Daughter of the Strong

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by

Maren Smith

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Chapter One

He moved carefully and quietly through the underbrush, glancing down the hillside through the trees until he found a hidden position which would nevertheless allow him to see the road. In the distance he could already hear the rumbling of the wagon wheels in the dirt, the clopping of a dozen or more well-shod horses, and the gentle metallic clatter of well armed and armored knights, both marching and riding alongside the Baron Edward the Strong. Old man though he might be, The Strong was anything but easy prey.

He gripped his bow tightly, pulling an arrow from the quiver across his back and carefully notched it. It was more than a small thrill of excitement that wound through him as he glimpsed the first of the procession through the trees. He had one shot and one alone. If he missed....

Oh no. He took careful aim with the bow. He wasn't about to miss. Six years of careful planning were coming to fruition. He knew these lands like he knew his own hands. He knew his route of escape and his readied horse was hidden nearby. Burkshire Keep was going to be his: both the lands and the castle.... and the lovely Hallie, daughter of Edward.

His breathing quickened and his pulse raced just to think of her. By the end of the day her father would be dead and she would be left defenseless and alone in a world made for men. A grim smile pulled at the corners of his lips as the elderly Edward came into view. For a grand total of six shifting horse's steps, he had an unobstructed aim at the old man's heart.

"Do not worry, old man," he whispered, soft as the wind that barely rustled through the leaves around him. "I will comfort her for you. And I promise, she will never want for a thing."

The arrow left his hands, renting the air with the softest hiss, and struck the Baron in the chest. The old man was dead before he hit the ground.

* * * *

The skies were cloudy and the seas as stormy as he'd ever seen them. Burkshire was a motte-and-bailee keep, situated high atop the rocky inhospitable peaks of the Wessex coast. It was crumbling and run down, years of gross mismanagement having taken its toll on what meager defenses there still were. Nearly everything was still made of wood, much of it rotting in the salty sea air. Tremen had serious doubts about its abilities to withstand even the shortest siege.

The nearest decent farming community was two miles away. But the grazing lands were good, the sheep fat, and the villages of Sedgewick and Worechester were renowned for their wool and the colorful dyes that Burkshire produced. The fishing in the rough seas around the shores were dangerous but rich, especially in the oyster beds. Burkshire paid more of its taxes in pearls than in coin, and that was why it was so valuable. That was why Ethelred the Unready had given it to him after the previous liege's murder. The third son of a minor noble, Tremen of Southby had leapt at the opportunity.

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Offers of land and titles did not come often to men of his low, albeit noble, social rank ... not even ones with strings attached. Edward's daughter; she was part of the arrangement. Even so, Tremen had not balked. Within twenty minutes of hearing Ethelred the Second's proposal, he was married by proxy, sight unseen, to the mistress of his new fortress domain.

Before leaving the King's company, he'd sent a missive to his new bride, informing her of the new order of things and requesting that she be prepared for his arrival, and then ordered his retinue of soldiers to pack themselves up and head for the coast of Wessex.

Now, by 'prepared' Tremen had meant that his new wife, Lady Hallie, as the King had referred to her, should make room in the barracks for his men, have enough food upon the tables the night of their arrival, and make available to him all persons of responsibility for new instructions on the running of Burkshire Keep. That she should also ready herself to take up her wifely duties to him pretty much went without saying. At least in his mind it did.

Apparently, he thought to himself, as he surveyed the well fortified walls of Burkshire, lined by at least fifty armored and armed men, the drawbridge raised and portcullis lowered against his coming, the mind of a woman worked in distinctly different ways. Perhaps he should have known better than to expect a warm welcome from his lady wife and the inhabitants of his new home.

Behind those tall and rotting moss-covered curtain walls, columns of black smoke were billowing into the air on fetid

winds that reeked of cooking oil, boiling tar and the fainter scent of the ocean. Tremen could see archers positioned in the narrow niches along the upper parapet, and in the very center of them all, standing between the snapping banners of the Keep, Tremen spied a woman. Being far enough back from the walls to be well out of the archers' deadly range made it hard to tell exactly how fair the maiden might be, but there was no mistaking who she was.

Lady Hallie. Tremen frowned before forcing himself to offer her the very grimmest of smiles. He was not amused, really. When it became common knowledge that he'd been held out of his own castle by his own proxy wife, the ridicule he would have to bear.... well, he didn't want to think about it. In fact, he could already hear the King's admonishment: how could Tremen possibly hold the Keep against seafaring marauders when he could not even hold it against his own recalcitrant wife. Such a thought was sobering enough to wipe even the grimmest smile from his face.

Tremen shifted in his saddle, his restless mount pawing the ground as it fed off his agitation.

On the horse next to him, his captain-in-arms, Marston said, "What do you want to do?"

"Storm the Keep," Tremen said flatly. "Grab the woman by her hair and thrash her silly."

Chuckling under his breath, Marston shook his greying head. "I cannot say I disagree with you, m'lord. That one could do with a little less spirit."

"It's not her spirit I object to," Tremen corrected. "'Tis her defiance."

He held out his hand and Bink, his young squire, stepped closer to Tremen's restless horse to hand up a makeshift white flag.

"I could run it out for you," the boy offered. Like an overeager puppy, he looked up at Tremen with wide brown eyes and a freckled face that reflected only earnest helpfulness. Bink was the youngest son of a friend of Tremen's own father. And though he'd reluctantly taken the boy into his service two months ago, the youth had proven to be the most studious and attentive squire he'd yet met.

"Aye," Tremen said. "I know you would, but you would not know what to say to her."

Bink looked hurt. "I'd tell her whatever you told me to."

"I do not know what to tell her." Wrapping the white banner around one hand, Tremen shifted his reins to the other, turning his horse towards Burkshire. "'Let me in, you bloody defiant wench' comes close, but I don't think it'll have the same ominous ring coming from you as it would from my own lips."

Marston looked away to hide a smile, Bink just looked disappointed.

Personally, Tremen thought he'd be damned fortunate to make it to the front gates without being skewered by a dozen or more arrows. Apparently Marston must have entertained the same thought, for as he urged his horse away from his own men and into the Keep's firing range, his captain-in-arms called after him, "Good luck."

Tremen rode out to the Keep. He kept the white banner in plain sight and though he could feel his own nervous

apprehension, clenched in the pit of his belly like an icy fist, he refused to appear as anything other than coolly confident that he would be received. As he neared the front gate, he heard the heavy chain behind the wall rattle, wood groaned and the draw bridge began to lower.

A man rode out to meet him, heavily laden with leather and chainmail armor and a pointed metal helmet. The grate was lifted to show his youthful face and a few wisps of blond hair.

"I am Robert," the young man told him curtly, the ice in his pale blue eyes strikingly chilling. "You are not wanted here."

Tremen almost smiled. "On the contrary, my boy. I am wanted, and by the one man in Wessex whose opinion matters the most. I am sent at the behest of the King. My orders are to take command of this Keep and to hold it."

"Those responsibilities will fall to the man the daughter of the Strong deigns to wed."

"That they are," Tremen said agreeably. "And that man is me."

The younger man took exception, cruelly pulling at the reins of his mount, driving the bit deep into its mouth and forcing it back several steps. He hissed his anger, "Then that makes two points on which you are now mistaken. Hallie has already accepted my suit. We will wed within the month; go back wherever you came from. You are not wanted here."

On the parapet above, the woman, who had been watching this exchange, pushed back from the wall and disappeared from sight. A moment later, she rode out to meet him like a man, with two soldiers flanked to either side of her. Her gown was a dark crimson, trimmed in white velvet. Over the top of that, she wore a soldier's leather breast guard, which covered her bodice and the pale expanse of her breasts. A soldier's helmet protected her head and covered the top of her waistlength hair, which she'd twisted back in twin braids of brown that flowed one over each shoulder and brushed down upon the saddle.

She rode right out to the very lip of the draw bridge, stopping between the two men, so close that her mount extended its head to sniff at the muzzle of Tremen's. For the first time, Tremen was able to see her features clearly.

The Lady Hallie was very beautiful. Her dark blue eyes like the stormy seas just beyond the not so distant cliffs met his own gaze with clashing fury. Her full mouth was pressed into a hard, flat line, and her cheeks were pink with barely contained outrage. The horse she rode full astride rather than gracefully seated upon a planchette, was as much a man's battle mount as his own. All that was lacking was for her to meet him with a sword upon her hip. If he weren't so bloody annoyed, if this entire exchange were not being witnessed by two garrisons of soldiers, and if she were anyone other than his wife, he'd have found her unladylike behavior almost enchanting.

As it was, Tremen leaned over in his saddle, resting his forearm across his thigh as he sarcastically inquired, "Did you not receive my missive, daughter of Edward?"

"I did," she replied, every bit as testily. "I should thank you for giving us such ample warning. Most invading conquerors do not extend that courtesy to their would-be victims."

Protectively, Robert tried to come between them but Hallie refused to allow it, nudging her mouth forward a foot to block the advance of his. "You should not be out here," he chided her, but Hallie held up a silencing hand, and though his eyes flashed, the young man fell silent.

"I thank you for your concern, Robert," she said, her eyes never leaving Tremen's. "But I am well aware of what I should and should not do."

Tremen flexed his fingers, fighting against the tiny itch that began to tickle at his palm as he looked from Robert to Hallie speculatively. An intense dislike for the young cockerel began to wend through him. "This land and Keep were bequeathed to me by the King. That hardly makes me an invader, conquering or otherwise."

"Burkshire belongs to me," she snapped. "It is my birthright to be given to the man I marry. I did not choose you."

"His Majesty has made you my wife."

"I did not ask for his interference!"

Bracing a hand upon his thigh and arching his brow, he leaned slightly towards her as he asked, "What makes you think you are entitled to ask? Or, for that matter, to choose your own husband? That is decision is better left to those who know what is best for you ... and for Burkshire."

"What is best for me is best left up to me." Her eyes flashed and her voice became husky and angrily low. "Leave my lands now, sirrah, or your handsome head will come to adorn my castle walls."

She found him handsome? A prickle of pleasure washed through him before he gave himself a stern mental shake and returned his thoughts to the problem at hand.

"My lady, this is no way to greet your husband."

"I have selected my husband," she returned shortly. "And he is not you."

"On the contrary, my dear. We have been lawfully wedded for over a fortnight now." Tremen attempted a smile and tried for humor as he said, "It is a union that shall be fully legal the instant I have bedded you, a prospect which I find increasingly to my liking the more I see of you."

Her cheeks flushed an even brighter pink and to the young man she snapped, "Kill him, Robert."

Grabbing up her reins, she turned her horse with a jerk of its head and would have retreated back behind the fortress walls of her home but for Tremen's staying hand. He abandoned the flag of truce and grabbed for her reins, pulling her mount closer to his.

"Remove your hand!" she demanded, her eyes all but crackling in fury.

The young Robert drew his sword in an instant. "Release her!"

But Tremen had other ideas. "You have forgotten to take one little thing into account, my spirited one."

She frowned at him.

"When dealing with an invading conqueror, never lose the advantage." His smile widened, and before Robert could

react, he grabbed the leather front of her armor and yanked her out of her saddle and into his own.

Hallie let out a shriek, her entire body stiffening as he sat her down upon his thighs, holding her back to his chest, a living shield against the Burkshire soldiers who stared down at him along the fortress walls, aghast.

"Release her, villain," Robert bellowed, driving his mount closer, his sword held dangerously aloft. But Tremen held Hallie much too closely for the reckless youth to dare striking.

"Lay down your arms, Robert the Young and Foolish," Tremen told him flatly. "Do it now, or I will have you slain."

The upheld sword wavered, but the young man looked from him to Hallie and back again uncertainly.

"Now," Tremen commanded again.

With a flicker of his eyes, the young man's stare turned from uncertain to impotently furious. After a long hesitation, he gradually lowered his arm.

"My lady," Tremen murmured into his captive's ear. "Tell your men to lay down their arms and, I promise, no one will lose their life over this ill-conceived rebellion."

She felt very good in his arms. She was also shaking, though he doubted if it was because of fear. Hallie confirmed that suspicion when she shouted to the men on the wall, "Kill him!"

Tremen's palm began to itch even more intensely.

"No!" Robert cried out, just as quickly, but by the looks on the faces of the soldiers high above, the idea of attacking—at least while he still held her—was far from appealing. And Tremen was not above using that to his advantage. "I am Tremen of Southby and I am your new liege lord, appointed by His Majesty, the King of Wessex. Lay down your arms. To do anything less is to engage in treason, despite anything this spoiled and willful child might have told you." He turned his mount to face Robert, his arm tightening around Hallie's slim waist when she tried to elbow his ribs and jump to the ground. "If any of these men are yours, then you had best command them likewise. Do so now, and I swear no one will be punished for this act of outright rebellion."

The look on Robert's face, half shielded by his helm, was as close to hatred as Tremen had yet seen.

