prove dangerous. Food was often scarce in the winter, even in the villages. Some years, when the harvest had been poor, the ceorles would die of starvation if they did not live under the protecting roof of their thane's hall. None of their own people had ever died of hunger, for Sigebert hoarded his stores like a misery giving each man his due ration for the work done in the fields; but in bad winters travellers sometimes came begging for food and were turned away. It was harsh, but necessary if the villagers were to survive. Winter was not a good time to set out on a journey—in a few weeks it would be Christmas, and the frosts could turn to snow at any time.

Elona sniffed and pulled the fur rug closer round her and up over her toes, glad that she had gone back for it. The uncertain future frightened her a little,

but she was determined not to let Cedric guess she was beginning to regret her hasty flight.

'It would have been better if we could have brought my father's cart,' she mused, sighing as she picked up another branch to feed the fire, watching the sparks fly in the darkness as the flames shot higher. 'And much better if we had never been caught by the Normans. We might have been in London now, and safely tucked up in our beds . .

There was a little sob in Elona's voice as she spoke, and Cedric glanced at her with a fleeting smile on his mouth.

'I doubt the citizens of London sleep very soundly with the Normans at their gate,' he said with such a cheerful note in his voice that she stared at him in surprise. 'Don't be anxious, my lady. I'm sure we shall find someone to take us in before the snows come. The forest is large, but it cannot go on for ever. We shall come to a village soon, never fear.'

Elona looked at him, her eyes dark with tiredness and the aching misery inside her. She hugged her knees for comfort, hiding her face against her arms. Cedric's confidence was heartening, but it did nothing to dispel the mood of black despair which had descended on her during the day, and which she knew had nothing to do with the precarious situation they were in.

She huddled beneath her thick mantle, closing her eyes as she tried to relax. She was so very tired, but sleep seemed to elude her. The sudden loud cry of a night bird made her tense and clasp her hands against her sides. Was it an evil omen? Her skin crawled with icy chills as she began to listen to the odd noises all around her: grunting somewhere in that patch of thick bushes, a sudden scuffle and the sharp squeal of a frightened animal.

Tears began to roll silently down her cheeks and she pressed her fists against her mouth to stifle the sobs, tasting salt. Cedric must not hear her weep. He would think she was afraid of the dark, like a child. Elona knew that the deep loneliness inside her had little to do with fear of the forest and the evil spirits who dwelt there. She was a little afraid, but the pain in her heart was almost unbearable.

She felt the gentle touch of Cedric's hand on her shoulder. 'You should not weep, my lady,' he said softly. 'Do not be afraid; there is naught to harm you in the cry of a bird. I am with you. Sleep now, and let me watch over you. Soon the pain will go from your heart and all will be well.'

'I'm not crying,' Elona said in a muffled voice. 'Go to sleep yourself, Cedric. The fire will keep wild beasts at bay.'

Despite her misery she was cheered by the boy's obvious concern for her, and the pain about her heart eased a little. At least she had one friend to comfort her. Her body was aching from exhaustion and the lack of sleep the previous night. After a while the warmth of the fire began to relax her, and then at last she drifted into an uneasy slumber.

Raoul was tired. After a night and a day of hard riding and fighting he was more than ready to take off his armour and snatch some rest. Yet he knew it would be hours before he could allow himself that luxury. First he must see that the prisoners were securely housed: he did not trust Lord Sigebert not to instigate a mass breakout if he were given half a chance; then, when all was settled, a full report must be made to Duke William. The matter of the Saxon thane would have to be resolved before he spoke to Elona.

Sighing, Raoul moved his stiff shoulders wearily. He hoped Sigebert would come to his senses and not force them to hang him as an example to the others. In truth he was a troublesome thorn in their sides, and had he been any other man the Norman would not have hesitated: even now the thane's body would have been hanging from a tree. But his relationship to Elona had so far saved him. Raoul knew it would be hard to explain her father's execution to his wife, and prayed that he would not have to do so.

Elona. . . The very name set his body tingling and aching with the longing to be with her, to feel her soft flesh pressed against his own. He wanted her so badly. Elona, his lovely wife. His now to keep and hold for ever. Surely he would find a way to reach her this time, even if it meant humbling his own pride.

It was with a sense of relief that he saw the village ahead of him. At last! He spurred his horse on with renewed energy, smiling as the guards sprang to attention when they saw him. Well, it was a bitter cold night, and he could not blame them for wanting to huddle near the fire. He would have the watch changed every two hours in future, so that the men would stay more alert. Raoul believed they were in no immediate danger of attack, but it was foolish to take chances, and he knew that, despite the capture of Lord Sigebert, there were still pockets of resistance about the countryside.

He gave orders for the prisoners to be held in the stoutest of what had once been the ceorles' huts and placed a strong guard about them, making sure that Sigebert was kept away from the others. Most of the Saxons were cold, tired and defeated; Raoul was sure they would gladly swear fealty to the Duke in return for a pardon and the freedom to return to their homes. Yet, while Sigebert remained defiant, there was still a chance they might try to break out. So far, nothing had seemed to change his attitude.

Passing the cottage he'd had specially prepared for their wedding night, Raoul thought about Elona and was tempted to go in and surprise her. Sighing, he forced himself to walk on. There was still his duty to the Duke, and once he had Elona in his arms he knew nothing would make him leave her again until she was his own.

Duke William was at supper with his nobles when de Bainwulf reached the hall. Seeing him enter, the Duke jumped to his feet and beckoned to him with a broad grin.

'At last you are returned, my friend!' His voice boomed across the hubbub. The news is good. Ansgar has spoken for me in the council of the nation. He has told the English nobles that I am a prince without equal in either wisdom or courage. My spies tell me that the primate Stigand is preparing to come over to me. He will soon be followed by the flower of the English nobility. I shall be crowned in London before the new year.'

De Bainwulf knelt and kissed his hand. 'My news is nothing beside this, Sire—yet I think it will please you. We have taken the Lord Sigebert alive

and brought him here as a prisoner for your judgment.' He paused, frowning. The Saxon remains defiant, and swears he will not bend the knee to you, yet I would crave your indulgence for my wife's sake. For the love I bear you, grant the Lord Sigebert a pardon if he will swear loyalty.'

Duke William's eyes were grave as he looked down at his friend. This is welcome news you bring, de Bainwulf. Unhappily, my task is a less welcome one. I must tell you that the Lady Elona has gone.'

'Gone?' Raoul felt a chill enter his heart as he got to his feet. His hand clenched on his sword-hilt, and the muscles in his shoulders tensed like a coiled spring. 'Gone? My lady? Where? How can this be?'

The Duke met his eyes with concern. 'We have discovered a nest of spies within the village. Two of the women have confessed to a plot to persuade the Lady Elona to murder you, and take her own life. It seems that between them they spun a tale of deceit and lies to make her believe you intended to humiliate her before her own people by taking another woman to your bed and flaunting her as your mistress.'

Raoul's eyes glittered with anger. 'I would speak with these women myself, my lord.'

Duke William glanced at his face and away again. 'Unfortunately one of them took poison before we could prevent it; the other died while being questioned.'

Then no one knows where Elona is?' Raoul's face darkened, and his pulses throbbed. 'Did no one see her leave? Surely she cannot have left the camp without being noticed!'

'A young Saxon girl saw Lady Elona very early this morning. She was asked to fetch the boy harper Cedric to your wife, and this she did. It seems that the youth went with your lady.'

Raoul drew a sigh of relief. Then she is not alone. Thank God for it! But did the guards not see which way they went? They must have seen them leave, surely.'

'Those responsible have been punished for their negligence.' Duke William's face was hard but it softened as he looked at his loyal friend. 'Yet there is hope, Raoul. It seems that Cedric was unwilling to leave us. He gave the servant-girl a message for you, which should help you to find them. We would have sent men out to search, but I thought you would want to go yourself.'

This girl, where is she?' Raoul asked, his eyes lighting with hope. The Duke's piercing gaze swept round the hall, and then he beckoned to a young girl. She came towards the high table, her eyes frightened as she curtsied first to the Duke and then to Raoul.

'Come, girl, give your message to the Lord de Bainwulf.'

The girl lifted her eyes to Raoul's face, taking courage from something she saw there. 'Cedric said that if you wanted to find Lady Elona you must seek her in the forest yonder.'

'In the forest!' Raoul ejaculated. 'It is so dense that I could search for a month and never find her! And, in this weather, she could die of cold and hunger.'

'Your pardon, my lord,' the girl said timidly. 'There was more.'

'More?' Raoul stared at her hard.

She knelt on the floor and cleared away the rushes to make a space; then she traced a curve with a line across it in the earth. 'Cedric said you must look for this sign. It will be carved into the bark of the trees every so often. If you follow it, you will find them.'

'Thank God for the boy's good sense,' Raoul cried, relief sweeping through him. He smiled at the girl now that his worst fears had been eased. 'I thank you for your message, mistress. You shall be well rewarded for it. And when I bring my lady back, you shall be her handmaiden.'

The girl's cheeks flushed with pleasure. 'I should be glad to serve Lady Elona, my lord.'

Raoul nodded, forgetting her as he turned to leave. The Duke laid a restraining hand on his arm.

'Curb your impatience and stay until morning, Raoul. You must rest and eat. You can do nothing tonight.'

A surge of frustration made Raoul want to throw off the Duke's hand. He was on fire: a terrible fear gripped his heart as he dwelt on all the dangers of the forest. Elona, his beautiful young wife, was out there somewhere with only a youth to protect her. If she should die . . . The thought terrified him. He felt that he would go mad if he waited even a moment before setting out after her. Yet he knew that the Duke was right; he could do nothing until the morning.

He would eat and make a full report to the Duke; then lie down and rest until first light, but he knew he would not sleep. His thoughts would be full of Elona, torturing him until the dawn.

## CHAPTER NINE

THE SOUND of water dripping woke Elona. She moved uneasily, feeling the stiffness in her limbs as she lay half waking, half sleeping and listened to the unfamiliar noise. Opening her eyes at last, she sat up in sudden alarm as she realised where she was and saw that she was alone. The fire was almost out and there was no sign of Cedric.

Elona called his name, her voice shrill with fear. Her heart pounded wildly as she heard a loud fluttering in the trees and saw several large black birds rise up into the sky like a cloud. Crossing herself swiftly, she stifled the scream that rose to her lips, her mind full of superstition. Were the winged black creatures only ravens or the evil spirits who had stolen Cedric away in the night?

She got to her feet quickly, shaking the debris from her tunic and pulling her mantle round her shoulders as she stretched and yawned. The ground had not made a comfortable bed and she could feel a dull ache in her back. Looking around her, she noticed the trees had lost their crisp covering of ice and realised the air was milder than it had been the previous day. The thaw had set in during the night, and it was the drip of melting ice she had heard on waking.

She began to search the clearing for dead wood and found a few sticks which she threw on the fire, poking at it to try and make it flame. But the wood had turned damp overnight, and sent up a dismal stream of grey smoke.

'You will put it out like that.'

Cedric's voice startled her, and she spun round with a glad cry. I wondered where you had gone. I was beginning to think that evil spirits had taken you away in the night!'

'I've been hunting for our breakfast.' Cedric grinned cheerfully and held up a plump rabbit. 'I was lucky! I snared him with my net at the first try.'

Elona smiled, her fears seeming foolish now that the youth had returned. That's good. I'm hungry.'



Cedric knelt down and removed the damp wood she had tossed so carelessly on the fire, replacing it with some he had found.

'This is dry,' he explained, turning to her with a little smile, 'I took it from the inside of a hollow trunk.'

Sitting on the rug, Elona hugged her knees, watching as Cedric deftly skinned and gutted the rabbit. 'I was frightened when I woke up and found you gone,' she admitted. 'I did not know what to do.'

Cedric glanced up, his eyes carrying a hint of reproach. 'You should have known I would never desert you, my lady.'

'Yes,' she said with a sigh, 'I think you are the only person I have ever known who truly cared for me. My mother was kind to me occasionally; I think she wanted to love me, but something made it impossible for her to do so. I never understood why she kept me at a distance. Sometimes it seemed that she was afraid to love me.'

Cedric shook his head, his eyes regarding her sadly. 'It's true I love you, Lady Elona, you have always been kind to me—but there is another who loves you most truly.'

Her eyes widened in surprise. 'My father has never liked me. There were times when I felt he hated me, though he pretended to be concerned for my welfare whenever my grandfather visited us. Besides, if he cared for me at all, how could he order me to take my own life? No, you are wrong, Cedric, there is no one to care for me but you.'

'I did not mean the Lord Sigebert.' He did not look at Elona as he sliced off a portion of the rabbit and speared it with a sharpened stick, holding it out to her. 'This is cooked now.'

Elona took the meat, biting it with relish and laughing as it burnt her tongue. 'This is good, Cedric. So who were you speaking of? Not my husband?'

Cedric nodded, his face serious. 'It's my belief that the Lord de Bainwulf loves you very much, my lady. When your father refused to surrender to the

Duke, he offered to take on three men in close combat as your champion, so that your life might be spared.'

Elona stared at him. 'He offered to fight for me? But— but the odds were too heavy. He would surely have been killed.'

'Lord de Bainwulf knew that he must accept heavy odds if he wished to sway the Duke. It was his courage and willingness to die in the attempt to save you that persuaded the Duke to show mercy. I am sure of it. The Duke laughed at your lord, and said you had bewitched him. He thought it was a great jest, but I believe he meant to give you in marriage to de Bainwulf all the time.'

Elona finished eating, and licked the fat from her fingers. 'Why have you not told me this before, Cedric?'

'The Duke forbade me to tell you that night. Besides, I thought you must be aware of the deep regard my lord has for you. Why else would he demand his right to wed you if he did not love you?'

'No . . .' Elona shook her head slowly, unable to believe what he was saying. 'No, you are wrong, Cedric. It was Raoul's sense of honour which made him offer to champion me, and he married me because . . .' Her words trailed away as she became confused, no longer knowing what she truly believed. 'You must be wrong. I know he does not love me. He told the Duke so.'

'Lord de Bainwulf is a proud man, my lady. Could it be that he wished to hide his feelings from you for some reason?'

'What reason could he have?' Elona frowned. 'No, my friend, there is much you cannot know of this.'

Cedric shrugged his shoulders. He had known Elona almost all his life and was well aware of her stubbornness, which she had never bothered to hide from him as she had from Lord Sigebert. It was useless to argue with her when she had set her mind against something, as she had now. Besides, the Norman lord must find his own way of showing her how deeply he cared for her. Cedric believed that even Lord de Bainwulf himself was not yet truly aware of his own feelings.

Loving them both, Cedric had watched the struggle between them anxiously. It was, he thought, a meeting of noble spirits: a contest which neither could win. If either of them had asked him, he could have told them why they quarrelled so fiercely, but neither was likely to do so, nor would they listen to unwanted advice—not that Cedric would dare to offer it to his master. He sighed as he looked at Elona's lovely face and saw the pain she was trying to hide from him. He prayed that the Norman lord would not be too proud to come looking for his errant wife. For if there were faults in the man he had come to admire so much, they were his fierce pride and hasty temper.