"You insufferable brute," Hallie spat, squirming furiously in his one-armed embrace. He did not relax his arm so much as an inch and in frustration she snapped, "My men are loyal to me alone!"

With a grim half-smile, Tremen amended himself. "No one shall be punished except for the spoiled and willful child, of course."

Just as quietly she seethed back, "Go ahead. Do your worst. I will never bend to your rule."

"Then, madame," he tsked as if pained, but yet never quite lost his dark smile. "Then you shall do a lot of bending over my knee."

"Shoot him!" she shouted again.

Tremen raised his eyes to the archers on the wall, but they had already begun to lower their arms.

"What are you doing?" Hallie shrieked up at them. "Kill him, I said!"

Twisting her in his arms, Tremen promptly dropped her belly down across his thighs and lay two smart, open-handed swats to the seat of her skirts. "That is more than enough out of you!"

Robert looked pained; Hallie sucked a sharp breath, but then fell perfectly still and quiet, and Tremen raised his arm to signal his men before riding into the Keep. The Burkshire men parted before him, swords undrawn, staring in confusion and uncertainty both at him and Robert, and their Lady, who lay face-down across the front of Tremen's horse.

"Bow," he told them. "Swear your fealty to me and all will be forgiven. I will even grant clemency to those who cannot take the oath; they may leave through the gate behind me." He turned to Robert. "That means you as well, boy."

A Burkshire soldier stepped towards him, saying, "We serve the lord of Burkshire, whoever he might be. We have all taken that oath, and we will hold it."

Robert's face turned as red as the splash of crimson in the Burkshire banner and he looked away, his chest heaving as the soldier lowered himself onto one knee before Tremen.

"No!" Hallie wailed, but the effect was the same. Like the ripple of a stone falling into water, the sea of men around them followed suit. Even those still up along the parapet, lowered themselves to one knee and inclined their heads respectfully.

Hallie went as stiff as his sword.

"They have not betrayed you," Tremen told her, though she turned her head away from him. "They have instead made an honorable choice." "What would you know of honor?" she spat, her frustration pinkening her cheeks and darkening her furious eyes. "You come here like a thief in the night and take everything I have and ever cared about! You came under a white flag of truce and then broke it!"

"Ah," Tremen said, shaking a finger at her. "You," he emphasized, "broke the truce when you commanded your young lover to slay me. I merely defended myself."

The pink on her cheeks deepened in color and she glared at him hatefully.

Tremen tsked. "I begin to think you care for Burkshire like a child for a favorite trinket. You certainly do not have her people's best interests at heart."

"What do you know of my heart?"

"I know your actions." Tremen caught the scruff of her neck. He heaved her up and out of his saddle, dropping her to the ground. Keeping a firm hold of her, he quickly dismounted next to her. Behind him, Marston, Bink and the rest of his men were just crossing the portcullis as he told her, "And by those actions, you could have condemned every man within these walls to a traitor's death. There is more to being a leader of men than holding a titled birthright."

He waited until Marston had dismounted before pushing Hallie towards the old and rotting castle. "I would have you show me inside, where we may discuss in private your stunningly poor show of obedience towards your lord and master."

"Lord you may be," the dusky-haired lady snapped back at him, turning to slap at his hand and jerking out of his grasp. "Of Burkshire, but not of me." Her voice dropped tremblingly low as she hiss, "I will be dead and buried long before I call you master much less husband!"

She snapped about and would have left him standing there, had he not just as quickly her arm and dropped to one knee.

Hallie's look of astonishment turned to one of sarcastic glee very quickly. Her lovely mouth turned upwards and she lifted her chin, which gave the annoying effect that she was looking down her slender nose at him. "I have hardly begun to battle you, sirrah, and here you are, bowing before me? I doubt you have the strength of will to fortify a keep like Burkshire."

His hand wrapped firmly around her wrist, he replied, "There is nothing at all wrong with my strength or my will, as you are about to discover, Hallie the Imprudent. And as to our battle, I believe we should lay some ground rules. The first of which being: to defy your husband in public is to humiliate him. If you choose to do so to me, my dear, be warned that I will return the favor."

Her smile faltered and barely had a flicker of uncertainty touched her eyes when he tugged her wrist, showing her just exactly how strong he was. He pulled her right off her feet, dropping her down across his make-shift lap and pinning her there with one arm braced across the small of her back.

Before all and sundry, he raised his hand and brought it cracking down again across her upturned rump.

"Oh!"

That was all the sound his warrior maiden made as Tremen proceeded to paddle her bottom with the flat of his hand and a vengeance. A dozen good smacks for locking the gates of Burkshire against him, another dozen for her unladylike and willful behavior, and a third for sharpening her tongue upon him in front of the men he would have to command. Each and every smack flattened the hillocks of her bottom, but she never once cried out.

Instead, Hallie fisted her hands up near her chin, clenching her eyes tightly shut and gritting her teeth. She made no noise at all, and could have been napping for all the discomfort he seemed to be causing her. Just when Tremen was beginning to think he might have to divest his target of some of her many layers of underskirts to get the point across, her hips twisted a little sideways and one hand tried to dart back in defense of her belabored hinds, but then Hallie caught herself.

And so did Tremen. He stayed his hand and set her promptly back onto her feet.

Again, her hands almost tucked behind her, but then she looked at the men gathered around them and she stiffened. Her stormy eyes flashed, her face turned pink and angrily hot. She stared up at him, no closer now to proper wifely behavior than she had been when she'd prepared the battlements for war against him.

Tremen held out his arm, crooked at the elbow, and waited for her to lay her hand gently upon it. "No more public embarrassments," he said. "For either of us. Agreed?" Had she a sword, his head would have been in dire jeopardy of becoming disassociated with his shoulders. But after a brief and seething silence, she reached up a trembling hand to touch his forearm. She all but shook with suppressed fury, but she kept it firmly in check.

They walked side-by-side up the steps, and Tremen couldn't help but admire the profile she presented him. No, she was far from being a willing wife, not by any stretch of the imagination. But then, in times such as these and with a keep like Burkshire to defend, what need was there for a weak and feeble female. He could not think of a one, but there were many advantages to having a strong and capable one at his back.

Of course—he glanced at her sidelong and then his eyes drifted down to the sword at her hip—he'd have to make sure she was disarmed first.

When they reached the door, he allowed her to proceed him into the Great Hall and, as she passed, she shot him a look that said, without doubt, the battle between them was far from over.

Oh yes, there would definitely need to be a taming before he dared trust her behind him. He covered her hand with his own when, once inside, she started to remove it and step away. He disguised the imprisoning gesture with an otherwise loving pat upon her slender fingers.

The instant they were out of sight from the rest of their men, with only a few servants lingering in shadows as silent witnesses, Hallie snatched her hand away from his. Scowling back at him, she picked up her skirts and fled up the stairs. It would be a challenge to bring her to obedience, Tremen thought, following in her wake but at a much more stately pace. How fortunate for him that he'd always been somewhat partial to challenges.

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Chapter Two

Nooo!

There was no actual sound, but that single word howled through his mind with the deafening intensity of a typhoon. It rushed through his skull, sweeping away every thought but one: he was going to lose everything. Everything!

With a roar, he slammed into his sleeping quarters hard enough to rattle the walls. His world turned red, consumed by a hazy crimson hue. His hands shook. He could barely even breathe. Furiously pacing back and forth, barely seeing his surroundings, he grabbed his own head. His fingers wove through the golden locks of his hair and he pulled, hardly feeling the pain as he ripped clumps of it from his scalp.

Think! He had to think!

In his pacing, he bumped a table and his fury erupted. With a wordless howl, he picked it up and flung the heavy furniture over on its side, scattering dishes and candles and a nearly full inkpot in the rushes on the floor.

Lady Hallie could not be married to another! He would have her; her and Burkshire both. He refused to allow that interloper to steal what was rightfully his. He refused!

But how to get rid of Tremen of Southby, the new lord of his lands without bringing the wrath of the king to Burkshire's front step?

His mind fell to icy quiet as he considered his options. There were more soldiers here now. Killing Southby would be harder than killing the Strong had been, but Burkshire was too valuable to simply abandon, no matter what the provocation. So he would have to be very careful. He would have to be very clever.

Sinking into a chair by the hearth, he folded his still shaking hands into a steeple, pressing them to his thin lips as he stared into the flames. Sucking slow, deep breathes through his nostrils, cold and still inside, he began to plan.

* * * *

The wedding feast consisted of mutton, suckling pig, a variety of fish and fowl, walnuts and sallat, almond-stuffed eels and oysters in cream. An unheard of—for Burkshire Keep anyway—six entertainers mingled among the laughing diners and squabbling, barking dogs that zig-zagged among the tables, fighting for what scraps were tossed to the rushes. The last time Hallie had witnessed an entertainer in the Great Hall, it had been before her father's death and yet she was far from enjoying the performance.

There were at least fifty men too many in the dining hall, eating Burkshire's food from her tables, laughing and shouting with ill-mannered glee, and all of them were wearing the colors of the conqueror, Tremen of Southby. What was worse, Tremen's first act as the new baron of Burkshire Keep had been to order the colors of her father stripped from the walls and hangings. New banners would be sewn and new jerkins made using the red and yellow pattern provided by Tremen. It would be sewn into every suit of armor and painted upon every shield, and every soldier within her walls would then belong to him! The insult was too much for any one person to bear, and yet Hallie did bear it. Her father's daughter in every way, she seethed in silence, forced to sit at the head table at her conqueror's side, sharing a trencher of food with him. She was even made to drink sweet, heady wine from the same pearl-studded cup. It was their wedding feast, and it was turning her stomach.

Hallie turned her face away from the entertainers, from the laughing, jovial, half-drunken soldiers, hers and Tremen's both. She clenched her fists in the folds of her gown. Oh, how she wanted to kill the man! His very nearness to her was a burning insult that seeped through her clothes and into her skin. Until her hands trembled with the desire to grab up the paring knife that rested near Tremen's hand and stab him through the heart where he sat, laughing at the acrobatic antics of the fool. Now and then, he leaned over and, with disarming civility and friendliness, urged her to take a bite of this or that, or sip from the goblet they shared.

Hallie was angry now, but if forced to be fair, under any other circumstances she knew she probably would have liked the man. Had she met him before her father had died, had he offered his suit as Robert had, giving her a semblance of choice, she might even have accepted him. He was older than Robert, an experienced warrior with the obvious scars to prove his skill at survival. Burkshire could likely benefit from such the leadership of such a man. But to have had the choice stripped from her in a way that no one had ever done before ... well, it stung her pride beyond bearing. And every time Hallie turned her head to look at him, all she could think was how she would rather starve than give in.

"You are not hungry?" Tremen asked yet again. He poked through the trencher, nudging the choicest bits of meats over to her side. Although smiling, his eyes were calculating as he said. "On this night above all others, I should hate for your strength to fail you."

Hallie's iron-clad control slipped and the knife was in her hand before she quite realized what she was doing.

Tremen stopped chewing, although his smile did not waver. He watched her and waited.

Hallie trembled. She was close enough to feel the whole of him tensing for action. She couldn't stab him, and she knew it. He was bigger, stronger, faster, and was possessed of greater and better training than herself.

Her hand shook. No matter how badly she wanted to, she would never be able to sink the small blade into his flesh. Nor was she yet desperate enough to turn the knife upon herself. That left only the meat upon their plate with which to vent her frustrations. Hallie stabbed the mutton leg so vindictively that she broke through the bone, and the tip of the knife's blade pierced the bottom of the trencher. It continued to stand upright after she let the handle go.

"Well thought out," Tremen complimented, his voice like sun-warmed honey.

She turned her face away before the sweetness of it left her gagging.

Far from the head table, down among the common soldiers, sat Robert. He ate slowly, without relishment, his

burning stare fixed upon Tremen. When her eyes fell upon him, for a moment Hallie almost felt like crying. Steadfast friends since childhood, after her father's death Robert had been a source of steadfast comfort. To see him relegated now to the ranks of the lowest guard, beneath even a mercenary or a merchant guest, was beyond insulting. As the son of a minor lord, albeit a penniless son, he should have been seated at the head table with them as he had since he was five.

"You cannot bear being parted from your ... friend, I see," Tremen murmured for her ears alone.

Hallie turned her glare into their supper plate. "Evil to he who thinks it," she hissed back, just as softly. "He, at least, pressed his suit properly."

And more and more she was wishing she had accepted his offer of marriage and wed him sooner.

"Your idea of proper," Tremen said with a slight shake of his head, "and that of every other maid in England seem to differ drastically. Robert the Boy—"

"Do not call him that," she snapped shortly.

"All right," Tremen nodded, leaning back in his chair. One hand resting on the table by the trencher, he idly rubbed his thumb along his forefinger in thought. "How about Robert the Beardless or Robert the Fool? Do you like those names any better? He drew his sword on me without justification. By rights I could have him locked in the dungeon."