'We must move on,' Elona said as the silence deepened. She jumped to her feet and shook out the fur rug. Cedric's words had made her uneasy, touching a raw place within her. Could she possibly have misjudged Raoul after all? The thought was too terrible to be borne, and made her restless. 'Today there is a thaw,' she went on, blocking the doubts from her mind. 'But we must find a village where we can shelter before the snows come.'

'You go on, my lady. I shall follow in a moment, as soon as I have put out the fire.'

Elona agreed, hardly listening in her sudden urgency to get away. Cedric watched as she disappeared into the trees. Then he took a sharp stick and drew a large crescent in the earth, marking it with an arrow pointing in the direction Elona had taken.

'You cannot miss that, my lord,' he muttered fervently. 'Please come soon! I'm not sure how much longer I can keep leading my lady away from the forest's edge before she discovers there's a village only a few miles away!'

Elona sighed, squirming as yet another droplet of cold water detached itself from the trees and trickled down her nose, falling off the end of her chin. The thaw had continued steadily all day, and the trees were dripping all over her. It was nearly as bad as if it had been raining, which by the look of the black sky it was about to do at any moment.

The ground was slippery, making it difficult to walk without skidding every few steps. Her thin shoes were soaked through and coated with mud, and the fur rug was getting heavier and heavier on her shoulders as it absorbed the water. She was wet and tired and miserable, and the thought of another night in the forest made her shudder.

'Can we not stop for a while?' Elona asked Cedric unhappily. 'I'm cold and hungry, and I want to rest.'

He turned to look at her, feeling a little guilty as he saw the dark smudges beneath her eyes. She did look very tired, and he wondered if he was being quite fair to her in leading her away from the village where they might find shelter. Lord de Bainwulf would be angry if she became ill; yet if they left the forest before the Norman came, he might never find them. Cedric felt that his mistress was already beginning to regret leaving the Normans' camp and he was sure she would be happier and safer under her husband's protection, but he knew she was too stubborn to give in and admit she was wrong. No, it was best if he continued to lead her in circles for a little longer.

'Forgive me, my lady,' he said giving her an apologetic smile. 'I know the forest seems endless, but I'm sure we shall find shelter soon.'

'It will soon be night,' Elona complained, shivering as the darkness began to close in on them and shadows took on menacing shapes. 'We've been walking for two days— surely we must reach the end soon! It must stretch for miles and miles.'

'It is indeed a vast forest, my lady.' Cedric avoided her eyes as he lied, knowing she would be very angry with him if she guessed that he had deliberately led her away from the edge of the forest several times. 'Perhaps we shall reach the end of it tomorrow.'

'But it will rain before morning,' she protested anxiously as she looked up at the sky. 'We must find a shelter of some kind for tonight.'

'Maybe I can build something to keep out the rain,' he offered. 'We can use the rug to stretch over the top.'

'Then we shall have only my spare mantle to sit on,' Elona objected, feeling cross with him for being so calm when she had begun to think they were doomed to wander in this dark and gloomy place for ever. 'And the rain will put out the fire, so we shall be cold.'

'It might not rain very hard,' the boy replied, looking hopeful.

Elona could have screamed with frustration. If she had not known that Cedric must be tired and hungry too, she would have believed he wanted to stay in the forest. Angry tears stung her eyes and she wished herself anywhere but here in this horrible wood. Remembering the softness of the bed Raoul had prepared for her, she found herself longing to be curled up in the safety and warmth of her husband's arms. Even his threats to make her his slave did not seem as frightening as another night in the forest.

Suddenly there was a loud burst of thunder, making her jump and shake. She was frightened of storms, which were the result of the gods' anger and always a warning of something bad. Even in her father's hall she had hidden her head beneath the covers and trembled with fear until the loud rumblings had died away. The prospect of being caught in a storm in the woods terrified her, and she clutched at Cedric's arm in alarm.

'We must find shelter,' she cried shrilly, as a flash of lightning rent the sky and the rain began to lash down with a vindictive fury, driving into their faces and blinding them.

'Over there!' Cedric pointed to a stand of thick bushes. 'We can crawl underneath and pull the rug over us.'

'No, I'm frightened, Cedric.' She looked about her wildly, tugging at his sleeve as she saw a wisp of smoke. 'Look! There's smoke—behind those tall trees. It must be a hut. Let's see if whoever lives there will give us shelter for the night.'

Elona began to run swiftly in the direction she had pointed out, and Cedric was obliged to follow her. He cursed the ill luck that had caused her to notice the smoke he had seen some seconds earlier but deliberately ignored. When the occupants of the hut told Elona they were close to a village, she would

insist on being shown the way and he would be able to delay her no longer. He could only hope that Lord de Bainwulf had discovered their flight and would find them soon. He stopped for a moment to carve one more arrow on a tree.

When Cedric caught up with her, Elona was already hammering on the door of a small hut. It was a matter of seconds before her knocking brought a response, and the door opened.

In the yellow glow of a rush candle, the monk's face looked thin and sallow. His head was completely shaven, and his coarse brown habit was heavily patched and worn, as were the sandals on his feet.

'Oh . . .' Elona faltered in surprise as she saw the monk. She was a little in awe of such men, for they had wisdom beyond her comprehension and lived their lives in a state of holiness. To intrude on his seclusion was an imposition, and only her fear of the storm and the forest kept her from leaving at once. 'We—We are sorry to disturb you, holy one. We are travellers who have lost our way and would beg shelter of you for the night.'

The monk regarded Elona in silence, his sad, faded eyes seeming to look deep into her mind as if searching for the secrets hidden -in her heart. Hearing another crash of thunder, she jumped and turned pale. Afraid that the monk would turn them away, she wrenched a silver bangle from her wrist and offered it to him as the tears sprang to her eyes.

'Oh, please let us come in out of the rain, if only until the storm has passed. The forest is dark and lonely and I am afraid of the storm. We have no money, but I will give you this bracelet if you will let us share your food and sit by your fire tonight.' She sniffed and wiped her face, smearing dirt down her cheek as she lifted her eyes to his in desperate appeal. 'Please let us come in? I'm so tired and hungry.'

At that moment she looked more child than woman, and the monk's lips curved slightly, as if he could not resist her appeal despite himself. Pressing the silver bangle back into her hands with a little shake of his head, he stood back and beckoned them inside.

The cottage was tiny, but neatly kept, with fresh rushes on the floor and the monk's possessions tidily stacked on a shelf at the far side. There was very little furniture, just a rough wooden chest and a straw pallet for his bed. But in the middle of the earthen floor a fire was burning brightly and a delicious smell issued from the cooking-pot which hung over it.

Still the monk did not speak, merely indicating that they should sit by the hearth. He closed the door and pushed the heavy latch in place. Grateful for his kindness, Elona gave him a warm smile and crouched over the fire. She held her numbed hands to the flames, rubbing them to restore the feeling in her frozen fingers.

The monk had returned to the large smoke-blackened pot which hung from a chain attached to a tripod of thick wooden poles. He added a handful of dried meat and herbs to the contents already bubbling merrily, nodding encouragingly to his visitors. After giving the aromatic stew a final stir, he went to the back of the room, opened the wooden chest and took something from it.

Returning to the weary travellers, he showed them two small wooden bowls, lovingly carved and worn smooth with use. As they each took one, he poured out a pale golden liquid from a leather flask, motioning to Elona to try the wine and watching her as she sniffed the sweet aroma cautiously before lifting the bowl to her lips and sipping from it delicately.

Her eyes widened with surprise and pleasure as she looked up at him. 'It tastes delicious! What is it made of?'

The monk put his finger to his lips, shaking his head but making no attempt to answer her. There was a sadness about him that touched Elona's heart, making her wonder why he had chosen the life of a hermit in the forest.

'You cannot talk to me,' she said, suddenly understanding his strange silence. 'Have you taken a vow of some kind?'

He nodded, his face solemn. Pointing to the bowl in Elona's hand, he raised his eyebrows as if in enquiry, and held up the flask.

'Yes, please, I would like some more,' she said, handing him her bowl. 'It has such a sweet flavour—like honey.'

The monk smiled, nodding his head several times and looking pleased. Elona laughed. The wine was warming her, restoring the colour to her cheeks. The little monk's kindness made her feel relaxed and happier than she had been for a long time. She felt safe inside the hut, although the fierce storm raged outside.

She looked at the monk thoughtfully, noticing his threadbare habit and how few possessions he had. 'How sad you must be, living here all alone. Do you never wish to return to the world?'

The monk shook his head slowly. Touching his breast to indicate his heart, he clasped his hands together as if in prayer, a look of such content on his face that Elona almost envied him. It was clear that he had chosen his life of his own free will.

'I understand,' she said. 'You are telling me you love God and never feel alone because He is with you.'

Something in the monk's eyes warmed Elona, and she realised that she was in the presence of a really good man. As he nodded his head once more and pressed his finger to his lips, she fell silent, respecting his wishes. They had disturbed his privacy enough as it was, and she must not plague him with idle questions. She watched as he stirred the delicious-smelling contents of the cooking pot, feeling her stomach rumble with hunger. It seemed a long time since she had eaten.

The monk ladled the stew into three small platters, giving one each to Cedric and Elona. Then he took a tiny loaf of coarse black bread and divided it into three pieces, distributing it equally between them.

Elona waited until their host squatted on the floor next to her and began to eat, dipping the hard bread into the rich gravy. She did the same, and found that although the bread was very hard the stew was both tasty and filling. She cleared her platter and wiped it clean with her bread, washing it down with another bowl of the honey wine. The warmth of the fire was seeping



through her body, and the monk's wine was potent. Her eyelids were growing heavy and she was conscious of feeling very tired.

Spreading the fur rug on the floor, she lay down and covered herself with her mantle. The storm was abating, but she could still hear the steady drip of rain. It was so warm and cosy in here by the fire and tomorrow morning was a long way away . . . Time enough then to decide what she must do. She smiled sleepily at Cedric, who was sitting with his knees hunched before the fire, staring pensively into the flames. She thought he looked anxious and felt a pang of guilt for dragging him away from the village where he had been so happy. But there would be time in the morning to talk about the future.

'Go to sleep, Cedric,' she whispered. 'We are safe here.' She looked across at the monk. 'I wish you a good night, holy one. Thank you for my supper. I shall remember you in my prayers.'

He leaned down to touch her head, as if in a benediction. Motioning to Cedric to lie down, he gave him a warm blanket to cover himself. Then he went over to his straw pallet at the far side of the room, kneeling with his back turned to them and his head bent in prayer. He remained there for a long time, his lips moving silently.

Cedric remained watchful until the monk had finished his devotions. His nature was not as trusting as Elona's, and he waited until he heard the monk's gentle snores. He turned to look at his mistress and saw that she was already fast asleep, her hand tucked beneath her cheek as she curled up in the softness of the rug. How peaceful she looked! Surely in the morning Lord de Bainwulf would find them, and then they could all go home. He lay down and closed his eyes, contented now that he was sure the monk meant her no harm.

Elona awoke suddenly as sh'e felt a rush of cold air touch her face. She blinked, rubbing at her eyes and yawning. She had been so very tired and the long sleep had refreshed her. Stretching, she became aware that the door of the hut was wide open. A man was standing there, his body blocking the light. It was difficult to see his face at first because the light was behind him, but she knew it could not be their host of the previous evening. This was a

bigger man who was wearing the tunic and cross-gartered hose of a Saxon thane.

As the man came further into the hut, Elona sat up warily, the tiny hairs in the nape of her neck starting to prickle as her heart began to beat unevenly. Now it was possible to see his features clearly, and the sudden discovery of his identity sent a shock running through her. She drew in her breath sharply, clutching her mantle tightly about her and staring at him in dismay.

'Oslac . . she whispered. 'How came you here?'

The Saxon thane was, if anything, even more surprised than Elona. He stared at her, his mouth hanging open. Then he looked quickly about the hut as though he, wondered whom else he would discover. He saw no one but Cedric, still sleeping soundly by the ashes of the fire.

There was a battle/ he said slowly, scratching his beard and eyeing her speculatively. 'The Norman dogs had us trapped in the marsh. I escaped by tricking them into believing I was ready to surrender. I've been running and hiding ever since. I saw the hut and came looking for food.'

Oslac glanced down at Cedric, who was beginning to stir. He nudged him with his foot, jerking the boy to instant awareness and grinning as he saw his look of alarm.

'Get me some food, boy,' he growled, his back against the doorpost, and turned his gaze back to Elona. 'I thought you two were the Normans' prisoners?'

'We escaped,' Elona said carefully, her nerves tingling. She saw a gleam in his eyes and stiffened, bringing her knees to her chest in a defensive movement. Something in the way he was looking at her made her feel nervous and uncomfortable. 'This hut belongs to a hermit monk. I'm not sure he has any food. He shared his supper with us last night.'

Oslac snarled again at the boy, his thick brows meeting in a frowir. 'I told you to find me something to eat.'

Cedric rose warily to his feet, knowing Oslac's moods of old. As he moved off to search the hut, the thane looked at Elona once more.

'Where is this monk?'

Elona met his gaze steadily, determined not to show fear. 'I don't know. He must have gone out—perhaps to gather firewood.'

'This is all I can find.'

Cedric held out a piece of stale bread, and Oslac snatched it, cramming it into his mouth as if he were starving. 'Is that all there is?' he asked sourly, pieces of bread crumbling into his greasy beard. 'It's two days since I've eaten.'

Elona watched him, feeling disgust as she saw how coarse and gross he was. She had always disliked the thane, but now his behaviour seemed more brutish than ever. Living with the Normans had opened her eyes to a more mannerly way of life. He became aware of her watching him, sensing her silent criticism. 'What are you staring at?' he grunted, wiping his hand across his mouth. 'So you've run away from your Norman friends. Did they throw you out when they'd all had their turn at you?'

Elona's face blanched. 'You are insulting. I was treated with both kindness and respect by Duke William and his nobles.'

Oslac's mouth curved in scorn. 'So you're a traitor as well as a wanton. Ealdgyth was right: you weren't worth what I paid for you. I should have wed her as she begged me to: she was a true woman, not a cold bitch like you.'

'Ealdgyth?' Elona stared at him, suddenly understanding why the Saxon girl had been so willing to bring the poison that Sigebert had sent. It was not to avoid humiliation or because Sigebert had ordered it, but out of jealousy of her. She wanted Oslac for herself. Elona felt a wild desire to laugh. If only Ealdgyth had guessed how much she had detested the idea of marrying Oslac! She spoke defiantly to the thane. 'So she was your spy. I wish you joy of her . . .'

The door opened at that moment and the monk came in. He stopped and smiled as he saw Elona, then looked from her to the thane, obviously imagining him to be her friend.

Oslac saw that the monk was carrying a large fish. He grabbed it and began to tear at the raw flesh with his teeth, chewing it with apparent relish and spitting out the scales.

The monk frowned. He had walked a long way that morning to catch the fish, and had been pleased he could offer his guests a good breakfast. Now his work was all in vain. Turning away, he went to fetch the flask of wine and a wooden bowl, which he offered to Oslac. The thane seized the flask and raised it to his mouth, gulping greedily. A look of sadness came into the monk's eyes, but he made no protest. Instead he walked to the chest, and then came back to Elona and squatted on the floor beside her, his back towards Oslac.

She took the object he had brought over to her, turning it wonderingly in her hand. It was a small cylinder of smooth leather, beautifully tooled with silver. Opening it reverently, she gently pulled out a scroll of creamy vellum, with delicate script and decorated in glowing colours and gold leaf. Scenes of devotion, with pictures of the Virgin Mary and the Christ child were intertwined with leaves and flowers. There were bands of magnificent decoration, and an elaborate initial letter at the beginning of each section.

'It is lovely,' she said, giving it back to the monk with a smile. 'I have never seen anything quite like it in my life. Thank you for showing it to me.' She stared at him in surprise as he closed her hands over the scroll and nodded. 'But you cannot give it to me! It's far too valuable.'

'What's that?' Oslac leant over and snatched it from her, glancing at it uninterestedly before throwing it down in disgust. 'I need more food, monk. And you'll have silver hidden somewhere. Monks are always rich.'

The monk spread his hands in a gesture of denial, then shook his head.

'What's wrong with him?' Oslac muttered, eyeing him resentfully. 'Lost his tongue, has he?'

'He has taken a vow of silence,' Elona said quickly. 'He cannot speak to you. Besides, he has no silver. Look for yourself—he has hardly any possessions.'

'Be^Hent, woman,' Oslac grunted. He got to his feet, seized the monk and lifted him bodily. 'Give me your silver, old man, or I'll break your neck.'

Cedric had been watching him warily. Knowing the thane's temper, he had tried to keep out of his way, but as he saw the monk choking something snapped in his brain. Without thinking, he hurled himself at Oslac, trying to stab him with the small knife he always carried.

Oslac swore. He let go of the monk, swatting the boy with the back of his hand as easily as if he had been a fly. Cedric lay motionless, his eyes closed. Oslac grunted and turned to look at Elona.

She had been kneeling by the old man's side, and satisfied herself that he was not badly hurt; then she went quickly to Cedric and bent over him. But before she could touch him, Oslac grabbed her arm and hauled her to her feet.

'Leave the ceorle alone,' he growled. 'He got what he deserved for attacking his betters.'

Elona's eyes flashed. 'Cedric is worth six of you,' she said haughtily.

Her scorn lit a flame of anger in Oslac. 'You were always a proud bitch,' he snarled. 'And your time with the Normans has not improved you. I shall have to teach you better manners once I have you home.'

She shrank away from him. 'I won't come back with you,' she cried. 'Let go of my arm, you vile creature! I must care for my friends.'

Oslac glared at her. 'Vile creature, am I? How fine you have grown, my lady.' He leered at her with a mocking glint. 'You're spoiled goods now, but I've paid your father's price and I may as well have what's mine!'

'No!' Elona wrenched herself from him, her breast heaving. She reached into her purse and pulled out the gold collar the Duke had given her, throwing it on the ground at his feet. That should repay you for my bride-price,' she cried. 'Take it and go!'

Oslac's eyes gleamed. He picked it up swiftly, tucking it inside his tunic. 'Thank you for your generosity,' he said, grinning. 'But I still mean to have you, fair Elona. It will give me great satisfaction to break that pride of yours.'

Elona looked into his face, and for the first time she was afraid of him. She backed away, shaking her head as he reached out for her and seized her wrist.

'No, I will not come with you,' she said, twisting frantically in an effort to free herself.

Oslac hit her across the face. She staggered, her eyes dark with fear even as she faced him defiantly. As he came at her again, the monk rose to his knees, holding out his hand in supplication.

'Please do not hurt her,'<sup>1</sup> he said, his voice cracked with emotion. 'I will give you all the silver I have, but please do not hurt her.'

Oslac halted and looked at him greedily. 'Give it to me,' he grunted, thrusting his hand at the monk.

The old man held out a tiny pouch, it is all I have. Please take it. Kill me if you will, but let her go, I beg you.'

Oslac emptied the pouch into his hands, scattering the few coins on the ground with derision. 'A pauper monk,' he sneered. 'Keep your silver, old man. I have a richer prize.'

Elona looked at the monk, her tears beginning to sparkle. 'Thank you,' she whispered. She could say no more, for Oslac was striding out of the hut, dragging her behind him like a slave.

Elona was forced to run to keep up with the thane's strides. He had fastened a rope collar round her throat, which almost choked her if she pulled against it. It was a punishment because she had twice already tried to run away from him, and he had made sure she could not do so again. They had been walking for what seemed like hours, Oslac scarcely bothering to glance at her now he had her fast.

Too proud to beg for mercy, Elona felt the pain build in her breast as she gasped for breath. If Oslac did not stop soon, she felt she would die. Yet the physical pain was as nothing beside the grief in her heart. Now that it was too late, she had begun to understand what it was really like to be a prisoner.

'Oh, Raoul,' she whispered softly. 'Forgive me, my love. I called myself your prisoner, but you were always gentle with me even when we fought. You would never have hurt and humiliated me like this. Why did I not understand that before?'

Tears stung her eyes as she thought of all she had so wilfully thrown away, and she blamed herself bitterly for Cedric's death. Had she been less proud, the boy would still be singing his beautiful songs, not lying motionless on the monk's floor. She was sure he must be dead, for he had not moved at all after Oslac had struck him down.

Now she admitted that Cedric had been right all the time; she should have waited for her husband to come back. She ought to have listened to him instead of closing her mind and heart. The two servants had lied to her. It had been cleverly done, and she had been too jealous and blind to see that they were tricking her. Raoul had not meant to humiliate her. This was bitter humiliation, to be dragged behind Oslac like a slave. How could she ever have accused her husband of behaving like this animal?

She remembered the fresh taste of Raoul's mouth as he kissed her; the clean male scent of his body as he held her close to his heart. A body that was lean and strong, not gross with fat like Oslac's. What a fool she had been, blinded by her pride to the extent of her good fortune. Why had it mattered so much that Raoul did not love her as she loved him? She should have been content to take what he offered. It could have been a good marriage based on mutual

respect, and she ought to have been content to love him and bear his children, even if he never said the words she longed so much to hear.

Elona's heart cried out to the man she loved. Oh, where was he, now that she needed him so? If only he would come and take her back. If only she could lie in his strong arms once more. Yet even as her heart called out to him, she knew it was useless. He had other tasks more important than searching the forest for an errant wife who had given him nothing but trouble.

Suddenly Elona's foot caught against the protruding root of a tree. She tripped and fell face down in the mud, dragged on for a few seconds until Oslac felt the weight of her body. He turned and frowned, hesitating for a moment before coming to jerk her to her feet. She swayed, and he saw the exhaustion in her face.

'We'll rest for a while,' he grunted. 'You're no use to me dead.'

He slung her over his shoulder, carrying her like a sack of wheat to deposit her on a patch of grass. Elona shut her eyes, blotting out the sight of him and letting the relief wash over her as she sat back against the trunk of a tree. At least she could breathe again.

'You don't look such a fine lady now.'

Oslac's taunting voice made Elona half-open her eyes. He was stretched out on the ground near by, watching her speculatively. She lifted her head defiantly, making no reply to his taunt.

'Always thought yourself too good for me, didn't you? I saw the scorn in your eyes when you looked at me. You thought I was a fool, but I bided my time. I knew I'd get you one day.' There was a brooding expression on Oslac's face as he dwelt on his wrongs, both real and imagined.

If Elona had been thinking clearly, she might have seen that his pride was wounded and answered with care, but in her misery she forgot caution. 'Yes, I am too good for you,' she spat. 'I'd have died rather than wed you. You're an animal!'



Too late she saw the fury in his face. 'An animal, am I?' he snarled, it's time that pride of yours took a tumble, wench.'

He reached out to grasp her ankle, dragging her towards him. Elona kicked out, twisting away to struggle to her knees. Oslac cursed as her foot scraped his cheek, lunging at her as she tried to stand. Bound and weary as she was, she could not move fast enough to avoid him and found herself pinned to the ground beneath his bulk.

She screamed, twisting her head wildly as his mouth searched for hers. The stench of his breath made her stomach heave and she felt vomit rising in her throat. Oslac's hands were pawing at her, ripping the silken material of her tunic. He leered down at her as the gown fell away to reveal the creamy swell of her breasts, the sight of her flesh seeming to incite him to a mad frenzy. Elona screamed in despair, calling Raoul's name aloud in her terror. She held her breath as Oslac's mouth covered hers. Then she felt him lifting her tunic, his hands forcing themselves between her thighs even though she fought to keep them tightly together. She closed her eyes and prayed for death.

'Oh, God, be merciful,' she wept. 'Let me die before this happens.' She tried to shut out the horror of what was happening to her.

Oslac swore violently. Elona felt his body stiffen; his hands suddenly ceased to invade her body. Then the pressure of his weight was gone from her and she was aware of him standing beside her. She opened her eyes as the shouting began.

At first there seemed to be men and horses everywhere. Oslac was staring wildly, his eyes rolling as he sought a way of escape. He ran first one way and then another as the soldiers closed in on him. Elona sobbed with relief as she saw that the men were Normans. Men she recognised as being in her husband's troop. She wriggled to her side, managing to sit up, searching desperately for the face she longed to see. Then she saw Raoul, and screamed his name.

He rode furiously towards her, flinging himself down from his horse and kneeling beside her. Claspig Elona to his chest, he held her tightly while she wept.

'Don't cry,' he whispered against her hair. 'It is over, my sweet lady. You are safe now, and nothing shall ever harm you again.'

'Oh, Raoul,' she sobbed, resting her head weakly against his shoulder. 'I prayed you would come for me.'

Raoul smiled, kissing her brow gently. Loosening the rope round Elona's neck, he slipped it over her head, and frowned as he saw the cruel marks where her delicate skin was bruised. A pulse flicked in his temple as he untied her wrists, and his lips thinned into a grim line.

'Don't be angry with me,' Elona whispered as she saw his face. 'I know I was wrong. I cannot bear it if you are angry with me.'

Raoul's eyes darkened as he heard how close to breaking she was. He touched her cheek, gently tracing the red marks where Oslac had hit her.

'I'm not angry with you, Elona,' he said, his voice husky with emotion. 'But with the brute who did this to you. My God! We were almost too late. I should never have forgiven myself if he . . .'

Elona looked at him, her eyes misty with tears. 'Raoul?' she whispered, gazing up at him with her heart in her eyes.

'We have the traitor fast, my lord.' The soldier's voice startled them both. 'Shall we kill him?'

Raoul's face hardened, his eyes becoming icy. 'No, that's a pleasure I want for myself. Watch over my lady, Robert of Bayeux. Guard her with your life.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Raoul, don't leave me,' Elona cried as he got to his feet.

He glanced back at her, unsmiling. 'Wait there, Elona. This is something I must do myself. It is a matter of honour.'

Elona shivered as she heard the cold fury in his voice. She had never seen him look like that, and it frightened her. She struggled to her feet, the young soldier steadying her as she swayed. He held her back as she would have followed Raoul, shaking his head.

'No, my lady,' he warned, his hand gentle but firm upon her arm. 'It is best this way.'

Elona stared at him wildly, her heart torn with pain. 'He must not fight Oslac alone!' she cried. 'If he should die . . .'

The soldier smiled confidently. 'Lord de Bainwulf has vengeance in his heart. I do not think you need to fear for him.'

It was taking the combined strength of several men to hold Oslac as he struggled violently, spitting defiance at his Norman captors and cursing them. Awaiting the sudden stab of a sword which would bring death, he stared in disbelief as Raoul de Bainwulf barked an order and he found himself suddenly free.

Raoul's eyes were glittering as he looked at the thane. 'You have dared to lay your foul hands on my wife,' he said quietly. 'For that I shall kill you.'

'Norman dog!' Oslac spat on the ground. 'What are you waiting for? There are ten of you to do the deed—isn't that enough? Or are you all cowards?'

Raoul's face was grim, but he made no answering insult. Instead he motioned to one of his men. 'Give me your sword,' he said calmly. The man obeyed, and Raoul tossed it to a spot near Oslac's feet. 'Pick it up. We'll settle this between us, man to man.'

Oslac looked nervous, as he was obviously expecting some trick. When he saw that the other soldiers made no move towards him, he laughed triumphantly, grasping the sword and holding it threateningly.

'Come on then, Norman swine. I'll see you in Hell first, even if your dogs kill me afterwards.'

Raoul said nothing. Drawing his own sword, he studied his opponent intently. The thane was a big man, tall and broad of shoulder but bulky and heavy on his feet; he moved awkwardly as he circled the Norman, his eyes darting from side to side.

Suddenly he made a lunge, roaring like an angry bull and lifting both hands high above his head as he charged wildly. Raoul side-stepped neatly, avoiding the blow and smiling coolly as the heavier man wheeled about, grunting. He lunged again, and Raoul parried the blow easily with his sword, thrusting the Saxon backwards.

Oslac's eyes glinted as he realised that his opponent was playing with him, laughing at his efforts to trap him. He saw the cool smile on the Norman's lips and muttered viciously in his beard, recognising the intelligence of his enemy and hating him all the more for it. Pressing forward suddenly with a flurry of maddened blows, he found himself out-thought and out-maneuvred at every thrust.

He was breathing heavily, a red mist building in his brain, blurring his vision. 'Stand and fight like a man,' he roared, frustration making his thrusts even wilder.

Raoul laughed tauntingly, his eyes glittering with pride, anger and triumph. Suddenly he lunged into the attack, taking the slower Saxon by surprise. His sword sliced through Oslac's leather tunic just above his right elbow. Blood began to drip down the thane's arm and he roared in pain, his face stupefied with anger and disbelief as he tried to retaliate, but found himself thrusting at air. Again he lifted both arms high above his head, charging for one tremendous assault, but even as he struck a crashing blow, Raoul's blade slipped beneath his guard and entered his throat.

It was a clean kill, and the end was swift. Oslac's eyes opened wide in surprise. He sank to his knees, an odd gurgling issuing from his throat as the crimson froth bubbled out of his mouth.

## CHAPTER TEN

ELONA GAVE a cry and broke free of the soldier's restraining hand. Running to Raoul, she flung herself in his arms as he caught and held her, almost sobbing her relief as he stroked her hair and smiled down into her lovely eyes.

'I thought Oslac would kill you,' she wept, 'as he killed poor Cedric. It was all my fault—I should never have made him come with me. I should never have run away from you. It was stupid and thoughtless . . .'

'Hush, my sweet lady,' Raoul held her from him and kissed her brow, his eyes warm as he looked into her face. 'Cedric is not dead, but very much alive. He wanted to help us to search for you, but I sent him back to the camp with one of my men. He has a headache, and a wound that needs attention, but he will be none the worse in the morning.'

Elona's eyes filled with tears and she pulled at his arm, her face full of a silent appeal. 'You must not punish Cedric,' she whispered. 'He did not want to run away. He—he loves you and told me I was wrong to run away.'

A glint of humour shone in Raoul's grey eyes. 'Oh, I dare say I shall think of something suitable for young Cedric. I shall send him to my home in Normandy.'