She flushed and looked away from him, but still she doggedly continued, "He faced you bravely. His valor should be commended, not mocked." "Were I you, I would be happy just to still have him within these walls, alive and breathing." Picking up a loaf of bread, Tremen broke off a chunk to sop up the juices from their meal. He buttered it and offered her part.

Hallie ignored the bread. "You should not even be here."

"I have every right to be here." Laying both parts on the trencher, Tremen licked the sweet butter from his thumb. "I have done no wrong, Hallie the Beautiful."

"Do not call me that," she snapped, glaring at him. It was a look he pointedly ignored.

"Besides, you know the law will side with me against any grievance you might have. You cannot rule Burkshire by yourself. Be happy that the King has paired you with a man who likes and values women. I think if you took but a moment to get to know me, you would not be so displeased."

"I know all I need to," she sniffed. "You are a beater of helpless women and you stink."

Tremen stopped at that and looked at her, his face unreadable. Laying the uneaten portion of bread on the side of their trench, he tucked his nose down towards his armpit and sniffed. "I do not either. These are clean clothes and I bathed before coming to the table."

"You stank earlier," she clarified.

"I had spent two weeks on a horse just trying to get here. If it is any consolation, however, you smelled wonderful."

She half turned on the bench to give him a sour look. "That is not." He shrugged with his eyebrows and took another bite of bread. "At least concede that I am trying to get along, while you are content in playing the part of a sulky brat."

"This is my home you have robbed me of!" she cried, her voice rising. "I do not want you here!"

Again Tremen paused his meal, and he also turned on the bench to face her more fully. "My dear young brat, I have robbed you of nothing. Do you not realize you are a woman born? Did your father not thrash into your backside the realization that you cannot lead like a man?"

"Do not speak of my father," she hissed sharply. "You have not the right even to be here much less to mention him!"

"Royal decree dictates otherwise," Tremen replied.

And from down in the lower tables, they heard Robert speak out above the boisterous laughter of the celebrating warriors, "It would not be the first mistake our illustrious monarch, the Unready, has made."

The acrobats stilled and the laughter among the gathered soldiers died. Tremen turned his gaze onto the younger man. It was the second time that night that Hallie felt the burly knight beside her tense for a fight. Her heart faltered and she tried to signal Robert with her eyes to be silent.

"Be careful, boy. Your words are treasonous," Tremen said coldly.

"The truth is never treasonous," Robert snapped back, blue eyes flashing. "What king is Ethelred the Second to command us? He murdered his brother and barters with the Danes. We are pressed between two rocks, the barbarians on one side and the Unready's Danegold taxes on the other. You are his dog, and you expect us to welcome you among us?" He laughed, the dark sound bouncing off the stone walls of the Great Hall. "I would sooner send you back to him in pieces."

Only the dogs, digging through the rushes, moved. Hallie couldn't even breathe. She stared in horror as the closest and best friend of all her life challenged a veritable dragon right before her eyes.

"For the moment, I believe, the King is in Normandy." Very slowly, Tremen stood up from the table and drew the knife at his hip. "So by all means, select whatever piece of me you would like to attempt first and take your chance."

Robert was instantly on his feet, but so was Hallie.

"No!" she cried. She grabbed Tremen's arm, almost choking on the words as she pleaded, "Please, my lord, you will kill him!"

The entertainers parted as Robert shoved his way to the small open space between the head and lower tables. He drew his own knife, his hand gripping and re-gripping the handle repeatedly.

Tremen stared down into Hallie's eyes and he didn't move. Not for the longest time. Hallie held her breath, hardly daring even to blink, begging him with her eyes not to kill Robert. She had no doubt in her mind that he could. He was bigger and stronger and vastly more seasoned than Robert, who although not unskilled with a sword or knife, had spent all of his years since infancy at Burkshire with her.

At long last, Tremen bow his head to her. Squaring his shoulders, he then glared at Robert. "You are no longer welcome in my home."

Robert's eyes bulged furiously. "Face me, you coward," he seethed.

Again the muscles beneath Hallie's hands tightened, but Tremen only turned to his man-at-arms and commanded him, "Escort him from my home. Kill him if he ever returns to it."

Hallie's pent-in breath fled her body in relief. She briefly closed her eyes, but when she opened them again, it was to find him staring back at her. All traces of the smiling, cordial groom were gone, only the unmasked warrior remained before her now. He made her shiver as, in a low, low voice, he said, "Consider this your wedding present."

"Face me!" Robert roared as his arms were seized on Marston's command and he was dragged from the hall into exile.

But at least he was alive. Hallie pressed a nervous hand to her stomach, her legs suddenly trembling too much for her to remain standing. She sank onto her seat as the musicians began to play and the acrobats to resume their trickster antics. She closed her eyes, flinching slightly as, beyond the noise of the Great Hall, she thought she heard Robert's faint bellow of her new husband's name.

"Please," Tremen said, and she flinched again when he touched her arm. "You should eat something."

"I—" she said, her chest heaving as she drew a deep breath, "—I am not hungry. Please, villain, I wish to retire."

Hallie hadn't thought much beyond the meal, but it wasn't until she heard the instant "huzzah" from the soldiers closest to them, that she realized what that would mean. Eager to revive the festive mood of only moments before, a cheer went up among the gathered men, those both old and new to Burkshire alike.

Eyes widening with belated panic, Hallie made a desperate grab for the table, but a dozen hands were already upon her. Tremen's men, and one or two of her own she realized, lifted her from the bench into the air while her conquering husband laughed and over a hundred men filled their dining hall with their shouts of, "Huzzah! To the new lord and his lady! Huzzah!"

"Dear God in heaven, no!" Hallie cried, grabbing for something solid to hang onto, but her hands found only empty air. Like only so much cumbersome baggage, she was carried from the hall, up the stone stairs into the darkness of the upper hall to the room that had belonged to her father, back when he had been alive.

Already Hallie spied her maid, Anna, anxiously awaiting the procession. As the first of the soldiers drew near, the maid threw out her hands to block them from entering the master's bedchambers.

"Let me go!" Hallie writhed with dervish enthusiasm to get back down on her own two feet, but the men weren't about to be deprived of their fun. At least one, in a haze of halfdrunken excitement, attempted to strip Hallie of her clothes right there in the hall.

The sound of ripping fabric elicited another exuberant "Huzzah!" from the soldiers and a startled scream from Hallie. Above the jovial laughter created by the tearing dress, Tremen's voice boomed, "Enough! Put her down." An instant chorus of good-natured groans accompanied the soldiers' obedience. Though deprived of the chance to participate in the traditional undressing of the bride, they set Hallie on her feet.

"Open another cask of wine," Tremen told them, and then had to shout over their cheers, "But do it downstairs!"

Clutching her torn gown close, jostled by the retreating soldiers, Hallie stared daggers at Tremen and then turned and fled into the waiting chamber. The instant Anna cleared the threshold behind her, Hallie slammed the door with all her might.

She panted, willing herself not to cry. Shaking and so angry that she could all but hear the pounding of her own heart in her temples, Hallie pressed herself against the door. Faintly through the wood, she heard Tremen dismissing what men still lingered in the hall. Even more faintly was the hesitant voice of her servant, Anna, saying, "M'lady? M'lady, we don't 'ave much time."

Hallie turned to look at her. The room was dark, despite a half a dozen lit candles spread throughout it and the roaring hearth, but not so dark that Anna could miss the open fury of Hallie's expression.

Thickly, she asked, "What?"

Anne wrung her hands. "Y-yer must ready yerself. F-for 'is I-lordship..."

"I would rather die." Hallie was amazed at how calm she sounded, but Anna still gasped in shock.

"Please don't say that!" Wringing her hands, the maid stepped closer, lowering her voice as she earnestly said, "'Tisn't a lady's lot in life t' choose. He is sent by the King. There is nothing we can do but accept and make the best of it!"

It was truly maddening to have to admit that Anna was right, and Hallie turned her furious stare to the floor. Her shoulders drooped. Her eyes flooded with tears that refused to be blinked back.

"Come," Anna said somberly, reaching for her hand. "At least after tonight, ye truly will be mistress of Burkshire."

She would not cry. She refused to cry. Hallie swiped at the tears as they trickled down her cheeks and allowed Anna to strip her to her shift. By the time Tremen opened the door, Anna had her washed, her hair brushed and plaited into a single, hip-length braid down her back, and Hallie tucked into bed in nothing but a thin shift to act as a barrier of decency between herself and the husband she didn't want.

Tremen dismissed Anna with a look, and Hallie frowned as she was abandoned to his company. She pulled the blankets all the way up to her chin. "I wish I was a man," she said flatly. "Then you would not be here."

In the process of unbuckling his belt, Tremen blinked at her and a low chuckle of surprise bubbled up out of him. "No," he agreed. "You are right. I would certainly not be here if you were a man."

She frowned at him over the top of the blankets. "I do not want you sleeping here."

"This is the master's chambers," he countered, removing his tunic. "If you are sleeping here," he emphasized as he lay it across the foot of the massive bed. "Then so will I." "Not in this bed," she snapped, waving her hands over the mattress. "Not while I am in it."

"In this bed," he corrected, as he bent to pull off first one boot and then the other. "With you in it."

He began to unfasten his pants, and despite herself, her gaze fell to his waist. A line of dark hair trickled down the hard plane of his abdomen, over the rippling muscle and the scarred, sun-browned skin, and into the cloth of his breeches. Heat flushed her cheeks and she looked away at the last possible second.

Unfastening the last tie, Tremen smiling a little at her discomfort. "Does your discomfort mean your maidenly modesty remains intact?"

Her eyes snapped back to him, sparking with anger. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Considering your earnest concern for Robert the Lovesick Pup, I was beginning to think perhaps I have come too late to know your maidenhead." He peeled his pants down past his hips and thighs and sat down on the edge of the bed to pull them from his feet.

"Do not call him that!"

If only she had a knife. Unfortunately, all she had at hand was a pillow. She grabbed it, but instead of trying to smoother him where he sat, she snatched an armload of blankets as well and scrambled from the bed.

He glanced back at her in surprise. "Where do you think you are going?"

"Perhaps I cannot stop you from sleeping in that bed," she hissed, "but I will be damned to the devil if I share it with you!"

Sighing heavily, Tremen rubbed his eyes but he made no attempt to force her back into bed. "I will not permit you to leave this room, Daughter of the Strong. You are my wife, and I will not suffer the castle gossips to waggle their tongues in our direction."

She spun on him, closing the blankets all around her, her long braid falling over her shoulder to lay between the mounds of her concealed breasts. "This is my home!" she shouted, very near to breaking down into angry tears in front of him. "Do not presume to tell me where I can and cannot go, you villain!"

"Our home," he corrected softly, maddeningly, refusing to fight when she would have greatly relished one from him. She needed him to do something dreadful and unlikeable. She needed him to do something wrong to make all the anger swirling within her justified.

"No!" she cried, wresting the blankets tight around her. "It's mine and mine alone. I may be naught but a woman to you, but my father taught me from childhood to care for this place. You are nothing but a royally appointed invader within these walls! But that does not give you leave to have me!" She stomped her foot she was so impotently angry. "You shall never have me!"

"Ah," Tremen said mildly. "So, 'tis your father to blame for your wild ways." He nodded his head once and then shrugged. "It changes nothing. Burkshire was given to me, and you came with the Keep." He fluffed the only pillow she had left upon the bed before leaning back against it. He stretched his long legs out before him, crossing them at the ankles and folded his hands behind his head. "It was part and parcel of the King's assignment. You and the Keep are inseparable. Whomever owns the one, possesses the other. Fortunately, that 'whomever' is currently me. And I say fortunately not because I am arrogant or because I am rubbing your nose in the fact that you are not the man you long to be. But because you are fortunate enough to be mated to someone who has no intention of simply flinging you upon this bed and sealing this marriage by force. I do not know of very many men would risk losing Burkshire just to give you time to come to peace with the arrangement."

Hallie felt her face turn as hot as any fire. She didn't either.

"I will, however," he told her.

"Do not," she whispered huskily, unable to swallow past the lump in her throat. Unable even to breathe right. He arched an eyebrow, forcing her to clarify. "Do not be nice to me. I will not let you."

She turned her back to him.

"Come back to bed," he cajoled.

She dropped her pillow upon the floor. "Go to the devil."

She could feel his eyes burning into her back as she lay down upon the floor by the hearth, cocooning herself into the blankets and rolling away from him. She closed her eyes and for a while the crackling and popping of an unseasoned log in the fireplace was all that could be heard over her own breathing.

"I have promised to give you time," Tremen finally said. "And I will. But I would know this first and I will have the truth from you, madame. Did you take that boy for your lover?"

Her eyes peeled slowly open and fixed on the fire. Once again her renewed anger helped her to stem back the tears that hovered at the end of her lashes.