'As—as a slave?' Elona's mouth trembled as she looked up at him. Would he really punish the youth so harshly? Yet he did not look angry.

'Do you still doubt me?' Raoul smiled oddly. 'I thought he should go to school and train to become my esquire. When he is older, he may wish to take service with the Duke and thus earn honours and lands for himself.'

'You would do that for Cedric?' Elona asked, looking at him in surprise, a warm flush spreading over her cheeks as she saw a tender but chiding expression on his handsome face. \*

'And more. I owe him a great debt, Elona. If it had not been for his keen wit, I might not have found you in time. He left a trail which led me to the

hermit's hut, and so saved days of searching. When I discovered what had happened there, I thought you lost, but the monk had followed you and Oslac to see which way you went and then it was a simple matter of finding your tracks in the mud. Had the ground been hard with frost it would have been another matter, so we must thank God for sending the thaw.'

Elona leaned her head against his shoulder, finding comfort in his strength. 'Please take me back with you, my lord,' she whispered, her throat closing with emotion. She was too exhausted to understand what all this meant; Raoul's tender looks and gentleness were almost too good to be true, and she could not yet believe in them. All she wanted for the moment was to stay within the safety of his arms. 'Please take me back,' she said again, her voice muffled in his shoulder. 'I'm so tired and cold.'

Raoul's arms tightened around her protectively. 'My poor little girl,' he murmured against her ear. 'I should have taken more care of you.'

She made a weak protest, knowing she had only herself to blame for all she had suffered, but it was so good just to relax in his hold and know she was safe. Raoul smiled as she sighed and leant against him. He bent down to lift her gently in his arms, carrying her to where one of the soldiers stood holding his horse in readiness.

Putting Elona up on the saddle, he mounted behind her. She drew a deep breath of contentment as his arms went round her, knowing that this was where she wanted to be, no matter what.

The wind was cold as they rode through the forest, stinging her cheeks and numbing her hands, but Elona was conscious only of the warmth of Raoul's body close to hers and the joy which was flooding through her. It was heaven just to feel the iron strength of those arms about her and know she was back where she belonged.

Afterwards, Elona could not recall much of the journey back to camp, except that it did not seem to take as long as she had expected. Exhausted and weary, she had been almost asleep when Raoul lifted her gently down and carried her into the hut he had prepared for their wedding night, and she

nestled her head against his breast like a trusting child. He laid her carefully in the bed, stooping to kiss her brow softly before he left her to sleep.

She cried out and clutched at his sleeve as he went, not wanting him to leave her. He smiled and stroked her hair back from her forehead, his tenderness bringing tears to her eyes.

'Go to sleep now, my lady. I shall come back soon, and while you rest my men shall watch outside. You are safe now, Elona, no harm can come to you here.'

There was so much that she wanted to say, but he seemed determined to go and her eyelids were heavy as she struggled to keep them open. But as the door closed behind him, she ceased fighting and gave in to the deep weariness which was stealing over her, frustrating her wish to remain awake until he returned.

She slept throughout the night and for most of the next day. Opening her eyes late in the afternoon just as the lanterns were being lit, she saw a servant-girl sitting patiently beside her bed. She smiled as Elona stretched lazily and yawned.

'You are awake, my lady. I am here to serve you. Would you have food or drink?'

Elona sat up, wincing as she felt the sting of bruises on her arms and legs, and shuddered as she remembered Oslac's brutal attack on her. She closed her eyes for a moment to block out the horrible memories—if Raoul had not come when he did . . . But he had, and she was safe at last. She sighed, and banished the vivid pictures from her mind. Raoul would protect her from all harm. He had killed Oslac and she need never fear him again.

She smiled at the young girl. 'I'm hungry,' she said. 'But most of all I want to wash myself. I feel dirty.'

The girl nodded, returning her smile. 'I shall fetch water at once, my lady.'

She^turned to go, but Elona called her back. 'I've seen you before—you helped me. Who are you?'

'My name is Olwen, my lady. I am a Saxon like you. When the Normans came, I did not run away as many of the others did.'

'Why?' Elona asked, looking at her curiously.

The girl shrugged her shoulders. 'My master often beat me. I thought that one master would be much like another.'

Elona felt a rush of sympathy for her. She was a year or so younger than herself, and slight for her age. 'I hope you have not been treated unkindly here?'

'No.' The girl's thin face lit up with an inner light. 'Cedric is my friend and—and Lord de Bainwulf has been kind to me. He says I am to serve you, my lady.'

'You said your name was Olwen—not Alfwen?' She felt a pang of jealousy she could not quite stifle. The girl was pretty, despite her paleness.

'I am Olwen, lady. I have never heard that name before. There are few women in the village and I am sure none of them is so called.'

'No one?' Elona stared at her hard. 'You are sure?'

'I am certain of it, my lady.'

Elona was convinced that she was telling the truth, and felt a little ashamed. Surely she had learned to trust her husband now? She smiled warmly at the girl, wanting to make up for her unworthy suspicion.

'Serve me honestly, Olwen, and I shall always be kind to you. You shall never be beaten, I promise you that.'

'Thank you, my lady.' The girl's smile was friendly. 'I shall fetch the water for you now.'



Elona sighed and snuggled back beneath the covers. It was so good to feel warm and safe again. She was aware of happiness welling up inside her. Even if Raoul did not love her as she loved him, he cared enough to search the forest for her. Admitting the depth of her love for him at last was enough to explain her feeling of deep contentment. Just to be Raoul's wife was all she could ask of life. To be protected and cared for by such a man was all that any woman really wanted. To be allowed to love him and bear his children was enough: she would not ask for more.

Olwen was not long in returning. She had a large wooden tub carried in and filled with water from bronze ewers, which she tested for temperature and sprinkled with perfume, shooing the other servants out when it was ready. Then she came to help Elona rise, wrapping a heavy silken robe about her shoulders until she entered the bath.

It was wonderful to feel the warm water against her skin, soaking away the grime of the forest. She glowed with a sense of well-being as Olwen carefully washed her long hair, rubbing scented soap deep into the thick tresses before rinsing and drying it.

Sitting on the edge of the bed while the girl combed her hair, Elona sighed in contentment, yawning and stretching like a little cat as the strength flowed back into her firm young body.

'Your hair is beautiful, my lady,' Olwen said.

'I shall let it hang loose tonight.' A little smile curved Elona's lips. 'My husband likes it that way.'

'It shines like gold silk.' The girl smiled as Elona looked at her reflection in the little bronze mirror. 'It is no wonder Lord de Bainwulf loves you so desperately. He was like a madman when he returned to camp and found you gone. When he first looked at me I thought he might kill me in his anger, but when I told him how to find you, his eyes lit up with such joy.'

Elona looked at her in surprise. 'Was he truly so concerned for me, Olwen?'

'Why yes, my lady. He glared at me so fiercely that I thought I should die of fear. Then, when I told him what Cedric had done . . .' Olwen broke off, dissolving into shy giggles as she suddenly saw Raoul standing in the doorway. 'Oh, forgive me, my lord. I did not hear you enter.'

Raoul's eyes gleamed and his mouth twisted with wry humour. 'Away with you, child. I would be alone with my wife.'

'Yes, my lord.' Olwen glanced at Elona and hid her face with her hand as she ran from the hut.

Raoul stood looking at Elona, his eyes thoughtful as he saw her face grow pale. He frowned, sensing her nervousness. 'Are you feeling better today?' She hid her trembling hands in her lap, gazing up at him hesitantly as her heart began to beat faster. Her fear of him had gone, leaving her shy and unsure. 'Yes, thank you, my lord.'

'Have you eaten?' Raoul, too, seemed uncertain as he hovered just inside the door.

'Not yet. I wanted to feel clean again first.'

He nodded, his eyes travelling over her slowly. 'You were tired when I brought you back, so I thought it best to let you sleep on. If—if you would prefer it, I shall have food brought here tonight so that you need not sup in the hall.'

'That would indeed be kind of you, my lord. I would like a little time before I face Duke William. I—I am ashamed of all the trouble I caused you.'

'You need not be. The Duke has punished those who were responsible for the plot against you.' Raoul's eyes darkened as he looked at her. 'Besides, I believe it was in part my fault. I frightened you. I am sorry, Elona.'

She looked down quickly, biting her lip. 'No, it was my fault. I know those women lied to me.'

'Well, we shall not quarrel about it.' Raoul smiled oddly. 'In any case the Duke is not here tonight. He has gone on to Wallingford, there to meet the primate Stigand, who has come over to his side. Soon others will come, perhaps even Edgar Atheling, for the boy must know he is not the right king for England. It is my belief that Duke William will be crowned in London before the month is out.'\*

'I'm glad.' Elona smiled at him. 'I know of no man better fitted to wear the crown. He will make a just and honest king for this land.'

Ratful moved closer to the bed, gazing down at her intently. 'It is William's right, and his wish. Yet I am glad the war is nearly ended.' He frowned, hesitating uncertainly. 'I must tell you that I took the Lord Sigebert prisoner, Elona. He remained defiant even in defeat, but it seems that the Duke eventually persuaded him to take an oath of fealty. I had hoped you would be able to see your father, but he has returned to his village where he must stay for the next twelve months.'

Elona gazed up at her husband, her heart beating unevenly. 'It does not matter, my lord.'

Raoul took two more steps towards her, his eyes wearing a distant look as if he were struggling to control his emotions. 'I was wrong to force you into this marriage against your will, Elona. If you wish to return to your village now, I shall not hold you to your vows.'

Elona lowered her thick lashes as her heart seemed to stop. Raoul no longer cared what she did; he was offering to let her go, when he had always sworn to keep her, no matter what she did. It was her own fault for causing him so much trouble. She bit her bottom lip to stop it trembling, and blinked away her tears.

'I—I do not want to return to my father.' She kept her eyes downcast, not daring to look at him. Even now she could not let him see how desperately she wanted to stay with him.

'Then will you stay with me?'

Raoul's gentle question set her heart racing again. She would not look at him for fear that he should see too deeply into her heart. Her pride would not let her confess her love.

'I—I am your wife, my lord. I shall stay with you if—if you want me.' She clasped her hands tightly together, her mouth dry with fear lest he should send her away. 'I—I will be a meek and dutiful wife and never plague you again. I shall always do as you bid me and never argue. Please don't send me back to my father. I—I am afraid of what he would do . . .'

Raoul frowned, cursing the Saxon thane who had so frightened her that her spirit almost seemed to be broken. He sat down on the edge of the bed, taking her hand. 'Don't be frightened of me, Elona. I am not angry with you.'

Elona hung her head. 'You have every right to be angry, my lord. I was wilful and disobedient—You should beat me as I deserve.'

'Should I?' Raoul's mouth twitched at the corners, despite his concern. He touched her hair, letting the pale silk strands slip through his fingers and feeling the desire begin to heat inside him. 'I have no wish to beat you—or anyone else—Elona. I find no pleasure in such pastimes.'

She raised her head to look at him, seeing the glint of humour on his face. 'Are you really not angry with me?' she asked in wonder.

'I'm not angry,' he promised. 'Besides, Cedric would never forgive me if I beat you—nor your new and devoted admirer and lifelong friend. Brother Edward, he tells me his name is. He asked me to thank you for trying to help him—and he sent you a present.'

Elona flushed as she heard the mockery in his voice. 'Please don't tease me,' she whispered, it was Cedric who tried to help the monk. I—I did nothing. He should not have given me his beautiful parchment. It is too valuable. Besides, I—I cannot read . . .'

She turned her eyes away from his as though ashamed of her ignorance.

'You need not be ashamed to admit it, Elona,' Raoul said gently. 'You cannot learn if no one teaches you. I have other documents in Normandy. I shall teach you to read, if you wish it.'

She gazed up at him then, surprise in her face. 'You have parchments?'

Raoul laughed huskily. 'Yes, does that surprise you? There are many things in my house which would please you, my sweet lady wife. It will be my pleasure to show them to you.'

Elona smiled shyly. 'Would you really teach me to read?'

'If you wish it,' Raoul repeated. He stretched forward and touched her cheek, his eyes searching her face. 'There is much I could teach you, if you will let me. The pleasure and comfort a man and woman can find together is something to be prized, Elona. You should not fear it.'

She turned her face down, afraid to let him see the glow she knew was there. The touch of his hand against her cheek had sent her pulses racing and she felt dizzy with happiness. She had not killed all his desire for her: he still wanted her! She felt a stirring of desire within her and knew she wanted nothing more than to lie in his arms and feel his hands caressing her as they had the night they were wed. Yet she could not make her lips form the words which would tell him what her heart cried out.

Licking her lips nervously, she said: 'Shall—shall we join the Duke at Wallingford?'

Raoul frowned as he saw that she was still very tense. 'Alas, there is a nest of rebels at Romney. Tomorrow I must leave to crush their resistance before it gains a hold.'

Elona said in alarm, 'You will take me with you?'

'Yes, if you truly want to come with me.'

'I do,' she cried, forgetting to be shy in her face of losing him. She lifted her face to gaze up at him eagerly. 'I always want to be with you.'

'Do you, my lovely Elona?' Raoul cupped her chin with his hand, tipping it upwards gently to kiss her mouth caressingly. He looked at her, probing her thoughts. 'Are you still afraid of me?'

'No,' Elona breathed, her eyes shining now, despite her fear of revealing too much of her heart. 'Forgive me for all the wicked things I said to you. I knew not what I said when I called you those terrible names and accused you of being cruel.'

Raoul smiled and shook his head regretfully. 'Perhaps I deserved them. I fear your husband has a temper, Elona.'

Elona laughed, and flushed as she heard the teasing note in his voice, her heart thumping. 'You should not mock me so, my lord.'

'What must I do, then?' Raoul's brows rose and his mouth began to curve at the corners. 'Will you let me love you, my sweet lady?'

Elona's heart was beating so fast now that she found it difficult to breathe. She could not answer him, hiding her face against the softness of his tunic, and trembling as his gentle hands stroked her hair.

'Will you let me kiss away your fears and show you that sweet joy I told you of?' he asked softly, his lips brushing against her hair.

'Yes,' Elona's answer was so softly spoken that she feared he might not hear it; but as he held her face between his hands to gaze into her eyes she knew he did not need to hear. Her answer was there for him to plainly see, shining brightly like a star from the heavens above. 'Oh yes . . .'

She closed her eyes as he laid her gently back against the pillows. Even now that she had admitted her love for Raoul in her heart, she could not speak of it, though she knew he must be aware of it. Despite her longing to feel his kisses burning against her skin, despite the hot trembling his touch had aroused within her, she was still afraid to respond too eagerly.

Lying passively as Raoul's hands moved lingeringly over her smooth flesh, it was all Elona could do to stop herself from confessing her love. Yet even

when she could no longer control her body, arching it to meet his in an ecstasy of passion, she held back the words which would reveal her soul to him and leave her nothing.

Raoul's lovemaking was tender, almost as if he feared to hurt her, so that even as he entered her she felt that he too held back something of himself. And, when it was over, he took her in his arms, cradling her like a child until she slept.

The next morning dawned crisp and bright. The thaw had ended and overnight a frost had turned everything white. Although there was a pale sun that edged its way through the grey clouds, it was very cold.