"If you tell me now," Tremen continued, "then I promise not to be angry. I will not shame you, and I swear to exact no retribution—" She could all but hear him clench his jaw before he added, "—on either of you. But if by sleeping on the floor you hope to hide from me any prior wanton acts, eventually I will discover the truth of it and my promise to you then will not be as kind. I promise, you will feel the full force of my displeasure unless you confess your transgressions to me now."

There was no doubt in her mind exactly how his displeasure would be felt. Her bottom right was still tender from her earlier spanking and she even winced as she sat up, rolling onto her hip to glare at him over the edge of her father's bed. "So, because I will not share your bed you now think me a wanton?"

"No," he said with a slight shake of his head. "My reasons for thinking you unpure stem more from your lack of curiosity. I have been naked in front of you now for five minutes and you have not even looked." Hallie felt her face flame again. She had been so angry, she hadn't even noticed.

Swallowing hard, she forced herself to take notice of him now. Slowly and deliberately, her gaze raked down from his face, over his massive shoulders and broad chest, streaked by more faint scars than she cared to count. She couldn't even imagine how many battles he must have been in to have received so many wounds.

Blinking twice, she then made her gaze go further still, down over the hard definition of his stomach to the nest of curls that crowned the apex of his thighs. His manhood stirred under the caress of her eyes, stiffening slightly.

It took everything she had to feign indifference. "I have seen better," she sniffed.

Tremen sat up. He was quiet for a long time. "Is that your confession? Or are you lying to me out of spite?"

Frowning, Hallie turned back over and lay down again, pulling the blankets back up over her shoulder.

Again, for the span of a dozen heartbeats, silence filled the room. Then he said, "I realize you are willful, but I did not think you also stupid until now."

Hallie snapped back over and sat up again. "How dare you!"

"A smart woman," he bluntly stated, "would put more contemplation into her words before you speak them. What exactly do you hope to gain by antagonizing me? Is it your desire to live out your life bound to a man whom you have enraged to the point of brutality? To a man who beats you?"

Her eyes flashed. "I am already bound to a man like that."

"Oh," he chuckled, a dark and unpleasant sound. "My dear Hallie the Unwise, it could very easily be worse."

Her eyes teared and she quickly lay back down again, punching her pillow vindictively as she faced the hearth. "I do not see how."

Folding her arms across her chest, she tried to keep her bitter misery from overwhelming her eyes. Her nose began to run and despite her best efforts, her eyes leaked.

With a deep sigh, Tremen gave in first. "You cannot be comfortable sleeping like that. Come back to bed. I promise, you will not have to suffer my touch."

Swiping at her cheeks with the backs of her wrists, she sniffled. "Take yourself to the devil, villain."

With a sigh of surrender and muffling a curse under his breath, Tremen lay down himself. "Fine, but that is 'my lord villain' to you, you misbegotten wretch!"

Rolling onto his side, he faced the wall opposite of the hearth, and neither one of them slept.

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Chapter Three

Somewhere in the darkness beyond the crackling fire, a branch snapped back where the forest met the beach but Robert didn't bother looking around. The waves roared up upon the rocks, crashing against the shore, thrown by the storm blowing in off the ocean, but he was far enough up on the shore not to be worried. Instead, with the warming fire burning at his back, he sat on a driftwood log with his eyes fixed hard upon the distant lights of Burkshire Keep, positioned high up on the far cliffs. Far above the destructive ocean, far above any attacks that might come by sea. Perhaps someone glancing out might notice his campfire, but he was much too far away for them to know it was his.

With elbows resting upon his knees, his clasped hands held contemplatively to his lips, he looked from one lit window to another, wondering which one was hers. Was she even now in Tremen the Interloper's bed? Was she fighting his authority, or trembling, sighing, moving beneath his kisses and caresses? He liked to think he knew Hallie well enough to think her still at drawn daggers with the man to whom she now was wed.

Robert clasped and unclasped his hands, but remained cold and quiet inside. The situation was not beyond salvaging. Oh no, his eyes narrowed, he was far from defeated. This might even work to his advantage; an enemy out of sight and mind could be infinitely stronger because of it. The night skies flickered and a low grumble of thunder rolled overhead. Behind him, the low nicker of a horse tickled his ears and footsteps in the sand approached at his back, but he didn't turn around. Two well-armed men joined him around the fire, the older of the two laying his axe across his lap as he said by way of a greeting, "Ho Robert. Have you the payment ready?"

Robert's jaw clenched, raising his face slightly to the sky as the first drops of rain splashed down upon his head. The Interloper might think he'd won, but Robert had only just stepped onto the battlefield.

* * * *

Hallie awoke the next morning with tears on her lashes, an ache in her chest and the word 'father' on her lips. As her eyes fluttered open to face the golden hue of dawn, rising above the windowsills, the last remnants of her dream faded into nothing, leaving her with no idea of what it could have been about. Surely, it could not have been worse than the sad reality of her situation and his death.

She reached up with trembling fingers and wiped the telltale moisture aside. She had learned early in life that crying was nothing but a useless waste of energy and time. Certainly, her father would not have tolerated such a display of weakness. One of the worst thrashings she had received in childhood had been for crying. Yes, she had fallen off the horse, and yes, she had broken her arm in the tumble. But as her father had so clearly put it, if you indulge in the ride, you accept the consequences without flinching. That was how he'd lived his life. That was why he had been the Strong, and Hallie was nothing if not her father's daughter.

She swallowed her tears, tamping her sadness down within her. She rolled over in her bed on the floor ... and very nearly shrieked as every muscle in her body screamed its agony. Her neck hurt. Her shoulders and back hurt. Sometime in the night, in an unconscious quest to find a comfortable position on the hard wood floor, she had rolled on top of her left arm. Now all she could feel in that limb from her shoulder to her fingertips was a dead, tingling sensation.

Biting back a groan, Hallie turned onto her stomach, that being the least painful movement she could think to make. Slowly, stiffly, hugging her useless arm to her belly, she unraveled herself from her tangle of blankets. Gradually, she pushed onto her knees and then to her feet.

The coals in the hearth were covered by grey ash, leaving the room lit by the slow growing amber of predawn light. As she flexed her fingers, gradually bringing the feeling back into her hand on a wave of prickling pin-needles, a long, low rattle wafted from the bed, catching her attention. Sprawling flat on his back, his arms flung out across the bed, and snoring loudly, Tremen was still sound asleep. Hallie made a face and shook out her arm, ready now to stop coddling it. He snored again and she shook her head; just what she wanted to wake up to every single day for the rest of her life.

Hunched over and feeling very much like the old woman she resembled, she shuffled to his bedside. Although just as unclothed now as he had been last night, somehow naked in the morning was much more revealing than naked at night. Only partially covered by the blanket, his broad, thick chest heaved as he breathed in and she found herself staring at the collection of fine scars that decorated him. They were proof of his valor. His bravery.

Or his clumsiness, a wistful part of her suggested.

No. No, she would not be that lucky, and Hallie heaved a heavy sigh. Just how many of them, then, she had to wonder, had been acquired in the service of their King? Her mouth tugged downward as she realized these scars were quite possibly the biggest reason why he, of all the men in Wessex, was selected to be the new master of Burkshire.

And her.

She could have done worse, and Hallie knew it. He could have beaten her last night. He could have forced her, solidifying his ownership of both her and her birthright. But he hadn't. He had even been kind ... in a gruff sort of way.

Tremen twitched in his sleep and his hand darted up to scratch his belly, pushing the blanket down his narrow hips by that much more. Hallie's gaze became drawn by that thin line of hair that trickled down beneath the folded edge of the blanket.

She could stop looking any time now, her subconscious whispered, but Hallie didn't move. She didn't even blink.

Tremen's breath hitched, silencing the deep rattle of snores, and he shifted. Tucking one hand behind his head, he pulled the blankets one way and his left leg fell out from under the covers to lie in the open: white, bare and somewhat hairy. Not disgustingly so, but hairy in a very raw and masculine way that warmed the pit of her belly. She looked over the shadowy region high on his upper thigh where the blanket still preserved a thread of his modesty.

Her fingers itched. The rest of him looked so much different now than he had the night before, she couldn't help but wonder if—her eyes drifted to the conspicuous bulge between his parted thighs, just barely hidden by the edge of the blanket—that might not look differently too.

Reaching out of their own accord, she carefully snagged a wrinkle in the blanket between two fingers and lifted it up. A trickle of morning's light washed down over his skin.

Sweet Lord above, he was massive! Long like a pole, somewhat hard, and so thick that she wasn't sure if she could close her hand around the width of him and have her fingers meet. She covered her mouth with one hand to keep from making an inadvertent sound that might wake him, a little unnerved by the sight of it and, reluctantly, even a little intrigued.

Then Tremen snored again, bringing her sharply back to herself. The heat in her face had very little to do with the sun now. She quickly dropped the blanket and snatched back her hand, hugged it to her chest lest it suddenly decide on its own to give her a second peek at that monster between his hairy thighs. Stepping back from the bed, she quickly ran her offending hand through her hair, as if a change in texture could kill the tingling sensation in her guilty fingertips. Stop staring, she told herself, whatever is the matter with you?

Her lips turned down in a fearsome scowl and, after a lot of internal bickering, she finally managed to tear herself away. She had a long a busy day ahead of her. She simply could not afford to spend it standing at the foot of her own bed, gawking at her villain of a husband. Villain, she told herself fiercely. Keep that in mind!

Turning on her heel, she hobbled slowly and stiffly from her bedroom. Early as it was, Burkshire Keep was still and quiet. The only people moving about were those few soldiers upon the curtain walls and at the gates, not to mention the occasional servant. Everyone else was still abed, which suited Hallie just fine. She really did not want anyone to see her like this, bent at the back and shuffling like an old woman. The stairs, in particular, were a lesson in agony that had her gritting her teeth until the sore muscles in her back began to loosen again. Halfway down them, however, she ran into her first problem.

"Oh, miss!" Helen, a lower floor maid cried out. She dropped the bucket she was carrying and ran to help, her eyes filling up with tears and her bottom lip beginning to wobble. "Oh miss!" she choked. "What's 'e done to ye?"

Hallie had her mouth open to correct the woman, before common sense reasserted itself and a devilish idea insinuated itself into her brain.

Sniffling, she made her mouth wobble right along with the maid's. "Oh, Helen!" she commiserated. "Last night.... well, it was the worst of my life!"

She didn't even have to lie.

"That black-'earted beast!" The maid threw out her arms to help Hallie the rest of the way down the stairs. "Just like a man not to think of a woman! And 'ere it being yer first time, too!"

They walked to the kitchen together, with Helen clucking sympathetically all the way and Hallie hiding her giggles behind the occasional and honest groan.

Alma, the cook, was already up and bustling to cook enough breakfast to feed a small army. There was even a small mountain of dead chickens waiting to be plucked for the noon day meal as well. But even with the work waiting for her, the cook took one look at Hallie and promptly let out a shriek that echoed through the kitchen and captured the attentions of her two assistants, Bess and Gertie. "Miss! What's 'appened to ye?"

"What d'ye think 'appened?" Helen hotly demanded. "I knew it would end like this! 'E's too big for a wee thing like our Lady Hallie, I said! Just look at 'im. 'E fills the bloody doorway—beggin' yer pardon, m'lady—yer all 'eard me say it! And now look what 'e's done to 'er. I'll bet she's hewn right in 'alf! Look at 'er, she can't 'ardly walk!"

Hallie turned a bright, hot shade of red, but no one took any notice. She was ushered to the nearest chair instead and given a cup of ale to sip.

"I'll spit in 'is eggs," Bess grumbled, her plump hands on her equally plump hips.

"'E ought to be called Tremen the Cruel, treatin' a lady so!" Helen exclaimed. "Who does 'e think 'e is anyway?"

"'E thinks 'e's the lord o' this 'ere castle, that's what 'e thinks. And e'd be right!" Alma was more practical. Wiping her hands on her apron, she took a small clay pot from the cupboard and walked over to press it into Hallie's palm. "'ere, m'lady. Apply this 'twixt yer legs and it'll 'elp with the 'ealing."

"Thank you." Hallie looked at the pot, a little disappointed that they hadn't assumed he'd just beaten her. Of course, even if all the servants banded together to make Tremen's life here a living hell, he'd probably still be too stubborn to return to Southby so her life could return to normal. With a sigh, she abandoned that half-baked plan before the servants could be encouraged to revolt, something that would likely result in a flogging for them anyway.

The morning turned distinctly gloomy as she realized, no matter what she did, she was likely to be stuck with Tremen for a long, long, looooong time. If she wanted to survive the bitter unpleasantness of it, she was going to have to find a way to adapt.

* * * *

Tremen awoke with his hand in something wet and sticky. His head was pounding, and he could see the sunshine through his eyelids. That made the simple act of peeling his eyes open and then getting them both to focus very hard. He was rather proud of himself for accomplishing it when he finally did manage. At least until he saw the red on his fingertips and the distinctive sickly-sweet smell of copper hit his nose.

Blood.

"Damned miserable wench!" Tremen bolted upright in bed. He quickly swallowed his panic, and yanked back the blankets to get a better look at the huge red stain on the sheets. He blinked in an effort to expand his visual range to include Hallie, who stood on the opposite side of the bed, staring back at him with surprised eyes.

"What is wrong with you?" she demanded.

"You stabbed me," he accused. He began to search his body for the origin of the wound, but except for the sheet and his hands, there wasn't any more blood. "Where did you get me, woman? Am I mortally wounded?"

The surprise faded from her eyes, and she narrowed them at him wryly. "Sadly, no. Not yet."

She stretched out her hand over the bed, and for the first time Tremen spied the vial she held. Giving the sheet a critical look, she poured another trickle of blood onto the bed.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, his brow drawing angrily down.

"I am not a dolt and I refuse to be humiliated by the likes of you," she told him. "When they come for the sheets, if there is not proof of my maidenhood upon them, there will be malicious talk at my expense." She paused to eye the blood stains once more. Her lips pursed. "By now you must have deflowered more than your fair share of virgins, villain. Is that enough blood do you think?"

"Oh, aye, if we're slaughtering cattle!" Tremen rolled towards her and quickly snatched the vial out of her hands, but not before she dumped the remainder of the contents onto the bed. "Is this enough blood," he muttered, his face mirroring his disgust as he looked from the bed to his red and sticky hands. "I should think you would know how much to leave upon the sheets by your own first hand experience, or was Robert the Feeble to weak to manage it?"

"Oh, leave him out of this," she sniffed. "I have already told you I did not share his bed and I am not going to spend the remainder of my life defending myself against that accusation. Besides, all this blood will likely build your reputation regarding prowess in the bedchamber. But since it also keeps mine from being gossiped to shreds, I am willing to compromise."

"Compromise?" Shaking his head and giving her another dark look, which she ignored, he tried to get out of bed without touching anything. Setting the mostly empty vial aside, he turned to the night stand to wash his hands. "Had you simply come to bed when I asked, you would not now be scrambling to cover your wifely failing."

Hallie snorted. "The Second Coming will occur before I come to you." She turned and hobbled to the foot of the bed, sitting down on one of the few unbloodied places.

"What is wrong with you?" he asked, watching her with a raised eyebrow.

"The floor is not as comfortable as that bed."

"You have only yourself to blame for that." Tremen shook his head, more at himself this time than her. "They are going to think I beat you."

"I only wish they had." Easing herself down onto a stool by the hearth, she propped an elbow on her knees and her chin on her palm. "But no. I am merely the victim of an overly amorous new husband." Her tone made paused him in the middle of pouring water from the pitcher into the nightstand basin. He gave her another long look before setting the pitcher down and dipping his hands into the cold water. "Is there any hope at all that we might come to amicable terms in our relationship?"

She sighed into her hand. "None whatsoever. You are here until I run you off again."

That made him laugh, albeit grimly, and he bent down to wash his face. "I am going nowhere, Hallie. You may as well resign yourself to that."

Her jaw clenched twice. "I would sooner resign myself to marriage to a barnyard beast."

He raised his head, water dripping off his chin, and glared at her through narrowed eyes. "I am trying to be kind."

"I do not want your kindness," she bit out.

"No, I can see that." Straightening sharply, he threw the rag he'd been using to clean his hands back into the basin. Bloody water splashed over the side and onto the table as he turned and started towards her. "You do not want my kindness, so perhaps I should give you my cruelty. Then at least your waspish tongue would be justified."

When he rounded on her, she vaulted off the stool onto her feet. "Keep your distance, villain," Hallie told him, throwing out a hand to warn him off even as she backed away. "Don't you dare lay a hand upon me, you poxy brute! I allowed you to get away with it once, but—"

"Allowed?" He started to laugh, although there wasn't much mirth in it, and then as if making up his mind, he began to look around. "Fine." He stopped his advance long enough to retrieve his belt off the floor. As he looped the length of it in his hand, he stalked towards her again, a totally different look in his eyes. This one was dark and did not bode at all well for her bottom. "I swear I will not lay a hand on you."

Hallie turned and fled. Had she run from the room, Tremen might have let her go. But instead, she ran to the wood bin by the hearth and grabbed from it a length of stick. Little more than kindling, it was slightly less than three feet long and barely a finger's width thick. What she thought she could possibly do with that, Tremen scoffed to consider. But the fact that she had picked it up at all only annoyed him even more than her insults and his early morning blood bath.

"Once again," he conceded, "you may have your way in this."

Tremen tossed his belt away, but kept on coming. When she swung that stick, he blocked it with his forearm, barely feeling the sting of the impact over his burgeoning annoyance, and quickly captured her wrist. He grabbed the stick right out of her hand and, surprisingly, Hallie let it go. Again she turned to run, but his hand clamped down on the back of her neck, stopping her in her tracks as she winced and hunched her shoulders to ease the pressure.

He didn't bother putting her over his knee. Instead, he pushed down on the back of her neck until she obligingly bent towards the floor. When she was halfway down, he let go of her nape and quickly caught hold of her waist, wrapping his arm around her hips.

"No!" Hallie kicked out with her feet and he countered by lifting her up off the floor.

The stick she had selected was dry and not at all good for delivering a proper switching. Three strokes was all he was able to land before it broke across her skirted backside, scattering three pieces into the rushes around their feet. For a bypasser, however, to hear her, one would have thought he were skinning her alive.

She gave a soft cry when he let her go and collapsed to her knees. Catching her bottom, she rocked once and then fixed him with her flashing angry stare. "I shall remember your cruelty!"

"Then also remember how you brought it upon yourself," he snapped, tossing the short piece of stick that he still held into the hearth. He turned and stalked back to the washing bowl to finish cleaning the blood from his fingers. Behind him, he listened as she began to rock, hissing angry pain-filled breaths between her teeth and exhaling soft moans. He had not handled that right.

Heaving a sigh, Tremen dropped the cloth back into the bowl. Bracing his hands upon the small table, he hung his head and just listened to her breathing, hissing her pain between clenched teeth. What would his father have done, he wondered as he washed the blood off his hands and arms, if his mother had ever treated him with such little regard? Unfortunately, no answer presented itself. Most likely because he couldn't even begin to imagine his gentle, loving, laughing mother speaking to anyone so callously.

Maybe he was going about this the wrong way. Tremen paused in the act of drying his hands to give Hallie another look. She knelt upon the floor and stared right back at him, her face completely void of emotion, so void that he could all but hear the cogs in her mind whirring as she plotted against him. Whippings were not going to change that. Perhaps instead of simply expecting her to obey the King's decree, he could try wooing her with kindness. Women liked kindness, or so he'd been told.

Soft things, too. Like flowers and handkerchiefs and ribbons. Tremen watched as she gingerly rubbed her backside, stifling another groan as she did so. Too bad that it was the wrong time of the year for flowers, and that the nearest town that was barely more than a pig wallow was unlikely to have silks or ribbons, or anything else approaching a noblewoman's quality. He'd have to ride two days north before he found something like that.

Straightening slowly, Tremen turned around and walked slowly to the door. Opening it, he did the next best thing that he could think of to gifting her with presents. He called down the hall for a hot bath to be brought.

"I can do that myself," Hallie snapped with all the prickliness of a thistle.

"I merely thought you might like to ease your sore muscles in a hot tub of water," he said, holding his hands up in a placating gesture. "But if you would rather ache all day, that is fine as well."

"I would rather ache," she sniped, holding her bottom, "than to take my comfort from anything you provide."

"Then ache." He returned to the bed and dressed in silence, enduring the coolness of her stare as it burrowed into his back like a knife. But as he was buckling himself into his armor, he tried again. "My dear Hallie the Stubborn, this is the first morning of the rest of our lives. The choice is yours as to whether it is a happy one, or whether we spend all of eternity fighting at one another's throats. Personally, there is enough in this world to struggle against without also having to battle my wife."

Hallie didn't say anything, but eventually she did lower her angry stare to the floor.

Tremen walked over to stand at her side. "I promise, should you allow yourself a chance to know me, you will find I am not the villain you prefer to believe me."

She looked anything but convinced, and on a whim, he bent to kiss her goodbye. He was hardly surprised when she turned her face away. With a wry half smile, he bussed her cheek with a kiss nonetheless. "I hope your day is a pleasant one."

"I hope you fall off your horse and break your neck," she replied, but he couldn't help but note that there was slightly less rancor in her tone now than only a moment before. Progress, he decided, didn't always have to announce itself with earth shattering force.

* * * *

The Keep was in much worse condition than Tremen's initial glance yesterday had led him to believe. There were cracks in the defensive walls and rotting in the braces that would need immediate repair. In the past decade or so, the growth of the forest had been allowed to creep up to the parameter walls and no matter where he looked he could find no evidence of any kind of training camp for the soldiers to hone their skills. Small wonder then that so many of the old lord's men seemed to be paunching around the middle.

The moat was stagnant, full of the foulest smelling water, vegetation and waste. The runoff was clogged and, he suspected, no where near deep enough to be adequate to begin with. As Tremen stood looking up at the old-fashioned motte-and-bailey fortress, he knew without a doubt what he was going to have to do. He sent out scout to locate a decent rock quarry and Marston to hire the builders. If Burkshire was to survive the changing times, it was going to have to modernize. Every bit of wood in the walls and the Keep was going to have to be replaced.

By midday, he had the boundaries for a training camp lined out. Without exception, every soldier was ordered to spend two hours a day there as well as one additional hour taking down the vegetation that was inching ever closer to their walls. He then took a tour of the lands, which included the lookout towers to the North and West of the fortress, high upon the craggy cliff sides that stood sentinel over the ocean. The only part of Burkshire's defenses that Tremen didn't find lacking were the pit fires and fog horns spaced out along the coast between the Keep and each watchtower, ready to sound an alert at the first sign of a raiding party. Surprisingly enough, the lookout towers were in much better condition than Burkshire.

From there he took a tour of the neighboring tenants lands, greeting the families and for the most part finding them cheerful and well cared for. By the time he returned to Burkshire, dummies had been set up on the section of the training field designated for archery, and Lady Hallie and her maid were upon it.

It was startling to see her there. In Tremen's experience not a single noblewomen that he'd ever met had had much of a stomach for battle and all its intricacies. But there she was, at the end of the archery lane, waiting while some of the younger Burkshire boys set up the targets along the far end. With a quiver of arrows strapped to her back, she stood holding a long distance bow in her hands. Laughing with her maid, all traces of amusement quickly faded from her face when he rode up to her. However, it wasn't her scowl that gave him pause. Anna also gave him a furious stare, one that was particularly startling with its degree of venom. In fact, he drew his horse to a halt, blinking in surprise as he realized 'vengeful' might have described that glare better.

The maid held his gaze for only a few seconds, before dropping her eyes to the ground and leaving Tremen to wonder just what the hell he'd done to deserve that. Just in case, he turned the horse so that he faced Hallie and her bow with his well-armored side.

Just in case.

"How goes your day?" he asked his wife, guardedly.

"Well, villain," she replied. "And yours?"

"Better than I expected." Kill her with kindness, he told himself, glancing down at the bow in her hands.

Subconsciously or not, he still backed his horse up a step. "If it can be worked into your day, I would request a moment of

your time later this afternoon." He cleared his throat. "I would like to hear your opinions on some changes I would make."

Anna was so surprised that she forgot to maintain her vengeful scowl.

Even Hallie blinked. "My opinion?" she echoed.

"Surely you must have one or two," Tremen said. "After all, as you are so fond of pointing out, Burkshire has been your home far longer than it has mine. I should very much like to hear any input you might have on my future plans for strengthening it."

At first Hallie didn't move. She simply stared up at him, her hands clenched tightly upon the bow, her lovely face unreadable.

"This is your home, too," he told her. Before his eyes, some of the iciness melted from her broomstick straight pose.

They stared at one another for a long time, before she finally sniffed. She turned her face away as she said, "I will make the time at your convenience, of course, my lord."

My lord instead of villain; Tremen almost smiled. Tally one point for kindness. "After the noon meal?"

"If that is your convenience."

He nodded and then looked back down at the bow she held. He gestured at it. "Be careful with that, daughter of the Strong. It is not a toy. In less skilled hands, it can even inflict serious harm upon an unintended target."

She turned back to him, her jaw clenching with renewed bitterness. Every bit of her newly thawed ice returned as she stalked two steps away from Anna, drew an arrow from her quiver and notched the bow. Barely two seconds passed as she took aim on one of the targets and fired. The arrow hit the dummy at the opposite end of the field dead in the center of its hay-stuffed chest, startling both Tremen as well as the young lad, standing a mere six feet away.