Elona awoke to find that Raoul had already risen. She knew he had much work to do if they were to leave for Romney today, and was not disturbed by his absence.

Olwen brought food and water, helping her mistress to dress in a warm tunic, and a thick mantle trimmed with fur.

As soon as she was ready, Elona went outside, feeling restless. She breathed deeply of the cool, fresh air, a sharp sense of joy filling her; it was as though she had been reborn, as though the woman she was now had never lived until this lovely morning. Happiness was spreading through her, making her want to shout and sing.

Last night she had still been afraid, but this morning all her fears had somehow disappeared. She knew at last that it was her own feelings she had feared, not the man who had held her so tenderly all through the night, wiping away her tears when she wept with pleasure.

Once as a tiny child Elona had tried to climb upon her father's knee. Clasping her chubby arms about his neck, she had hugged him and kissed his cheek. He had thrust her away with a drunken snarl, cursing her for her impertinence. After that she had found it almost impossible to offer

affection, risking her heart only when she knew she was loved; and the only one who had given her love had been Cedric—until last night.

Although he had not said so in as many words, Elona had felt that Raoul cared deeply. She could not doubt that he wanted her passionately. His lovemaking had brought her more happiness than she had dreamed existed in this world, or the next, but the tenderness he had shown her afterwards was like a shining jewel in her heart.

She saw her husband talking with one of his men and waved to him, her eyes and cheeks aglow. He caught sight of her and came over at once, his eyes moving over her face questioningly.

'We are almost ready to leave,' he said, smiling as he saw the colour in her cheeks. 'It is very cold this morning, my love. You must wrap up well. I would not have you take a chill.'

'I am not cold,' Elona replied, her lips curving and her eyes glowing with love. She hoped he could see into her heart, and would read there all that she could not express in words.

'Will you ride beside me or travel in the cart?' Raoul asked, taking her hands in his.

'I'll ride with you, my lord.'

His hands closed tightly about hers and she knew he wanted to kiss her; but he would not because there were soldiers all around them, watching with interest and sly smiles.

'When you look at me like that, Elona, I wish I could forget my duty,' he said, his voice low and passionate. 'I wish we were at home in Normandy so that I could lie at your feet all day and sing you love songs . . .' He laughed suddenly, a rueful tone in his voice. 'But I had forgot—You don't like my singing.'

'Perhaps I liked it too much,' Elona replied, blushing. 'You are wicked to tease me so, my lord. I shall punish you for it later.'



'Will you?' His eyes burned into hers, sending little shivers of delight down her spine. 'Ah, my sweet Elona, how ybu have plagued me! Are you really as meek and gentle as you would have me believe? Or will you turn into a she-devil again as soon as my back is turned?'

Elona gurgled with pleasure. She wondered why she had never realised that he was only teasing her when they had quarrelled before. Had he changed, or was it that love had opened her eyes to his true nature?

Raoul returned to his duties, leaving Elona to wander about the village. Her breath made little white clouds in the air, and she rubbed her hands together to warm them, but inside she was glowing. She watched as the last of the wagons were loaded with supplies, finding Cedric about to hitch up the cart which had once been her father's. She went to him with a smile, looking up at him as he climbed into the driving seat.

'So you are coming with us?' She saw the ugly bruise on the side of his head, and frowned, it was my fault you were hurt, Cedric. Will you forgive me?'

Cedric smiled and shook his head. 'It is merely a scratch, my lady. Have you forgiven me for tricking you? I did it only to protect you. You would find life too hard on the road in winter.'

Elona blushed, lowering her lashes in embarrassment. 'Oh yes! You were right, Cedric. My husband is a good man. It was foolish of me to run away like that. Has he told you of his plans to send you to Normandy?'

'Yes, my lady.' Cedric raised his head proudly. 'I'm to be Lord de Bainwulf's esquire. I am a free man now. I do not belong to your father or the Duke. Lord de Bainwulf has bought my freedom.'

'I am glad.' Elona's eyes were warm as she looked at the young boy's face and saw his pride. 'Will you do something for me, Cedric? Will you let my maid Olwen ride with you?'

'Yes, my lady.' He gave her a boyish smile, his cheeks pink. 'I am still yours to command, even though your father no longer owns me.'

Elona laughed and pressed his hand impulsively, her happiness was such that she did not know how to contain it.

It bubbled out of her, making her want to sing and run like a child in the meadows.

Elona saw Raoul beckoning to her and went to him, letting him put her up on her horse. Remembering the night he had ridden through the dusk with his arms about her, Elona wished he would take her up with him now, but knew he would not. She found her gaze dwelling on the sensuous curve of Raoul's mouth, and saw his eyes light with laughter as if he had guessed she was already impatient for nightfall.

Elona looked away quickly as a blush stained her cheeks. She must not be too eager, or he would think her immodest. Hearing Raoul's husky laughter, she risked a glance beneath her lashes and drew in a sharp breath as she saw his burning look.

'I, too, am impatient,' he whispered, giving her a smile before he left her to swing himself into the saddle of his own mount.

Raoul gave the order to move out, and Elona rode with him at the head of the troop. They left the village and crossed the stone bridge. In the clear, still air of the morning the horses' hooves rang out sharply as the soldiers clattered across the bridge, closely followed by the baggage train and the heavy engines of war.

Elona tried not to notice the battering ram and mangonel; a terrifying weapon of destruction which hurled huge stones or balls of burning pitch over the protecting walls of villages like her father's, wreaking havoc on the luckless defenders.

She did not want to think about the war or the dangers her husband must face. He had told her little of what was ahead, but she knew his mission must be important. Duke William needed a free passage to the sea, and it would be Raoul's task to make sure there were no more of the disasters which had occurred at Romney some weeks earlier when vital supplies from Normandy had been destroyed. Duke William had himself burnt Romney to the ground

in retribution, but reports had since reached him of a band of rebels hiding in the marshes.

It would not be an easy task for Raoul and his men, Elona knew, for the marshes were treacherous and impossible to pass without a guide. She had heard her father speak of them and remembered the tales of unwary travellers disappearing in their murky depths.

Elona frowned. Her father's village was no more than twenty miles from their destination. She wondered if Raoul knew that and whether he would suggest a visit.

Raoul became aware of her new mood and glanced at her with a lift of his brows. 'So serious, my lady? Where have your smiles gone?'

Elona shook her head, forcing herself to smile at him. It was strange, but a terrible feeling of foreboding had fallen over her since leaving the village. A bird's shrill cry disturbed the stillness of the morning and, as she looked up, she saw a red streak across the sky. An icy chill ran down her spine as she remembered tales of blood in the sky and blood which bubbled from the ground in crimson springs: whenever these signs appeared, it was always a warning of something evil. She bit her lips, trying to shut her mind to these thoughts which had come so suddenly. Why was she suddenly so afraid of what the future held?

Forcing herself to relax, Elona told herself that her fears were foolish : the result of spending too much time listening to Alfrida's tales of evil spirits. She had seen Raoul fight Oslac and win, and she knew he had survived the terrible battle at Hastings, where so many others had died. Why, then, should she fear for his life, now that he had only a handful of rebels to contend with?

She turned to her husband, determined to let nothing spoil her happiness, 'I was counting the hours until nightfall, my lord,' she lied.

Raoul's smile did not reach his eyes, and she knew he had seen through her pretence. Elona saw the doubt creep into his face, but dared not tell him what was in her mind. He would laugh at her and think her a superstitious woman

if she told him that she believed the red sky and the bird's sudden cry to be evil omens.

The sun had moved across the sky, disappearing at last behind the trees. As the night approached, Elona's uneasiness increased. The countryside was becoming more and more lonely as the villages they had passed earlier in the day were left behind. On either side of the road were woods, from which could come a sudden attack at any time.

For a while she had managed to shake off her feelings of impending disaster, telling herself how foolish she was to be frightened of a few rebels. The Norman party was made up of more than a hundred fighting men, besides the servants and followers. Together they must present a formidable force, enough to strike fear into the stoutest hearts.

Their journey had been uneventful thus far, with nothing more than a broken wheel on one of the wagons to delay their progress. Elona wished she could rid her mind of the shadowy fears which haunted her, wanting desperately to recapture the shimmering happiness which had been hers on waking.

She had seen Raoul watching her as they rode, his face growing sterner as the day wore on. Instinctively, she knew he found her new mood disturbing. With all her heart she longed to explain why she was finding it more and more difficult to smile at him, but was reluctant to put her thoughts into words. If she did not actually say what was in her mind, perhaps it would not happen.

When at last they saw the Norman camp a short distance ahead, Elona drew a sigh of relief, feeling some of the tenseness drain out of her. Raoul had sent on a small party to prepare the camp for the main body. Some fifteen men had left the village two hours earlier than the others, to make certain of finding a suitable spot for the night.

Seeing the shelters already erected, Elona realised that she had been worrying for nothing. There would be no terrible disaster today. Once the soldiers were all together inside the barriers, instead of being strung out in a

long column, she could relax and feel really safe. She could stop worrying that something terrible was going to happen to Raoul. Suddenly she was impatient to reach the camp. Glancing over her shoulder at Raoul, she gave him a brilliant smile.

'I'll race you there,' she called gaily.

'No, Elona, come back!'

Elona heard her husband's command, but it only made her laugh and spur her horse, on faster. She desperately wanted to reach the safety of the camp. Perhaps tonight, when she was wrapped in Raoul's strong arms, she could find the words to tell him of the dread which had entered her heart and haunted her throughout the day.

Hearing the thunder of hooves behind her, Elona glanced provocatively over her shoulder and laughed aloud. 'Catch me if you can!' she cried challengingly.

She had gained a start on Raoul, and it was with a sense of triumph that she managed to stay ahead of him, riding into the camp several seconds before him. Almost at once, her instinct told her something was wrong. Reining in, Elona turned to call a warning to her husband, but then she saw it was already too late.

Whereas she had been allowed to pass unheeded, her husband's horse was immediately surrounded by a score of shadowy figures. Fear rose in her breast as she realised they had ridden into a trap: those dark figures were not Norman soldiers but Saxons. Elona screamed as she saw Raoul's horse rear up and heard its snort of terror. Her husband was striking out fiercely with his sword to left and right, wheeling his horse about as he tried to fight his way through to her. She heard the clash of blades, and a terrible scream as Raoul struck down one of his attackers; his place was immediately taken by another. There were too many of them for one man to overcome.

Elona began to shout for help, screaming at the top of her voice and praying that the Normans would realise what was happening and come swiftly to Raoul's rescue. Turning her own mount, she tried to ride to his assistance,

but some of the shadowy figures had turned their attention to her. They were all about her, grabbing at the reins and clawing at her skirts. She felt their hands dragging her down and she hit out at them wildly, kicking into their grinning faces and yelling. Then the thunder of hooves and a bloodcurdling battle cry told her that at least some of her husband's men had arrived.

Suddenly the clawing hands fell away from Elona; the rebels who had attacked her fled as a dozen yelling, sword-waving Normans rode straight at them, trampling them beneath their hooves and cutting down those who tried to fight. Screams and battle cries rent the air as the soldiers cut down the fleeing rebels with a terrible vengeance, which was made fiercer by the discovery of the bodies of their comrades who had built the camp and been taken by surprise. Elona was surrounded by a melee of thrashing, snorting horses and thrusting swords, unable to see through the confusion what was happening to her husband.

Then, almost as suddenly as it had begun, it was ended. A sudden hush fell over the soldiers as they surveyed the scene around them. The silence was so strange after the fierce fighting that it struck chill into Elona's breast.

She saw that a group of Norman soldiers had formed a circle and were looking down at the ground, their faces grave in the pale light of the moon. Then one of the men detached himself from the others and came towards her. She recognised him as the soldier who had stood with her while Raoul fought with Oslac, and her heart turned over as she saw the look in his eyes.

'My lady,' he said, gazing up at her awkwardly. 'My lady, the Lord de Bainwulf has been wounded.'

'Oh no!' Elona cried, her heart jerking with pain. 'Oh, please, no!'

He helped her to dismount and she ran past him, her eyes wild with fear and her heart pounding. 'Oh please don't let him be dead!' she prayed, her lips moving in silent entreaty. The circle of soldiers parted to let her through and she fell to her knees beside Raoul's body. He lay with his eyes closed, his face as white as death. Blood was seeping through his hose, where a sword had dealt him a glancing blow. It was not a serious wound, and she searched feverishly for the mortal injury which had robbed him of life.

Finding none, Elona threw herself across his body, weeping and begging him to speak to her. Gentle hands were laid on her shoulders and she was lifted away from him.

'Lord de Bainwulf is not dead,' the soldier said. 'He has received a blow to the head which has made him lose his sense. He will recover in time, Lady Elona. I have seen such things before.'

Elona gulped back her tears, gazing up into his face with eyes which begged for help, 'I know you,' she said. 'You were with my husband when—when he found me in the woods that day.'

'I am Robert of Bayeux, my lady.' The soldier smiled at her reassuringly. 'We must carry your lord to a place of rest and tend his wounds.'

'Yes, we shall use the cart Cedric is driving,' Elona said, wiping her tears from her cheek as his voice steadied her. 'There is a straw pallet for Raoul to lie on—and he can continue the journey in comfort when we move on.'

Robert nodded and touched her hand in sympathy. 'Lord de Bainwulf's leg wound is slight,' he said, smiling at her. 'You will see, my lady—in the morning he will be himself again.'

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE SOLDIER'S words Ijheartened Elona, giving her the courage to hold her head high as she walked slowly behind the men who bore her husband's still figure towards the cart. They laid him carefully on the straw pallet, then most of them departed in hushed silence while Robert remained behind to help her to strip away Raoul's hauberk. Pouring cool water into a wooden bowl, Elona washed the blood from his right calf, finding to her relief that the cut was clean and not as deep as she had feared. Once it was tightly bound, the crimson tide ceased to flow, and she was able to turn her attention to his head wound. When they had removed his badly dented helmet, cutting away the thick leather hood beneath, they found a sticky patch at the back of his skull where the force of the blow had drawn blood. It did not appear to be a serious wound, for the flesh had not opened, yet Raoul lay unmoving, his lips white and his breathing shallow.

As Elona bathed the sweat from his naked body and applied healing salves, she could not help noticing the old scars of wounds he had sustained long ago. Somehow the sight of them made her more aware of her love for him. Her hands trembled on his smooth flesh and she had to fight hard to keep back the foolish tears which would shame her before his men. Now she began to understand as never before the full meaning of her husband's courage and nobility. A man who had fought so many times and suffered so much had yet retained his honour and compassion: such a man deserved all the love she bore him and she felt a great humility within her.

'Oh God,' she prayed silently. 'Only let him live and I will never be stubborn or wilful again. I shall light a candle to the saints every day if only he is spared.'

Elona remained by her husband's side throughout the night, alternately praying and weeping bitter tears. Having done all she could, including covering him with the fur rug, she felt helpless as she knelt by him. Flesh wounds were something she could cope with, but this strange trance-like state bewildered and frightened her. And when the dawn's light strengthened and morning came, Raoul had still not opened his eyes.