To say that he was astounded by her accuracy, especially at this distance, would be to state it mildly. She was a better archer than some of his seasoned warriors. He felt a slight tickle at the back of his spine to admit it, but she was even a better archer than himself.

"I shall bear your warning in mind," she told him stiffly. Turning, she marched away, leaving Tremen to stare after her in wonder.

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Chapter Four

Robert hunkered down at the side of the boat, holding his cloak tightly about him, his eyes fixed firmly on the wood bottom, which was covered by a good three inches of water. It would be deeper, but many of his fellow shipmates were still bailing like mad. As if God's wrath could be thwarted by buckets and man's frantic efforts to stay afloat in this storm.

The waves crashed over them, soaking him once more with a salty spray that stung his eyes and lips and burned his skin. The swells lifted the boat in their peaks and tossed it ruthlessly up and down.

"We are going to die!" a priest behind him wailed, his voice barely heard above the howling wind and cracking lightning, that split the sky an instant before the first hard drops of rain came dashing down upon them.

As if death could frighten him.

Robert lifted his face into the torrent, letting the fresh water wash away the burning salt. In the distance, he could see where the storm ended, and the skies grew clearer. Like a fog along the horizon, the craggy peaks of land grew up out of the violent seas, stabbing like daggers at the heavens. There were miles of choppy water between him and that land.

The swells picked up the stern of the boat, raising them until they were nearly vertical in the air. Robert grabbed onto the side to keep from tumbled into the aft as another of his unlucky companions did. Down the wave crashed again, dropping them back onto the shifting water and the boat yawned onto one side, nearly turning over as another wave picked them up again.

"We will be sunk!" the priest screamed, panic raising the pitch of his voice until he sounded almost like a woman.

Robert began to laugh. "Sink me," he growled to the heavens. The wind howled, snapping the rope that secured the sails and sending the canvas sheets to flapping wildly. The wooden mast groaned and suddenly cracked under the strain. It fell overboard, nearly pulling the boat over with it, but for the sailors who hastened to hack through the ropes that bound them to it.

"Is that the best you can do?" Robert jeered, daring God to do his worst. "Sink me, damn you!"

The priest gasped. "Are you mad?"

"Sink me!" Robert bellowed and a towering swell turned the boat onto its side before crashing down like an avalanche of rock upon them. The air disappeared and the wood vanished beneath him as the sea claimed them all.

* * * *

Midday came way too soon for Hallie. As much as she would have liked to stay indefinitely on the budding training field that Tremen's men were building, there was no ignoring the promise that she had made her husband. And she was not a woman who ever deliberately broke her word.

"At least 'e is trying to make amends for the way 'e treated ye," Anna said brightly, which only made Hallie feel worse, especially since he'd never done anything to mistreat her in the first place. Except perhaps for the spankings. Although if forced to be honest, Hallie would have been hard pressed to admit she had not earned them.

Burkshire was a hub of activity as she made her way back to it. There were more than twenty men with picks and shovels digging and flattening the ground ten yards outside the curtain wall. A dozen more were emptying the stagnant moat in preparation of rerouting it to the new outer wall. The stench was terrible and it hit her when she was still half a field away.

If she had thought the moat smelled foul when full of water, the pungence of it empty was enough to gag her. By the time she reached the drawbridge, she had the excess cloth of her sleeve pressed over her mouth and nose and she was doing her best to breathe as little as possible. But that only lasted until she saw Tremen, not giving orders from the wall as she had so often seen her father do, but down in the muck with the servants, sweat, mud and things even less pleasant streaming down his shirtless back and a shovel in his huge, calloused hands. Despite the foulness, he was laughing with his men, though that stopped the instant he saw her.

His smile dimmed slightly as he straightened his back for conflict and then squinted up at the sky. There was a storm rolling in off the ocean and black clouds hid the sun; he looked back to her with a wry half-smile. "Is it noon already?"

"Would you like to postpone?" She tried not to sound hopeful, but the smell was so bad she could taste it in her mouth as she spoke. How he could bear to be standing knee deep in the mess was beyond her comprehension. She was all but gagging on the stench as it was. "No, no." Tremen handed his shovel to the man next to him and began to wade his way out of the moat.

"Oh, how foul." She coughed, covering her nose with both hands as he seemed to kick up the smell even worse with every step. "It did not smell anywhere near this horrible before you started digging up the sewage. If you must change things, why not simply fill in the moat and leave well enough alone."

"And spend the next decade smelling this every time it rained?" Tremen countered, then shook his head. "'Tis a wonder the inhabitants of Burkshire are not already crawling with plague. No. We'll toss the worst of the muck off the cliff and then bury the rest. In a few days, you shall never know this was here."

Hallie only thought the smell from the drawbridge was bad. But as he climbed up the ladder towards her, she abruptly changed her mind. It must have been much, much worse for the diggers still below.

"Ugh!" She turned her face away, holding out a staying hand to keep him back. "What a horrible smell!"

She staggered back a step when he kept coming, an irrepressible grin splitting his muddy face, until she bumped into the gate.

Tremen quickly captured her there, bracing his fists against the wall to either side of her head. Leaning in, he wiggled his eyebrows up and down, his boyish grin letting her know just how well aware he was of his own repulsiveness at the moment. "Greetings to you, Hallie the Ever More Lovely. How about a kiss for your husband?" "Ugh!" Hallie flailed her hands, wanting so badly to push him away but there was no place safe to touch him. "Get away from me, you—you—"

"Villain?" he chuckled, but obligingly stepped back.

Covering her nose, Hallie scrambled to put distance back between them, but before she could get completely out of reach, he laughingly gave her bottom a sharp slap.

"Oh!" she yelped and grabbed her assaulted nethers, her hands encountering the filthy palm print he'd left on the seat of her gown. She quickly snatched them back again to stare down at the mud on her fingers in first shock and then fury. "Oh, you brute! You despicable ... insufferable..." her mouth worked to come up with an insult at least as foul as the mud he'd left on her stinging backside. "...you..." There was none. In the end, all she could do was stamp her foot in absolute frustration and scream a ragged, "OH!" at the top of her lungs.

Tremen's grin never even wavered. "I guess we had both better get cleaned up. Shall we meet in the library in one hour?"

He never even waited for an answer, but headed inside, leaving her rubbing her backside and fuming behind him.

* * * *

By the time Tremen had washed away the smell of the moat, noon had passed and evening was well on its way. The storm that had been slowly brewing since dawn had finally broken over land and he could hear the rain striking the roof hard and steady. Since the study shutters had to be drawn to keep out the damp, the fire in the hearth was built up as high as possible to chase away the darkness. He hoped Hallie might view it as both warming and welcoming.

At this point, he just hoped she still intended to come.

Struggling for optimism, he had an army of lit candles scattered through the room in an effort to banish the natural darkness. He did his best to clear the stacks of papers off two chairs, shoving them onto the already overflowing shelves that lined the walls, piling every available space with scrolls, folds of parchment and carefully scribed books, some of which dated back over two centuries. The newly cleared off table was only vacant a few minutes before a huge lunch was brought from the kitchen.

There were meats, cheeses, freshly baked bread, wine, fruit and pudding. It was enough to feed a half a dozen men, but he was taking no chances that she might find displeasure with anything at his table, thereby becoming displeased with him. And no sooner had he spread the meal out between the two chairs and dismissed the servants than did he hear a tentative knock at the door.

"Come in," he called out, giving the table one last critical assessment. At the last minute he decided that the chairs were too far apart and he quickly scooted them closer together just as the door creaked open.

She had put her long hair into a braid, which she had wound enticingly about her head, and changed her gown. The peach of the fabric matched the slight flush that stole into her cheeks when she looked at the food upon the table, and she made no move at all to come inside. "I will come back after you have finished dining," she said and turned to withdraw.

"There is enough here for us both," Tremen called after her. "I thought we could share a meal while we discuss Burkshire's future."

Hallie at first pretended to ignore him, but after a half a dozen steps down the hall towards her bedchambers, she then stopped. Her shoulders slumping slightly, she took a deep breath and turned back around.

"I will have lunch with you," she conceded and she walked across the threshold. "I shall even talk to you and share my ideas, as you wish of me. But I still do not like you very much and you are not about to change my feelings."

"Fair enough." Tremen beckoned her to the table. "Every relationship must have its beginning."

"Beginning, middle and end, villain," she clarified for him. "Just so you are clear on where you stand."

"Have a seat." He pulled out a chair for her and waited with extraordinary patience for her to wage her mental war over extremely limited options before finally giving in with grudging compliance. Not completely without gentlemanly manners, he tried to seat her with grace, but she ignored the chair he held and walked around the table to seat herself in the one meant for him.

Refusing to be outdone, he quickly ducked behind her and pulled out that chair instead. She whirled on him, hands on her narrow hips, and he smiled down at her from only a scant few inches away. "We can do this all day," he said with mock cheerfulness. "Is it so great a thing that I ask for, just a modicum of common courtesy? We can sit at the same table, can we not?" The feet of the chair squeaked against the floor as he pulled it out another inch or two.

Making a slight face, Lady Hallie sat and allowed him to push in her chair. But she almost came right back up out of it again when, instead of sitting across from her, Tremen seated himself next to her.

"Even if you never come to like me," he said as he poured them both a cup of ale, "we can still be pleasant to one another."

She stared into the fire, the orange-yellow light of the flames bathing her face. "Yes," she finally said. "You are right."

"Of course I am." He began to select slices of meat and pick through the chunks of cheese, piling both onto the platter between them. "It's all a part of being an insufferable conqueror."

For the first time, she turned her head to glare at him, but the look was ruined by the unwilling smile that pulled at the corners of her mouth. "Pass the bread, villain, and tell me what you have planned for my home."

"Our home," he corrected holding up a finger pointedly, and then began to serve them both. "My charge is to make Burkshire the first defense against the Danish raiders. To do so, I must update the entire keep."

"We need a new granary," she said, popping a piece of cheese into her mouth.

"All right," Tremen conceded. "I will set aside the funds for that as well as for the well a man from Dwellan has requested, but both of those things will need to be done later this fall. I believe our immediate focus at this point in time should be the fortification of the wall and establishment of a new watch system to counter the growing Danish activities along the eastern coast."

"What Danish activities?" Hallie scoffed. "They usually do their raiding further West. And besides, it will be several weeks yet before the seas calm and summer begins. They will not dare come a-viking before then."

"I do not want to be without a wall when they come."

"When they do come, it will be to trade for our wool and dyes." Lady Hallie shrugged. "Suit yourself, but I think you worry over naught. We have had nary a peep from the raiders for over nine years now. And when we do see them in their viking moods, all we catch are the occasional glimpses of their dragon boats in the early morning fog."

"In our current condition," Tremen pointed out, "it would only take one well-executed assault to compromise this holding. God help us if we cannot stop them at the walls."

"So which of the curtains do you wish to rebuild?"

Tremen braced himself. "All of them. The French are fortifying their castles with stone. I think we should do that with Burkshire."

"Stone?" Hallie started to laugh, but when he didn't join her, she stopped. "My lord, this is the planting season. Our winter will be very uncomfortable if you press the tenants into unnecessary labors now." "I do believe I am about to be vilified again."

"Of course not." Lady Hallie's hard expression said otherwise. She stubbornly kept her eyes on her food so he wouldn't see it.

"You have that look on your face," Tremen contradicted.

"I cannot help how I look," she said shortly. "This is the face that God and my parents saw fit to birth me with."

"And you are being prickly. In spite of all my hard efforts to win you over."

"I have already told you, I do not plan to change how I feel about you." Her mouth tightened. "You forced your way into my home, beat me, threatened to press my people—"

"Our people," he interrupted, tearing off a piece of hard bread to chew on.

"*My* people," she reiterated, her tone rising sharply. She gave up the pretense of eating and dropped her uneaten food back on her plate. "You are little more than a—"

"A villain," he said for her. Stifling a heavy sigh, he leaned back in his chair, resting his elbow on the side of the table and his jaw in the palm of his hand. "A conqueror, an intruder. Even though I was appointed master of this holding by the King. I hate to be the one to point this out, as I am sure it will come to you as a dreadful shock, but has anyone bothered to inform you that you are, in fact, a woman? You do not get to ride horses like a man, shoot bows and arrows and rule a keep."

"It is the height of all things unfair that a mishap at birth should rob me of my home and land me with an unwanted bed mate!" "Floor mate," Tremen said drily. "I do not believe you can in truth be called a bed mate until you actually share my bed."

"My parents' bed!" she contested hotly.

"Ah, but the roof said bed rests under is now legally mine, thereby rendering it, by default, also mine. As well as everything else within these walls."

Her back stiffening, Hallie narrowed her eyes at him. "I sincerely hope you do not consider me lumped into that category."