Cedric came to the cart, bringing her bread and a bowl of hot broth. 'Eat something, my lady,' he urged, his eyes anxious as he saw her white face. 'You must keep up your strength if you are to nurse Lord de Bainwulf.'

Elona took the food to please him, but it stuck in her throat and she spat it out. How could she eat when Raoul was lying there so pale and still? How could she go on living if he never smiled at her again? The tears pricked her eyes but she blinked them back, refusing to dissolve into self-pity. Only the man she loved so desperately mattered to her now. She knew that she must be strong to care for him.

The day passed slowly; the soldiers walked about the camp restlessly, talking in hushed whispers and waiting. From time to time one of them would come to the cart to ask if there were any change, their faces grave and concerned as Elona shook her head. The sadness in all of them made her realise how much they loved and respected their leader.

Cedric brought a dish of roasted meat, standing over her while she ate a few mouthfuls and scolding her when she pushed the remainder away.

'You must eat, my lady,' he chided her. 'If you are ill, Lord de Bainwulf will be angry with us for neglecting you.'

Elona gazed up at him. 'I have caused him so much trouble,' she whispered chokingly. 'First I ran away—and now this . . .'

'This was not your fault.'

'Oh, but it was! He called me back, but I would not listen. I drew him into the trap. Oh, Cedric, if my lord dies . . .'

'He will not die. Robert of Bayeux says that this condition can go on for—for some time . . .'

Cedric frowned, not daring to repeat all that the soldier had told him: there was no sense in alarming Elona with fears for her husband's mind. 'Besides, it was not your fault. The trap was set; they were waiting for us to ride in.'

'But if I had waited, he would not have been alone when they attacked him.'

'Yet Lord de Bainwulf would still have been one of the first to ride in. He could still have been wounded.'

Elona shook her head, her face pale but stubborn. She knew that Cedric was speaking the truth, but his attempts to comfort her neither lessened her pain nor eased her guilt. True, she could not have known that the advance party had all been slain and that rebels lay in wait for them, but still the blame was hers. She had felt all day that something terrible was about to happen, and instead of riding recklessly into the unknown she should have listened to Raoul when he called her back. She knew he would have approached the camp with more caution, making sure his men were alerted to any sign of a trap.

'It was my wilfulness,' she repeated, her eyes glittering with tears as she looked at the boy. if he dies, it will be my fault.'

Cedric sighed, knowing that it was futile to argue with her. He left her alone, his heart heavy. All night he crouched beneath the cart, wrapped in a blanket, listening for every sound. If Elona called, he would be there at her side within seconds.

But she did not call. Raoul's condition remained unchanged; his breathing shallow but even and constant, as if he were in a deep sleep. By morning Elona was almost exhausted, having spent two nights without sleep, her face white and drawn. Her eyes felt gritty and her limbs ached, but she had reached a decision in the long, lonely hours of the night.

When Olwen came with meat and wine, pleading with her to try and eat, she forced herself to swallow most of it, knowing that she must conserve her strength if she were to continue to watch over her husband day and night. And nothing could drive her from his side while his life hung in the balance.

'We are but a few hours' journey from my father's village?' she said to Cedric. if anyone can help my husband, it is Alfrida. She has more wisdom than any I know, and I am determined to ask her for help. She must come to him.'

There was a hint of alarm on Cedric's gentle face, 'I have little faith in the old witch's charms, my lady. Do you think it wise to bring her here? Your father

has no love for Lord de Bainwulf. If he should learn of your lord's weakness at this time, he might seek to harm him.'

Elona nodded at the truth of his words, her eyes a silent witness to her anxiety. 'Because I know it would be too dangerous to take my lord into the village, I must beg a favour of you, Cedric. The only one who could reach Alfrida without being suspected is you.'

He stared at her, hesitating only for a moment before saying, 'Ask what you will of me, lady, I would gladly give my life to serve you and my lord.'

'I know just how much I am asking of you. If my father caught you, he would punish you severely. Perhaps I have no right to expect so much.'

Cedric raised his head proudly. 'What would you have me say to Alfrida?'

'Thank you.' Elona touched his arm, the tears starting to her eyes. 'I shall give you something for her: a talisman she gave me when I left the village. Tell her that it has kept me safe, but I am in desperate need of her help and I beg her to come to me with all speed.'

Cedric frowned. 'Alfrida is old—She could not walk so far. I shall have to take the cart.'

'The men have not been idle these past hours; a stout hut is ready to house my lord. We shall carry him there in a little while.'

'I shall need one other to mind the cart,' Cedric said, looking thoughtful, it must remain hidden while I slip into the village to speak with Alfrida. Sigebert would never let her come to you if he knew why you wanted her.'

'Ask Robert of Bayeux to choose a man he trusts. May God go with you, Cedric, and keep you safe.'

'I shall not fail you,' Cedric vowed, kissing the hand she held out to him.

Elona smiled, giving him the little talisman she had carried with her since the day Alfrida had pressed it into her hand.

'Please tell Robert I would speak with him.'

'As you wish, my lady.'

Cedric left, returning shortly with the young soldier. Elona explained her plans to fetch the wise woman to Raoul. He listened in silence, but did not question the wisdom of her action, saying only that he would send a small escort of armed men to guard the wagon.

Elona thanked him. She watched as two of the strongest soldiers lifted her husband on to a litter and carried him to the makeshift hut they had built. He did not wake or cry out, even, as they moved him, and her heart was heavy. Unless Alfrida had some magic to free him from this strange trance, she was afraid he would die. And what would her life be without him now? Having tasted happiness briefly, she knew she could not face the emptiness of a future without the man she loved.

The weather had turned colder once more, and the sky had an ominous whiteness about it as the small convoy trundled out of the camp. Elona watched them leave, shivering in the bitter wind before turning to go inside the little hut where Raoul lay.

She threw some wood on the fire, laying another blanket over him and looking anxiously at his pale face. Then she glanced up as Robert of Bayeux entered the hut. He came to stand beside her, his face grim as he saw there was no change in the sick man's condition.

'You should rest, my lady. Let me watch over him for a while.'

She shook her head. 'No, Robert, I am not tired. Besides, you have other responsibilities. I shall need to keep some of the men with me to protect my lord, but you must take the others and go on to Romney. The Duke's business has been too long delayed already.'

'I shall stay here with you and Lord de Bainwulf, my lady.'

'No, I think not, Robert.' Her eyes shone as she looked up at him and a single tear escaped to run down her cheek.

'I know how well you love my lord, but for his sake you must do your duty. Lord de Bainwulf would want it so. The Duke's cause must not suffer because Raoul is ill.'

Her lovely face was proud as she looked at him, and there was a quiet dignity about her which touched his heart.

'You are a true soldier's wife, Lady Elona,' Robert's voice held respect. 'I would fain stay here with my lord, but you have shown me my duty. It shall be as you say. Before we leave, I shall choose ten of my most trusted men to guard you.'

'Thank you.' Elona smiled tremulously. 'My lord has faith in you, and I know you will not fail him.'

The soldier saluted and left. She heard him giving orders to strike camp and tried not to think of how alone she would be when he had gone. Between them, he and Cedric had supported her spirits and it had been a hard decision to send Robert away. Yet she knew Raoul would have made the same choice.

For some time the sounds of men's voices shouting to one another mingled with the stamp of horses' hooves and the rattling of iron-bound wheels as the heavy engines of war began to move, followed by the baggage carts. Elona wondered if the noise would rouse her husband, and she sat beside him on the ground, telling him what was happening as if she hoped to reach his mind. But it seemed that nothing could penetrate the mist which had claimed his senses.

Robert came to tell her that he was ready to leave, assuring her of the loyalty of the men he had picked to stay behind. They were all well known to her, indeed many of them had been with Raoul when she had first been captured, and their self-appointed leader promised her he would see that a vigilant watch was kept over the now nearly deserted camp.

Elona went out to watch the long column of soldiers ride away. They all saluted as they passed her, and she smiled, lifting her hand in a wave of farewell as Robert mounted his horse and rode off to join the others.

'God be with you!' she cried.

'And with you, my lady.'

How quiet it seemed once the tramp of hooves and the jingle of harness had ceased to break the stillness of the morning. Although the skies were still threatening, and the trees had a white frosting on their leafless branches, it had not yet begun to snow.

Elona looked at the scattering of men walking about the camp or crouching by their cooking-fires and sighed. She was not alone, but in her heart there was an aching loneliness. How long would it be before Cedric returned with the wise woman, and would she be able to save Raoul when she came?

Turning as she heard her name called softly, Elona saw her young maid waiting patiently for her. She sighed again; in her distress she had almost forgotten Olwen. The girl would be anxious for Cedric's safe return too.

'Will you not rest and eat now?' she asked.

Elona forced a smile to her stiff lips. 'Yes, if you will stay and share the food with me,' she said. 'But first I must tend to my lord's wounds . . .'

Cedric crept towards the silent village, a prickle of fear crawling down his spine as he heard a rustling in the darkness. Then he heard a grunt and, realising that it was only the hogs moving in their enclosure, laughed at himself for his fears.

He had reached the village late in the afternoon, having left the cart safely hidden in the woods half a mile back where it would not be discovered. For some time he had lain in the bushes across the river, watching the villagers go about their work. Some girls carrying nets to snare rabbits had walked right past him, and one of the great grey dogs lurching playfully at their sides had run to where he lay, barking and sniffing at him. The girls had been too busy chattering to notice, merely calling the dog to heel when they disappeared over the rise.

Before approaching the village itself, Cedric waited until dusk fell and the sound of voices gradually died away, knowing that to do so earlier would be foolish. The villagers would be hostile, and anyone who saw him would tell Sigebert at once. The huts were shuttered and barred against the night and no one was stirring as he slipped quietly between them, every sense alert for a sudden shout which would be the sign he had been discovered; but all was still apart from a fluttering of wings in the dovecot as a rat disturbed the sleeping birds.

Cedric scratched on Alfrida's door with his nails, calling her name softly, but there was no answer. So he rapped hard with his knuckles, raising his voice and glancing anxiously over his shoulder lest anyone else should hear and come to investigate.

'Curse the witch/ he muttered to himself, is she deaf?'

He called again, and this time there was a rustling sound inside the hut. He waited impatiently for the door to open, but it remained closed, though he sensed the old woman's presence on the other side.

'Alfrida!' he said, it's Cedric. I have come from the Lady Elona. Open the door—I have a message for you.'

There was still silence for a moment, then the sound of movement as the bars holding the door were removed. As it opened, Cedric saw the old woman standing there huddled in her ragged mantle as she peered at him suspiciously.

'What do you want?' she muttered crossly, her chin wagging in annoyance. 'Can't a body sleep without someone wanting something?'

'I've come from Elona. She needs you. You are to come with me.'

'Elona?' She stared at him. 'Elona's dead. Sigebert told me it was so.'

it's true he wished her dead,' Cedric replied, searching in his tunic for the talisman Elona had given him. 'But she is alive and in need of your help. She sent you this, and begs that you will come at once.'

Alfrida turned the talisman over in her hands, looking at it doubtfully. 'Where is she? Why does she not come herself?'

As Cedric explained, his impatience grew as the old woman made him go over and over his tale. 'The cart is waiting for you,' he said at last, glancing nervously over his shoulder into the darkness. 'Will you come or not?'

'Curb your tongue, boy,' she muttered, glaring at him as she hobbled back inside the hut. 'Waking a body in the dead of the night. It's always the same: they all want something from me.' Suddenly her bright eyes glittered with malicious glee. 'Don't stand there like an idiot, boy. Help me to gather my things. What are you waiting for?'

Cedric frowned but made no reply as he followed her into the hut, watching as she began collecting various jars and pots. He held a sack for her to put them in, shuddering as he wondered what was in some of her potions.

In the darkness just beyond the dovecot, Sigebert laid his hand on the arm of his companion as he started forward. The man looked at him enquiringly as he held him back.

'Shall we not take the traitor, my lord ?' he asked.

Sigebert shook his head, his brow wrinkling in thought. 'No, not yet. You did well to warn me when you saw the boy hiding near the village, Eric. Now you can serve me best by following them. Watch where they go, and then come back to me.'

The Saxon thane's lips curved in a cold smile. 'I would give much to see that Norman dog de Bainwulf grovelling at my feet . . .'

Elona bent over Raoul, bathing his brow with cool water and brushing a few drops on his lips to moisten them. Once during the night she had thought she heard him moan, but when she looked into his face there was no sign of a change.



She stood up and began to pace about the hut, feeling restless. It seemed a lifetime since Cedric had left the camp the day before, and she was beginning to fear he had been caught. She was close to despair and felt almost dizzy with weariness.

Covering her face with her hands, she sank to her knees again at Raoul's side as the helpless tears began to flow. She could bear this uncertainty no longer. Then a sudden shout from outside the hut brought her head up. She listened to the sound of excited voices, her heart thudding in her breast as the leather curtain at the door was swept aside and someone came in.

'Cedric, you're back!' she cried, rising swiftly to her feet, is Alfrida with you?'

Someone was entering behind the youth, and Elona gave a glad cry as she saw it was the wise woman. She ran to embrace her, sobbing her relief as the old woman's mouth split in a toothless grin.

'So, it is Elona!' she cried, chuckling gleefully. The boy did not lie to me.'

Elona hugged her thin body. Thank you for coming, Alfrida. I need your help desperately. My husband is ill and I am so afraid he will die. Will you help me—please?'

Alfrida pushed her away to look more closely at her. 'Let me see your pretty face,' she said, peering at her intently. 'You've changed. You've known danger and pain as I foretold, was it not so?'

'Yes, all you told me has come to pass. I have known danger, but your charm kept me safe.' Elona choked back a sob. 'Please, Alfrida, you must cure my husband. If he dies, I shall not be able to bear it.'

'You'll bear what you must,' the woman muttered, her chin wagging fiercely as she made her way towards the fire, it is very cold, and there'll be snow soon. I'm old, and my bones pain me, but I'll do what I can.'

'Oh, thank you,' Elona cried, her face lighting up. 'I knew you would not fail me, my dearest Alfrida.'

'I said I would do what I could,' Alfrida muttered. 'I may not be able to save him—But let me look at him, and we shall see what can be done.'

Alfrida hobbled over to where Raoul was lying, bending down to peer at his face. 'H'mm. He is handsome enough to turn the head of a foolish girl, I suppose. How long has he been like this?' She pulled back his eyelids to stare at his eyes and frowned.

'Three days and nights,' Elona replied, coming to kneel beside her husband and brush her hand over his brow. 'He has made no sound in all that time, nor opened his eyes.'

'It is as if he were in a deep sleep,' Alfrida muttered, screwing up her mouth and mumbling to herself. 'As if his soul had left his body to live on without it.'

'Will he get better?' Elona asked, looking at her with frightened eyes. 'How long will he be like this?'

Alfrida shook her head, grumbling in a low voice that the girl strained to hear. 'She asks so many questions. How do I know the answers? Only God and the spirits know what will become of him. I'm old, and my bones creak. I shall not see another winter. What can I know—Why must they always ask so many questions?'

Elona buried her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking as the tears flowed. She had been so sure that Alfrida could help and now it all seemed in vain.

'Don't weep, child,' the old woman said, her face creasing with pity and sorrow. Tears never saved a man's life yet. I'll consult the runes: they will say if he is to live or die.'

Alfrida took a pointed stick from her sack and drew a large circle on the floor, marking it in sections. Then she delved inside the bag again and pulled out a handful of stones with strange cyphers painted on them. Squatting on the floor, she began to chant in a high voice, her eyes becoming glazed as

she rocked to and fro. Suddenly she scattered the stones in the circle, her eyes bright as she bent over them.

'You have passed through many dangers,' she crooned, her skinny hands turning over the pieces of stone. 'I see a dark shadow hanging over you. There is much hatred and danger close at hand. You will need to be alert if you are to avoid disaster.'

'Will my husband live?' Elona asked, kneeling beside her on the floor, and looking at the strange writing on the stones anxiously. 'Will he be as he was before he was so sorely wounded? Oh, please, can you not tell me what I want to know? I am so afraid he may die!'

'Questions, always questions,' Alfrida muttered crossly, shaking her head and sighing. 'The runes show a journey. You will pass over a great water—It is all I can tell you.'

Elona drew a deep breath: it was always the same with Alfrida. She never told you what you wanted to know, speaking in riddles instead of answering yes or no.

'Will you not consult the flames as you did when I asked you to help me before?'

Alfrida looked up at her, her eyes very bright. 'Are you sure you have the strength to know what the future holds, child?'

Elona felt a chill of fear run down her spine, but she met the old woman's eyes steadily. 'Yes, I want to know the truth.'

Alfrida searched in her sack for an earthen pot marked with strange symbols. She took a pinch of powder from it, her lips moving in a silent incantation as she threw it into the flames and watched as they shot higher. In the brilliant blue gold of the fire's heart, pictures began to form and shape, pictures which made the old woman tremble and cry out in fear. She shrank away, hiding her eyes with her arm, and shaking.

'What is it?' Elona asked, her eyes wide with fear. 'Oh, tell me at once, will Raoul die?'

Alfrida began to moan, rocking back and forth on her heels and crooning words that Elona could not understand. Elona stared at her, her terror growing as the old woman seemed to sink into a trance. Then, quite suddenly, Alfrida looked at her, her eyes glowing with a strange light.

'Only you can save him,' she whispered hollowly. 'Only you can prevent death from taking us all...'

A cold shiver racked Elona's body as she looked at the wise woman. 'What do you mean?' she asked, her lips white and stiff. 'How can I save him? What must I do?'

'You must go again to the sacred tree.'

'No!' Elona cried, her eyes dark with terror. 'There is evil in that place. I cannot—dare not—go there again!'

Alfrida's eyes seemed to burn into her. 'Yours is the choice. If you do not go, this man will die—and so will others.'

Elona's hands trembled as she clasped them at her side. 'Tell me what I must do,' she whispered. 'What must I give in sacrifice this time? The gold collar the Duke gave me—or these bangles?' She held out her wedding gift from Raoul.

Alfrida shook her head. 'These trifles will not win the spirit of the tree to your cause.' She frowned, her chin wagging in concentration. 'Wait—I shall give you something.' She took a little wooden casket from her sack and placed it in Elona's hands. 'In here is that which I prize most in the world. Give this to the tree, Elona.'

Elona opened the casket and saw a lock of fair hair within. She looked wonderingly at the old woman. It is only a lock of hair.'

'It is the hair of my child,' Alfrida said. 'More precious to me than all the gold and silver in the world.'

'Then I cannot take it from you,' Elona protested, pushing the casket away. 'I did not know you ever had a child, Alfrida.'

'She died when she was but two years old.' Her eyes were moist. 'I have kept this with me ever since that day. Take it, Elona, for the love I bear you—the love I should have given to her, had she lived.'

'Very well,' Elona choked, tears running silently down her cheeks. 'I shall do as you say. Show me what else I must do, my dear friend . . .'

Elona paused at the edge of the woods. In the distance she could clearly see the outline of her father's hall, its dark shape stark against a curiously light sky. The moon was full tonight, its golden orb casting strange shadows over the earth.

'Stay here and wait for me,' she whispered to the soldier who had accompanied her on her journey. 'Be sure you keep hidden and do nothing to arouse the villagers.'

The soldier nodded, looking almost fearfully over his shoulder. The eerie stillness of the woods was enough to send chills creeping down his spine, and he wondered at the girl's courage in venturing to the heart of them. Elona left him without another word, gliding silently into the trees like a pale shadow.

Her heart was thudding wildly, and the pounding in her head was like the crashing of a thousand drums. She had been frightened the first time she came here, but this time the terror clawed at her belly, making her want to vomit. There was no sound in the wood, not even the gentle whispering of a breeze in the trees or an animal rustling in the undergrowth as it went about its nocturnal business. The quietness was unnatural, evil. She felt it instinctively.

When she reached the little clearing and saw the gnarled trunk of the ancient tree, her feeling of terror grew to such an extent that she almost ran away. Only her love for Raoul forced her to enter the circle of stones. She must at least try Alfrida's magic, for she could not bear it if her husband died.

She placed the little casket Alfrida had given her between the protruding roots of the sacred tree; then she took a fallen branch and began to draw cyphers in the earth as the wise woman had shown her. This done, she knelt down and took a tiny knife from the embroidered leather purse at her girdle. She looked at it, hesitating for a moment, then she made a slash across her arm, stifling her cry of pain as the blood spurted. She dipped her fingers in the blood and made a mark on the trunk of the tree.

'Blood must be paid in blood,' she said, repeating the words Alfrida had taught her. Take this blood and spare the one I love, O Mighty Spirit of the tree. Accept my gift and let me go in peace.'

She stretched herself on the ground and waited. Time passed, and her body grew stiff with cold, but nothing happened. There was no great wind to catch her up as it had last time, and no frightening visions—only the silence.

Feeling the first snowflakes touch her head, Elona got to her feet at last, shivering as she pulled her mantle closer around her. She looked towards the tree, frowning as she saw Alfrida's casket exactly where she had left it. Nothing had happened, even though she had obeyed the wise woman's instructions to the letter, forgetting not one word. The sacrifice had been in vain: it had been a wasted journey.

Suddenly Elona realised that she was no longer afraid. There was no magic or mystery here; it had all been in her mind. She heard an owl hoot in a near-by tree and smiled as a flurry of snowflakes settled on the tip of her nose. Now the woods were alive with the natural sounds of the night, no longer eerie or frightening to her.

She turned to leave, then remembered Alfrida's casket and went back to fetch it, finding her own silver bracelet still lying hidden amongst the debris. She picked them both up. It was silly to leave something which meant so much to her friend, and she had always liked the bracelet. It had been foolish

to come here at all. Alfrida believed in the magic of the old days, but it was all nonsense. Only God created life, and only He could save it.

Leaving the woods, Elona told her escort to wait for her outside the church. She went inside, spending several minutes with her head bent in prayer; when she got to her feet at last, she felt a deep calmness within her. She had asked for nothing but the strength to face whatever the future held in store for her.

Pausing by the stone font, she dipped her fingers in the holy water, making the sign of the cross on her forehead. She was about to turn away when a force stronger than she made her stop. Taking a tiny flask from the pouch at her girdle, she dipped it in the font and filled it with the precious water. Then she went outside to the waiting soldier. He looked cold and miserable, his mantle covered with a fine dusting of snow.

'I am ready to leave,' she said.

The soldier nodded, moving eagerly to help her mount her horse. 'I thought I heard something just now, my lady,' he said, glancing over his shoulder and peering anxiously into the darkness. 'And I have the feeling we are being watched.'

Elona looked nervously towards the silent village as though she expected to see her father waiting with a force of armed men to drag her back with her. She was glad now that she had refused Cedric when he had begged to come with her. He had already risked his life enough times in her service.

'It is dangerous to linger here,' she said, flicking her horse's reins. 'Come, we must go quickly. I am anxious to return to my lord.'

It was early morning when they reached the camp. Elona dismounted and ran swiftly to the hut, anxious to look at Raoul and reassure herself that he was still alive. Entering, she saw Alfrida crouched beside him, crooning softly to herself. She went to stand beside the old woman, looking tenderly down at the face of her beloved husband.

'Has there been any change?' Alfrida gazed at her, with an odd, preoccupied expression. 'No. It is very strange. The signs were clear.'

'It is not your fault.' Elona sighed as she stared at Raoul's pale face, it was foolish of me to expect you to cure him. We can do nothing. He will live only if God wills it.' She reached into her purse and took out the wooden casket, holding it out to Alfrida. Take this back, my friend, it was too great a sacrifice.'

Alfrida stared at the casket in horror. 'You should not have brought it back,' she cried, her eyes rolling wildly as she moaned and shrank back in terror. 'Do not give it to me—Throw it into the fire at once!'

'But it means so much to you,' Elona objected, hesitating as she saw the fear in the old woman's face.

Alfrida snatched the casket, crying out as if in pain as her fingers touched it. She threw it into the fire, covering her face and trembling as the flames consumed it.

Elona watched with pity in her face. Alfrida had lived so long with superstition and fear that it was useless to attempt to reason with her.

She turned away, kneeling down by her husband's side to smooth his dark hair back from his brow and press her lips against his mouth. Then she took the tiny flask from her pouch and poured a few drops on his forehead, tracing the sign of the cross with her fingertips.

'May God protect and keep you,' she whispered.

Then she got up and went outside to find Cedric.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

A SLIGHT SOUND woke Elona. She sat up with a start, wondering where she was. The fire had burned low and it was a moment or two before her eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom. She sighed deeply. She had dreamed that she was back at her father's hall, and it was good to know that it had only been her imagination.

Alfrida was no longer sitting beside Raoul, and Elona gave a little cry of alarm. Why had the old woman deserted him? She had promised faithfully to watch over him while Elona slept, and to wake her if there was any change. Getting up quickly, she went to her husband's side and bent over him anxiously. She sighed with relief as she saw he was still breathing. She thought his colour was a little better, and laid her hand on his brow, stroking back his soft, dark hair.

'Please wake up, my beloved,' she whispered, a tear sliding down her cheek and falling on his face. 'I cannot face life without you, my dearest husband. I need you so very much . . .'

Hearing the same rustling sound that had woken her, Elona spun round, her eyes peering into the darkness at the far side of the room. She cried out as she saw a dark shadow near the door.

'Who is it? Who are you?'

it is I, daughter.' Lord Sigebert's harsh whisper made her start in surprise. 'Speak quietly or you will alert the guards.'

Elona stood up with her back to Raoul as she greeted her father warily. 'How did you get past the guards?' she asked coldly. 'Have you murdered them?'

'No, as yet they are unharmed, though I have men waiting near by who will strike at a signal from me. What happens\*to them is up to you, Elona.'

'What do you mean?' The tiny hairs prickled in the nape of her neck and her stomach muscles began to tie themselves in knots. 'Where is Alfrida? What have you done to her? She would not have left here willingly.'

'I sent the old witch away. She obeyed me, as she must do if she is not to starve this winter. The old hag can rot in Hell if she causes any trouble.'

'I asked her to help me, Father.' Elona's chin went up. 'You should not punish Alfrida because you hate me.'

Sigebert's face twisted with malice. 'Why should I punish her when she led me to you? The night Cedric came to fetch her, I sent Eric the Fox to follow them. He told me where the camp was and kept watch over it. I knew you had gone to the church last night and I could have taken you then, had I wished to harm you. I was angry with you for disobeying me, but I am willing to forgive you and forget the past if you will come home with me of your own free will. They tell me this husband of yours is rich—as his widow, you have a claim on his wealth and estates in Normandy.'

Elona drew a deep breath, disgust stirring in her as she looked at him. 'My husband is not dead yet, Father.'

Lord Sigebert's eyes were full of greed. 'He will not live long. They tell me he's already near dead.'

'Then they have lied to you. Raoul's wounds are slight, and healing well—only the strange trance that holds his mind worries me. He will get better, I know he will. I shall make him well again if it takes months or years!'

'It would be an easy matter to make certain of his death,' Sigebert's voice was eager. He came nearer to Elona and she saw the fanatical gleam in his eyes. 'You could rub poison into his wounds, Elona. He would die slowly, and no one would know what had happened. If you showed a proper grief, the Duke would believe you and listen to your claims . . .'

Anger flared in Elona's face. 'And why should I kill my husband? His wealth is mine to share as his wife. He would give me anything I asked of him—what would I gain from his murder?'

'The freedom to return to your own people.' Sigebert's voice took on a sly, coaxing note. 'After the fine I was forced to pay, I am reduced to the level of a pauper. The ceorles will starve this winter if you do not help us, daughter.'

'I am sorry for them,' Elona said quietly, her blue eyes cold as she looked at him. 'But I have no pity in my heart for you. You drove me away from my home because you would not listen to my pleas. You would have sold me to a cruel man I hated. And when my life hung in the balance, you refused to help me; you sent me poison as a wedding gift. No, Father, I will not murder my husband to profit you. He is a good and noble man—a better man than you ever knew how to be.'

'You were ever an ungrateful wench!' Sigebert snarled. 'If you will not kill him, I'll do it for you.'

'Stop!' Elona cried hoarsely. 'Come one step nearer, and I shall scream for the guards. Indeed, I shall kill you myself if I have to.' She drew a knife from a tiny sheath at her girdle and held it poised to strike him.

Sigebert saw the knife in her hand and his face darkened with rage. Her threat did not frighten him, for on her own she could do no more than hinder him and her weapon was but a toy, but the guards would taken at her first scream.

'You are a treacherous bitch,' he spat at her, his face ugly with hatred. 'Like the Danish dog who sired you!'

Elona gasped with shock as she saw the bitterness in him. 'What are you saying?' she whispered. 'You—you are my father.'

Sigebert laughed harshly, his mouth curling. That hurts your Saxon pride, doesn't it, Elona? You cherished your noble blood that was untainted by intermixing. It's no lie: your wanton mother lay with a Dane I picked off the road, half dead of the wounds he got in a drunken brawl. A common warrior without a drop of noble blood in his veins.<sup>1</sup>

'My mother was not a wanton!' Elona cried. 'She was a frail, tired, unhappy woman whom you drove into an early grave with your cruelty.'

'She was a faithless harlot. When I found them together, she swore the Dane had raped her,' Sigebert sneered. 'But I knew she had lain with him of her own free will. I would have killed her, but her father was then still alive and a powerful man: I feared his vengeance if I murdered her, so I pretended to believe her lies. I bided my time and made her die slowly, little by little. When you were born I knew you were his child, not mine.'

'So that's why you hated me.' Elona's eyes opened wide as she began to understand so much now. It explained his coldness towards her and the strange attitude of the villagers. She had never really been one of them because her father was a Dane. 'I thought you disliked me because I was unlovable. I—I wanted so much for you to care for me when I was a child. I loved you . . .'

Sigebert's face darkened as he remembered the past and the bitter jealousy which had soured his life. Elona's mother had dealt his pride a wound which had festered inside him, growing deeper with the years, as he saw the pretty child grow to a beautiful young woman and knew that he was not her father.