Tremen hesitated, picking his way cautiously down a damning of things he could and probably should not say. He cleared his throat. "Legally—"

Hallie didn't let him finish. She stood up from the table, leaning her knuckles upon it as she loomed over him. "It will take a good deal more than a pleasant lunch and your charming company to alter things between us."

Tremen smiled at her, his eyes widening a little in mock surprise. "First I was handsome, and now I am charming! Well, that does make this meal worth every slow-passing and torturously prickly minute."

"I do not," she emphasized, pushing away from the table, "find you charming."

"Oh come now, my darling if contrary one, that is not what you said a moment ago."

Hallie glared at him, her fists planting themselves upon her hips. "I did not—"

"'A pleasant lunch and your charming company'," Tremen quoted. "That is what you said."

"I was being sarcastic!"

He held up his hand, his thick fingers a scant inch apart. "Have you ever noticed how fine is the line between sarcasm and a person's most secret feelings of truth?"

"Oh!" she all but growled. "Hie yourself to the devil!"

Hallie whirled about, skirts swishing about her legs as she marched past him. Or would have, had he not reached out and snagged her arm, pulling her back and toppling her off balance. She fell into his lap, her bottom landing in the slight crevice between his hard thighs. Her eyes and mouth both rounded in surprise.

"Get your hands off me!"

Anticipating a struggle, Tremen kept a firm hold on her left arm, pinning it neatly behind her stiff-as-a-board back. "My lady doth protest too much. I think you do find me charming; you simply are at a loss for how to express it."

Exactly where she had been hiding the knife, Tremen wasn't quite sure. But when he felt the slight prick below his belt, he looked down to find it held firmly in Hallie's free and unwavering hand.

"How well am I expressing it now?" she asked, her tone as cool and as unwavering as her hand.

Tremen didn't move and he did not release her captured arm. He smiled instead. "Be very careful, my darling wife, or we may never populate Burkshire with the necessary heirs."

Her hand tightened around the hilt of the small knife. "I am sure, eventually, I will recover from the disappointment."

He blinked innocently. "Is that sarcasm again? You are so hard to read."

She ever so slightly pressed the tip of the knife in another notch. "Let me go."

Tremen glanced down again at the knife, sucking in his gut in spite of himself. "You hold that like you know how to use it," he admired as he met her unflinching eyes once more. "Did your father teach you that as well?"

"You would be surprised at the things he taught me," she replied. When she lifted her chin in pride, he darted in and kissed the tip of her pert little nose. The point of the knife withdrew from his flesh as Hallie jerked back in surprise, and Tremen grabbed her wrist.

"Oh!" she cried and tried to pry his fingers off her.

Careful not to hurt her, Tremen twisted her arm until she gasped and her grip on the knife weakened. Though he took it away from her, she was anything but unarmed. Her very look alone remained murderous.

"Do not think you have won yet, villain," she snarled through tightly clenched teeth.

He sighed and his smile turned a little grim around the edges. "You really are one stubborn lady." He shook his head, and then he flipped her, catching her hands when she struck out wildly at him and laying her belly-down across his lap.

"Let me go!" she shouted.

She kicked and bucked, twisting her hips to roll off his lap and wrenching at her wrists even as he tightened his grip to hang onto them. She was strong, more muscular than soft unlike every other woman he'd ever held. And when she bucked, twisting and throwing back her head like an unbroken filly, her hair flew back and slapped at his face. "Very stubborn, indeed," he muttered and gave the lovely round swells of her backside a hardy swat.

"Ow! You bastard!"

Startled, he gave the back of her head an incredulous look. "You have spent too much of your life with soldiers."

He then gave her bottom the absolute hardest blow his arm was capable of. The sharpness of the clap was muffled by the barrier of her skirts, but still her howl was shrill enough to convince him that she'd felt it. And for just an instant, her struggles ceased. It was just long enough for him to capture the back of her legs between his own, pinning them down. He then tightened his grip on her wrists.

"Let's see you get out of this one," he said. At the end of his patience, he gave her the paddling that she deserved, flattening first one cheek and then the other, back and forth, and snapping her quickly out of her shocked immobility.

"Stop!" All of her frantic struggles were limited to the barest wriggling and all she could do was toss her head and scream.

"This is the best medicine for an impudent bride," Tremen stated, the heart-shaped target that was her bottom bouncing delightfully under the influence of his broad palm. And just to make sure she got the message, as he continued to scold he punctuated each word with a stinging swat that was just as hard as he could make it, "Thou! Shalt! Not! Draw! Arms! On! Your! Husband!"

With no other choice but to accept the spanking he dealt her, nevertheless, Hallie took it anything but gracefully. "Whoreson!" she spat, her brittle voice cracking. Oh, but the good Lord would have his Second Coming before Tremen glimpsed the glitter of tears in her hardened eyes. She was much too proud, no matter how much he made her bottom ache.

"Your language," he said mildly, but redoubled the efforts of his arms and let the flat of his hand express his displeasure for him. He dusted the seat of her skirts until he could almost feel the heat rising through them, and all of her shouts and cries had dissolved down to ragged gasps and mewling squeals through gritted teeth.

Given his way, Tremen would have spanked until he'd paddled that defiant pride right out of her. Unfortunately, there was a knock at the door first, and he had no choice but to stay his arm.

Unwilling to make her spanking public knowledge, even Hallie stilled her struggles. She raised her head to stare at the door, her soft gaspy breaths of pain the only sound she made.

"Well now, if that is not a stroke of good luck for you," Tremen said. Catching the scruff of her dress, he heaved her up off his lap.

The instant her feet were back under her, Hallie tried to duck out of his reach, but instead he pulled her down to sit upon his knee and completely ignored her sharp intake of breath the instant her bottom made contact with his hard thigh.

"Come in," Tremen called, almost cheerfully, while Hallie clenched her teeth and stared daggers at him.

A soldier from the walk swung the door open and stepped inside. "My lord, the Eastern watchtowers are signaling."

"Ready the horses. I will be there shortly."

The soldier bowed and retreated, and Tremen stood up, dumping Hallie back onto her own two feet. She would have scrambled out of reach, except that he did not release his firm hold on her arm.

"Even with the most capable of minds, my dear, you are still but a woman in a skirt, and by law you cannot rule Burkshire." Tremen held up her knife, offering it back to her. "Accept me so we may stop this pointless bickering. There is no other option before you and I am tired of having to constantly smack your sit-upon."

She glared at him, but as the seconds ticked slowly by, the frustration on her face weakened into reluctant resignation. Taking the knife, she looked away, her narrow shoulders slumping.

With a slight smile, Tremen nodded. "I will see you later tonight."

"If God does not strike me dead before then," she muttered unenthusiastically.

His smile widened a little more. "Ah, 'tis the little things in life worth looking forward to that give us so much pleasure."

Tightening his grip on her left arm, he turned her away from him and lay a single, sharp slap to the seat of her skirts with the flat of his right hand. The layers of her gown absorbed most of the sting, he knew, but the force of the impact jolted her hips and knocked her forward a step. "Oh!" Hallie swung around, jerking out of his grasp, her hands darting behind her to catch hold of her affronted buttocks. Her eyes flashed wide with shock and fury, and her jaw dropped open in silent incredulity. It was a toss-up as to what held more fury: her rubbing or her flashing eyes.

"That is the sort of bickering I was talking about," Tremen said, sternly but without the slightest trace of anger anywhere about him. "I do not like your needling insults, and I will not tolerate the defiance laced within them."

Still smiling, he bowed his head to her and then strode from the room. He even had the nerve to whistle a jaunty tune as he left her. In contrast, her shrill shriek of wordless frustration and outright anger echoed loudly down the hall after him.

* * * *

Hallie slammed into her room, so angry that she could barely see straight. Her eyes fell on a masculine white shirt lying across the foot of her bed, and something deep inside her just snapped. She grabbed up the shirt and flung it into the fireplace. Almost immediately, she snatched it back out again, stamped the fire out, and then threw the partially burnt shirt back on the bed where she'd found it. She glared at it, and then she winced. She was behaving badly and she knew it, but she just couldn't bring herself to relent.

This was her home. Hers!

And she was not a piece of meat to be passed from the King's hand into Tremen's.

But what she wanted made not the single bit of difference. She was, as Tremen had so charmingly pointed out, without options.

Hallie paced up and down in front of her bed, arms folded tight across her chest, fuming. Somehow, in her pacing, she ended up in front of the window. Laying her hands on the cold stone sill, she leaned out into the sunshine. At the far end of the courtyard, Tremen and his soldiers—men who, adding insult to injury, used to be loyal to her—mounted their horses and headed for the gate.

Leaving her behind.

She could count on the fingers of one hand how many times that she had been left behind, even before her father had died. Her eyes narrowed and her hands tightened on the windowsill until her knuckles whitened. Maybe this wasn't her house alone anymore, but she had no intention of hiding in her room like a timid mouse, either, while Tremen took control over everything she held dear.

Grabbing her cloak, she swung it around her shoulders and strode from the room with long-legged, purposeful steps. Down into the courtyard she went, just in time to see the last of Tremen's party crossing beyond the portcullis and vanishing into the forest greenery on the other side.

"Where was the attack?" she called up to one of the soldiers on the curtain wall.

"Brab-Upon-The-Hill, m'lady," he called back down. Hallie stopped short where she was. "The monastery—?"

"The Danes did not go that far inland," the man assured her.

So much for nine years of nary a peep. Rubbing her forehead, she headed for the stables. Cray the Stablemaster, took one look at her and turned as white as a blooming water lily.

"I-I cannot, m'lady," he stammered, stopping Hallie in the doorway.

"I have asked nothing of you yet," she said slowly.

Cray wet his lips. "Lord Tremen, 'e-'e said yer weren't t'go riding t'day. Not until 'e returns, not without his knowledge, and not without a fully armed escort."

"He said?" Hallie felt her anger like wisps of fog begin to seep through her. It started in her belly and worked its way down through her legs and up through her chest until it felt as if her heart were being squeezed. Her knees shook under the strain of keeping a blank face.

Cray backed up a step. "I-I-I am sorry, m'lady. I cannot saddle yer 'orse for ye."

"That's fine." Hallie walked around him, stalking towards the back of the stables where her mare was kept. "I shall saddle her myself."

Tremen might own Burkshire, but it was time he learned exactly where the extent of his authority ended.

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Chapter Five

His skin was burning, and it was due to more than just the sun beating down upon him. Slowly, painfully, Robert opened one eye. The other was crusted shut with the sand his face was buried in. His tongue was swollen, his mouth was dry, and the ocean salt was eating away at his skin as it dried upon him. Now and then, the waves rolled in, lapping at his feet and up his legs. Each scream of the seagulls felt as if it split his pounding skull, and it took every ounce of strength that he had to push himself onto his hands and knees.

Where was he?

He staggered to his feet, almost tripping over a length of tattered sail half buried in the sand. Debris from the boat lay scattered up and down the shore line, intermingling with the occasional bloat corpse as far as he could see. But when he raised his eyes to the tree line, he stopped when he saw two men on horses, watching him. Their clothing was very telling.

Danes.

Well, at least the sea had seen fit to vomit him up in the right place.

* * * *

The woods were eerily silent. Nothing but the wind rustled through the trees. There was no birdsong, no insects, nothing.

Tremen could smell the foul and unmistakable odor of cooking flesh and hair while they were still a half a mile from

the cottage. The fields were blackened and still smoking by the time he lead his soldiers down to the beach, past the outskirts of the surrounding forest, and caught his first sight of the tenant's devastated farm. Everything had been destroyed.

Tremen made a slight face. It was the only acknowledgment that he gave to the pungent odor of charred human flesh. His horse was far more vocal. It stamped and shied and chewed at the bit restlessly. Tremen had to work to keep the animal under control as he surveyed the smoking ruins.

"How many?" he asked Marston.

"The whole family," his man-at-arms replied. "Even the old man and children, according to the men who knew them."

Resting a gloved hand upon his thigh, Tremen glanced past the smoking remains of the farm to the beach. "Well, I doubt if the Danes landed here," he said, scanning the rocky shoreline. Even as he watched, the waves rolled away from dry land, revealing the jagged peaks of barnacle-covered rocks.

Marston snorted. "Not if they valued their boats." He pointed off towards the East. "The nearest safe landing site is about two miles that way."

"The Danes are on foot then," Tremen said. "At least, they must have been last night. But why attack here?" He shook his head, his gaze darting from the charred home to the burned out barn and then settled upon the blackened fields, where several of the Burkshire men—his men now—were still beating out the flames. "That does not make sense. No offense to the dead, but what did these people have that was worth stealing?"

"Or killing for?" Marston added, just as perplexed.

Tremen shook his head again. "This just does not make sense. The Danes would not bother themselves if there was not something of value to be taken. Unless they were starving, the only reason for this," he gestured to the carnage, "would be to prevent them from warning us."

"You think they are coming for Burkshire then?"

"What else is there around here to perk their greed?"