'You were the proof of her guilt,' he said, his eyes glowing with a feverish light as the hatred rose to cloud his mind. 'I could have strangled you at birth, but that would have been too easy. I wanted her to suffer, to have a constant reminder of her wickedness.'

So that was why her mother had been so withdrawn towards her. If she had dared to show love towards the child of her lover, Sigebert might have killed them both.

'You are a cruel, vengeful man,' Elona said, her face and eyes accusing. 'I would be a fool to expect you to show a little compassion. So I shall not ask for mercy. I shall say this instead: If you try to harm Raoul, I shall scream for the guards, and I shall tell the Duke that you have broken your vow to him. You know how he will take his revenge then, don't you?'

Sigebert's lips narrowed. 'He would burn the village to the ground and hang me. Very well, Elona, you have made your choice. I would have spared you if you had agreed to my plans—but now you will all die. My men wait only

for my signal to move on the camp—but first I shall be revenged on that Norman dog de Bainwulf for the way he humiliated me.'

Advancing towards her, Sigebert drew his sword, but even as Elona screamed and held her knife ready, a dark shadow moved silently behind him. Alfrida had returned, crouching unnoticed in the gloom while they were arguing. A flash of silver glittered in her hand as she raised the long dagger to strike, plunging it deep into his back.

The thane gave a great shout of pain, staggering as the crimson froth bubbled from his lips. His face contorted with rage as he turned on the old woman, driving his sword into her side. She moaned and sank slowly to her knees, crying Elona's name aloud. The girl moved warily towards her as Sigebert raised his sword and lurched wildly at her; but before he could strike, another shadow came swiftly from behind her. Sigebert's eyes opened wide with shock and the disbelief registered in his face. He hesitated for a moment, then roared his anger as he brought his weapon crashing down. The slight hesitation was costly; a blade flashed in the gloom, finding its mark with deadly accuracy, and the Saxon fell, pierced through the heart.

Elona stared at the man who had struck the death blow, her face pale as the world spun round her. 'Raoul,' she whispered. 'How can this be?'

Raoul swayed unsteadily, driving his bloody sword into the earth and leaning on it as he fought the weakness sweeping over him. 'Tend to that poor woman,' he said as Elona moved instinctively towards him. 'I should have acted sooner. Forgive me, Elona.'

Elona shook her head in bewilderment, turning from him to kneel by the old woman's side. Alfrida had been lying with her eyes closed, but as the girl spoke to her she opened them and smiled, restraining Elona's attempts to staunch the trickle of blood from her side.

'No! Leave me, child,' She whispered faintly. 'My death was foretold by the flames. Blood must be paid in blood. Do not grieve for me—I am old, and it is my time to die.'

'Alfrida!' Elona cried, tears starting to her eyes. 'Let me help you . . .' Her words trailed away as the old woman went limp in her arms, her last breath expelling in a gentle sigh. 'No, Alfrida, no . . .'

She felt the touch of Raoul's hands on her shoulders. 'I waited too long,' he said again. 'I believed Sigebert would try to kill me, and my only chance against him was surprise. The old woman died because I did not act soon enough. Forgive me, I beg you.'

Elona looked up, the tears sparkling like fallen diamonds on her lashes. 'You are weak from your illness, my lord. If Alfrida had not struck him first, he would have killed you. She knew it, and she gave her life for you, because of her love for me.'

'Yes, it was a brave act.' Raoul's eyes were sad as he raised her to her feet. 'We must see that she is laid to rest with all honour.'

Elona blinked away her tears. 'Still I do not understand! How long have you been awake?' She studied his face in concern as he seemed to sway on his feet. 'Lie down, my lord, you are not well.'

'In a moment.' Raoul passed a hand across his eyes, it is merely weakness. I woke some hours ago. That poor wretch was trying to give me one of her foul brews, and I think I scared her wits out of her when I opened my eyes. She seemed to think I had come back from beyond the grave.'

'But why did she not wake me at once?'

'I would not let her. She told me you had scarcely slept since I was wounded, and you looked so peaceful lying there. My head felt as if a hundred hammers were at work and I wanted only to sleep.'

'Then you did not hear Sigebert come in?'

'I woke just as . . .' Raoul broke off as there was a disturbance outside and the curtain at the door was flung aside. His hand moved towards his sword. 'What the . . .?'

Robert of Bayeux stood in the doorway, his eyes going swiftly to the bodies of the Saxon thane and Alfrida. 'I feared I might be too late,' he said. 'I came as quickly as I could, my lady. Praise God you are both alive.'

Raoul stared at him in bewilderment. 'What means this? Where have you been, and why did my lady send for you?'

He frowned, pressing a hand to his head as if to clear the mist which still seemed to cling to his mind. 'Just how long have I been ill?'

'It is five nights since we came here,' Elona said. 'Robert went on to Romney to attend to the Duke's business, but yesterday morning I saw one of my father's men lurking outside the camp and I feared an attack, so I sent Cedric to fetch him.'

'I came as quickly as I could,' Robert put in. 'A little way from the camp we ran into a band of Saxons, but they fled as soon as they saw us. I rode on ahead to warn you of danger, and found that the guard outside had been bound and gagged. Then I heard a scream, and I was afraid I had arrived too late." He reached out a hand to steady Raoul as he saw his ashen face, 'I think you should rest, my lord.'

Raoul put off Robert's hand. 'No, it was a slight dizziness, no more. There are things to do—This poor woman must be attended to, and the Lord Sigebert's body taken back to his village as a warning to the others.'

'These things will be attended to,' Elona said, looking at him-anxiously. 'Sit, if you will not lie down, my lord. Your strength has not yet returned.'

'Perhaps you are right.' Raoul's smile was rueful as he felt the earth move beneath him. 'I shall rest if you will stay by me, Elona. I think there is much I do not yet know.'

She smiled at him lovingly. 'First I will have food and water brought,' she said. 'Then I will tell you everything you wish to know, my lord.'

Elona stood alone, watching the sun sink into the horizon in a glorious blaze of purple and gold. It had been bitterly cold all day despite the winter sunshine, and a crisp covering of snow lay on the ground, muffling the sound of the man's footsteps as he came to stand just behind her.

<sup>k</sup>'You will turn cold, my love,' Raoul said, his arms moving round her to hold her close to him beneath his cloak. 'Come back inside now.'

Elona turned in his embrace, her eyes anxious as they searched his face. 'Should you not be resting, my lord?'

'I have done nothing but rest and eat for two days. I am well now, Elona, do not be afraid for me any more.' His smile was tender as he traced the curve of her cheeks with his fingertips, setting little tremors running down her spine. 'How beautiful you are. And yet your eyes are sad . . .'

'I was thinking of Alfrida. If I had left the casket in the woods as she bade me . . .'

'Hush, my love.' He pressed his fingers to her lips. 'Alfrida's spells were only superstition.'

'But she believed in them,' Elona protested. 'And how can we know the truth?'

'No one can hope to understand all the mysteries of life, Elona. That's why we must put our faith in God; He alone has the power to combat evil. Do not grieve for Alfrida, be glad of the love she bore you and be happy.'

'Oh, Raoul,' she murmured, laying her face against his shoulder. 'How I need your strength to guide me! I love you so very much.'

'Do you, my sweet wife?' His eyes searched her lovely face as he tipped it towards him gently. 'I have sometimes hoped it might be so, but every time I tried to break down the barriers between us I found it impossible. Even when you lay in my arms, I felt you held something back from me and there was a part of you I could not touch.'



'I was afraid,' Elona whispered chokingly. 'I was afraid that if I gave you my heart you might crush it as you crushed that vial of poison beneath your heel.'

'Did you think me so cruel?' His eyes held a deep sadness and Elona felt pain touch her heart.

'I—I had never known love from a man. I understand now that my mother was too frightened of her husband to show me affection, but for years I knew not what it was to see warmth in a human face. Sigebert either ignored me or raged at me for some childish fault. He treated my mother worse than the lowest servant. I—I could not believe a man existed who would be kind and gentle with me, even though I desperately wanted to.'

Raoul's face darkened with anger. 'I heard the foul things that monster said to you, Elona. I am glad he is dead.'

She shuddered. 'I cannot bear to think of him. I shall be glad when we can leave this place far behind us.'

'How far would you like to go, my love?' Raoul stroked her cheek, his smile tender. 'My home in Normandy is bathed in sunlight all day; it has a walled garden sheltered from the sea breezes, where the apple trees give shade on the hottest summer afternoon and the birds sing more sweetly than a minstrel boy. I would sit with you in the courtyard and spend my days in idle content. Will you come with me across the sea, Elona?'

'I shall go wherever you go for as long as I shall live, my dearest husband.' Elona smiled back at him, her eyes misty with love.

'And will you be a meek and submissive wife?' he asked, with laughter in his voice. 'Will you always obey me and never refuse to stop when I call to you?'

Elona hung her head in shame. 'Oh, pray do not tease me, my lord. I have not ceased to blame myself since you were wounded. I know it was my fault you rode into a trap, and I do most humbly beg your pardon.'

Raoul laughed suddenly, his arms tightening about her as though he would never let her go. 'I want no submissive wife, Elona. I want a brave, fearless warrior who would fight to save me, even though she has only a little knife. I want a stubborn, wilful wench who has plagued me day and night since I first saw her. I want a passionate, lovely woman who comes eagerly to my bed and longs for night to fall. I want you, my beautiful Elona.'

'Oh, Raoul,' Elona whispered, waves of joy washing over her. 'I have longed to be loved by a man who would take me in honour as his wife, a man who would love me tenderly and care for me always. I believed my dream was only that, something as far above me as the moon.'

'I shall love, honour and desire you for all my life,' Raoul said quietly. 'I was reared to be a soldier by a mother who was as proud as she was cold. When her husband died on the field of battle she buried her heart with him, giving love to neither my sister nor me. She never smiled again or gave a word of praise. I lived only to fight, believing the world held nothing more. Now I would never fight again if I were free to choose; but I promise you we shall go home as soon as William is crowned. I have done my duty by him, and he has no more claim on me.'

'May that day come soon,'<sup>1</sup> Elona said, her lashes flicking down to hide her eyes for one moment. Then she opened them and looked full into her husband's gaze, knowing she would never again be afraid to tell him what was in her heart. 'When we left the village for Romney marshes, I heard a bird cry strangely and saw blood in the sky. A dread entered my heart and I was afraid for you. I could not wait to reach a place of safety, and I shall know no peace until I can be sure you will sleep safe by my side each night.'

Raoul stretched out to touch her face tenderly. 'So that was it. I was afraid you were sad because we would pass so close to your own village, and you could not stay there with your own people.'

'Sigebert's village holds no happy memories for me. I always felt an outsider there, and now I know why. My father was a Dane. A common warrior . . .' She broke off and looked at him. 'Do you mind that I am not of pure noble blood?'

Raoul shook his head and smiled. 'I care not who your parents were, my love, but I do not believe all that Sigebert told you. Consider this; why would he take a wounded Dane into his house and tend his hurts? Danes and Saxons were ever enemies. Not from the goodness of his heart, I think. I believe your father must have been a member of some noble house from whom Sigebert hope to win a rich reward. Remember, he spoke of punishing your mother but made no mention of wreaking vengeance on your father. Think you he would have let a common warrior live? No, Elona, I will not believe you come from common stock, and your true father may yet live. We shall make enquiries in the village—someone may know the truth; and now that Sigebert is dead there is no reason for anyone to lie. They will be eager to save their own skins by pleasing you. Besides, the Normans are but Norsemen who settled in France: I am glad that you have the blood of my ancestors in you.'

Elona's eyes sparkled as she looked up at him. 'Do you think my real father may still be alive?'

'It's possible. If he lives, we shall find him, I promise you.'

'Oh, it would mean so much to me. I have never known a father's love. Cedric and Alfrida were my only friends.'

'Alas, we can do no more for Alfrida, but we shall take Cedric to Normandy with us. I have a fondness for the boy and I shall send him to school as I promised. Olwen shall go with us too, and in time they may be betrothed.'

Elona flung her arms about his neck, kissing his cheek. 'You are truly the noblest of men,' she cried.

Raoul's arms were warm about her. 'Is that all my reward?' he asked with a quirk of his lips. 'Methinks I deserve more.' His mouth covered hers hungrily, his kiss deep and passionate. Elona's heartbeat quickened as she felt the urgency in him, her body aching as she longed to feel it locked with his in the intimacy of love. Feeling her response, he bent and swept her up in his arms. Striding into the hut, he laid her gently on the softness of a thick fur rug, his face glowing with a fierce desire as he looked down at her. 'Let me love you, my Elona?'

'Oh yes,' she whispered, pressing herself against him eagerly, her breath sweet and warm on his face. Her arms went up about his neck, her hands moving into his thick hair as she pulled his lips down to hers.

He winced as her searching hands encountered the partially healed wound at the back of his head. 'Careful, wench,' he cried. 'I have but now risen from my sick bed.'

'Forgive me, my lord,' Elona begged, drawing away as though she feared to hurt him.

Raoul laughed and suddenly rolled her beneath him, his eyes shining with joyous triumph as he trapped her body with his own. 'Will you never learn what a wicked liar I am, Elona? I bellow empty threats and roar like a bull, but you have the power to enslave me with just one kiss/

Elona's gaze intensified as the wonder dawned in her. 'I have the power to enslave you, my lord?'

'By heaven! Duke William was right when he said each man must seek out his destiny. I have found mine at last.'

'Am I your destiny?' Elona murmured, her heart singing with happiness.

Raoul brushed his lips over hers lingeringly. 'My destiny, my heart, my life.'

Elona wound her arms around his neck, pressing her body against the long, lean length of his and feeling the burn of his thighs against hers.

'You will never cease to love me?' she asked. 'You will never grow tired of me?'

'Only if you grow too fat,' Raoul teased, smiling as he saw the indignation in her eyes. He kissed her tenderly. 'Listen well, my beloved. You called yourself my prisoner, but it was not so. No amount of silver could ever have bought you from me when once I had you. I loved you from the start, but knew it not until—until that day in the forest when the wild boar attacked you. From that moment, I knew I would never let you leave me.'

Elona smiled at him shyly. 'I loved you from the moment I first saw you astride that great horse. I thought you would laugh at me if I let you see it—and I would not admit it even to myself for a long time. I was so afraid you would use your power to hurt me.'

His face lit up with laughter. 'And so we were both striving for the same end, and too proud to be the first to say what was in our hearts. What fools men and women can be!'

'How could I know I was more to you than a mere hostage?' Elona challenged. 'You were a powerful Norman soldier and I was but a weak woman . . .'

Raoul threw back his head and roared with laughter. 'A weak woman indeed! I found you more trouble than the whole of King Harold's army. Beware the conqueror, say I; come not with a sword in your hand, for it will avail you nothing against a woman's smile. What magic web have you spun about my heart, Elona? What spell binds me so fast that I should die if it were broken?'

Elona sighed with contentment, satisfied at last that he was truly hers. Pressing her lips to the base of his throat, she kissed him, surrendering her last defences as she lifted her shining eyes to his.

it is no spell, my lord,' she whispered. 'Only the magic of love . . .'