Marston surveyed the farm's remains. Slowly, he said, "I have heard there is a church somewhere in these woods."

Tremen looked at him in surprise. "Where?"

Marston turned in his saddle and gestured to the nearest Burkshire soldier. "Where is the church?"

"There is a chapel at Burkshire, m'lord." Taking a few steps closer, the soldier half turned the other way and gestured to the North. "And the monastery of Monmouthe lies seven miles that way."

"Monastery." Tremen followed the direction of the soldier's hand, seeing only the darkness of the surrounding forest. "Religious items crafted from gold, money, food and nothing but monks to defend them."

"That would be worth killing for," Marston said grimly. "And it is far enough from Burkshire to make protecting it unpractical."

"If we send soldiers to defend the monastery, without a fortified wall we leave ourselves open to attack. No matter

what we do, the Danes take home a prize." Tremen scowled. "Damn it."

"Sir!"

Tremen turned to look back over his shoulder, pulling at the reins to turn his mount as well as Bink came riding up to meet him. The recklessness of the young squire's speed was barely tempered by his willingness to please.

"She is coming, sir. Your lady wife."

Marston turned in his saddle, surprised, craning his neck to see back down the road for a glimpse of Hallie.

Tremen frowned, slightly more annoyed than surprised. "Of course she is."

He stood up in the saddle, looking back over the tops of his men in time to see her come through the curtain of trees, riding down the dirt road after them. She rode her mare astride like a man, her long hair flying in the wind behind her. A bow and quiver of arrows were slung across her narrow back and a short sword was strapped to her waist. And judging by the murderous look she wore, she had every intention of using them.

Tremen sat back in his saddle. He harbored very little doubt that she had every intention of using them on him the minute she reached him. No doubt because of the injustice of having been left at home as any other wife would demand. He shook his head, both irritated and, yes, even a little impressed by her bravado. Hallie was like no other woman he had ever heard of much less met.

Noting her furious scowl, Marston leaned sideways toward Tremen and said, "The monastery offers asylum, you know." Eyes drooping half closed, Tremen gave him a very dry glare. "I promise to keep that in mind." Gathering up his reins, he rode out to meet her, half because he wanted to nip her defiance quickly at the stem and half because he didn't want her inevitable scolding to be administered to him in front of his men.

"I left orders that you were not to leave Burkshire," he called to her as their horses drew abreast of one another.

Her cheeks pinked with anger and her unfettered hair was tousled by the wind. "You must have me confused with your men," she told him coolly. "Either that or a lap dog! I do not take orders, villain, I give them!"

"I do not confuse you with either my soldiers or a beast," Tremen told her honestly, his gaze roving her from top to bottom. In a dress not made to accommodate her manly pose, the Byzantium blue gown revealed more than just a hint of the curves and valleys of her luscious form. "However, I would now ask you to turn yourself about and return to Burkshire."

"No!" she snapped acidically.

"Go home, my dear Hallie the Ever Infuriating," he said sharply, not at all liking her tone. "At least until it is safe."

Her flashing brown eyes darted past him and fell upon the crofters' hut, or what little of it remained, still smoking although by now his men had the last of the fire put out. Hallie blinked twice and a touch of sadness slipped past her angry mask.

"You knew them?" Tremen guessed.

Her eyes snapped back to him and she glared. "I know all of my people." Tears welled up, but she blinked them back. "Nan gave birth to her youngest son only two weeks ago. I brought them blankets and had warm meals sent while she recovered. She had a hard time of it."

"Go back to the Keep," Tremen said again, though more gently.

"No. If the Danes did this, then the monastery must be warned. It must be protected."

Tremen took a deep breath, struggling to keep his temper in check. "I have every intention of sending men to escort the monks to Burkshire until this danger has passed."

She looked shocked. "You expect them to abandon Monmouthe to be ravished and destroyed?"

"I have not the men to protect both Burkshire and the monastery. So you tell me, my darling wife, which would you prefer to give to the raiders?"

"Neither!" she cried, pulling back on her reins and turning her horse around. It sidled close enough that her leg brushed against his own. "I will protect it myself if you are too much the coward!"

His patience snapped, and in a flash, he reached out and grabbed her reins. That she could probably do it better than many of the soldiers under his command almost irritated him as much as her insult. He pulled her sharply back to him, nudging his own horse close enough to loom over her. In dark and dangerous tones, he growled, "You will take yourself home again, my one, my heart, my brave and darling fool, under your own power or under mine. The biggest difference between the two being that under my power you will be taken back face-down over my saddle. And once we reach our bedchambers, you will then be face-down over my knee. Be warned," he cautioned when her mouth snapped open for another hot retort, "pick your next words with care, or you may well find yourself hauled into the bushes for the switching of your life."

Hallie's mouth compressed into a tight and bitter line. Glaring, she pulled slowly back out of his grasp. "I really do not like you," she seethed.

Right now his fondness for her wasn't at its highest level, either, but Tremen knew better than to admit it. "Go home," he said. It was the last time he was going to tell her.

Fuming, she turned her horse around and kicked it into a raging gallop for home. Tremen turned and signaled for Bink to follow and make sure she reached Burkshire safely. Then he sat upon his restless mount, taking one deep breath after another, trying to calm down. It was almost a safe wager were he in the mood to bet, two pounds to one—that when he finally returned home he'd have to fight his way back into Burkshire again. That backwards scathing look she gave him said quite clearly that his return would find the portcullis closed against him.

* * * *

Lady Hallie was vexed. She was sorely vexed. She couldn't remember the last time that she had ever been so thoroughly, completely angry with anyone the way she was with her husband. How dare he send her home, like a dog with her tail tucked neatly between her legs?

And why in the world was she going?!

Hallie reined her horse to an abrupt stop, staring straight ahead at the winding road that led eventually back to Burkshire. Then she sent another scowling glare back down the path behind her, back in the direction of Tremen and her own traitorous men, and the little knave Bink, who was trying ever so discretely to follow her. A gust of wind blew over her, catching wisps of her hair and pulling them across her face. She brushed irritably back, her mouth tightly compressed in a look of supreme irritation.

She turned her horse again. Not towards Burkshire, not towards Tremen, but she instead headed deep into the forest towards Monmouthe. She was going to do what she should have done in the first place. She was going to warn the monks.

Tremen would not be pleased.

Hallie stamped down that errant thought, banishing it from her mind.

And his displeasure was going to have a very physical effect on her personal well being.

Hallie banished that thought as well, though it did leave her bottom tingling. She could almost feel the weight of his palm descending on her bared and vulnerable backside. Or would she be forced to bear the switch as he had already threatened? Her buttocks tensed against the saddle, and of a sudden her skin became unusually sensitive to the slightest touch. She had never been switched before, not even by her hardened father. But if those three stout smacks of the stick she had threatened Tremen with earlier were anything by which to judge, the 'switching of her life' was not something she wanted to endure.

Hallie almost pulled her horse to a stop, but then grimaced in disgust over her own hesitation. "For heaven's sake," she scolded herself. "'Tis only a spanking!"

Yet, whether by his hand or a switch, Tremen would likely strike her bottom until it stung and burned. But the discomfort would not last forever, and then she would be fine again. But no amount of spanking was going to change the fact that the monks of Monmouthe depended on Burkshire in times of violence. She had a duty to ensure the obligations of her Keep were fulfilled. Tremen not withstanding.

"If you indulge in the ride," she whispered and kicked her horse into a gallop. She would accept the consequences because she knew she was in the right. And she wasn't, she told herself sternly, about to let Tremen dictate otherwise.

* * * *

Tremen knew something was amiss when, as he led a group of nine men up the steep hillside to the centuries-old monolithic church, seated a top the highest cliff along the rocky shore, he happened to look behind him. Bink was riding after them, still a good three hundred yards across the valley at the bottom of the hill. But even from this distance, there was just something about the way his young squire looked, some sort of minute franticness that gave Tremen pause. Had the path been wide enough to accommodate two horses at once, he would have been tempted to pull aside and let the rest of his men pass until Bink reached him. Unfortunately, the path to the monastery was so narrow and steep, all he could do was continue up until he found a clearing wide enough for him to pull over.

The monks were in prayer, and the droning harmony of their half-chanted/half-sung Latin rang off the old stones and out across the well-tended gardens that took up most of the ground at the top of the hill. Considering the state of that winding path that connected Monmouthe to the rest of the world, Tremen wouldn't have thought the monks kept many horses. But as he shifted in his saddle, waiting for Bink to catch up, he noted the obvious shape of a shoed horse's hoof in the dirt ahead of him and he could hear the cantankerous braying of an irate donkey within the secular walls.

Doing his best not to trample the rows of budding herbs and vegetables, he dismounted his horse and walked over to get a better look. For some reason, he continued to stare at the hoof prints and an odd sinking feeling began to settle into the pit of his stomach. As Bink raced closer, Tremen began to get a better and better look at his face and that horrible sinking sensation became more pronounced.

Something was really wrong.

Almost against his will, Tremen's eyes shifted back to the hoof prints in the dirt. Suddenly he no longer needed to wait to find out why Bink was so pale in the face and frantic to reach him. Suddenly, he already knew.

"That disobedient little baggage!" Tremen snapped. Hallie was already here. She had defied him!

One of his soldiers rode up to take his horse's reins and Tremen, mindful of the budding plants, marched into the monastery. His chainmail rattled obscenely loud in the quiet of the enclosed stone church as he passed through the front gate and into the courtyard beyond. The doors here were tall and narrow, not made for the passage of warriors. As he stalked into the main building, he had to turn his broad shoulders sideways just to pass through the threshold. And still the length of his sword sheath scraped the opposing walls. In the house of God, the metallic scrape of it was a blasphemy.

He caught the attention of two monks, walking side by side in an upper corridor. They paused in a stone archway, leaning their hands upon the bannister to look down at him and his men as they filed into the courtyard behind him.

Struggling to control his temper, Tremen called up to them, "Lady Hallie?"

"Ah," one young brother nodded, and leaned over the bannister to point at a lower door to Tremen's right. "She has just been called into conference with Brother Michael in the herb garden."

Tremen turned to Marston, who was just approaching his left. "Get her horse and take it back to Burkshire."

"Will she not be returning to Burkshire?" the man-at-arms said, his eyes widening with dismay.

"She is my wife," Tremen seethed. "Of course she will." Heading for the herb garden, his chainmail clanking all the way, he growled under his breath, "When I get through with her, she will not be able to sit to ride." His first glimpse of Hallie as he strode through the narrow door into the shady hall beyond consisted of little more than a flash of Byzantium blue skirt as it disappeared through a distant doorway into the bright sunlight beyond. He could hear the chirping of birds and even from a hall away, glimpsed the rustling greenery of plants. The herb garden.

His temper fired within him, and Tremen quickly closed the distance between them. His hands were itching to get a hold of her. He could all but feel the weight of her across his thigh and the bounce of her bottom as he quite literally put it through a blistering assault. This monastery was going to sing with her cries of remorse and she was going to sorely, *sorely*, regret not having obeyed his earlier command.

By the time he pushed the garden door open wide enough to allow him passage through it, Hallie was already seated on a bench of stone beside a priest he could only assume was Father Michael. Tremen's armored sleeve scraped the wall, and they both looked up at him as he squeezed himself through the narrow threshold into the garden.

It was that look on her face that did his temper in. That haughty, victorious, rebellious look that raised the hackles on the back of his neck, clenched his hands into fists and brought him to within one unsnapped self-control thread of tanning her backside right then and there.

His expression must have turned storm cloud dark because a good deal of that haughtiness, as well as her smile, abruptly vanished from her face. When he came striding across that courtyard towards her, she tensed and for one rapidly heartpounding moment, it flittered through his mind that he might just have to chase her down before he could exact the proper punishment for her disobedience.

But then that stubborn pride reasserted itself. She closed it around her like a shield and, though she did stand up, she also stood her ground and didn't budge. Not even when he marched right up to her, coming well to within striking range. Coming so close that when she breathed in, her rising breasts brush his armored chest. He loomed over her, frowning and dark, each deep breath a seethingly furious one.

"I must say," he growled. "I do admire that in you. You are not one to run from a problem."

Hallie lifted her chin a notch, but in the face of his anger, she had begun to tremble.

"Were I you," he suggested, his hands clenching and unclenching ominously at his sides, "I would remain sitting for as long as possible. It is a comfort that you will sore be missing for at least a fortnight."

Her eyes narrowed, but he was quick to note that some of the color was fleeing her face and she lowered her defiant head. It was as close to a bow of submission as he was likely to get from her.

"My lord?"

Still seething, Tremen turned from Hallie to the priest. "Are you Father Michael?"

"I am." The old man in the heavy, coarse habit smiled and tipped his head in deference to the nobleman. "You must be the villain." Tremen frowned at Hallie, who had suddenly become intensely interested in a rosemary bush. "I am the new lord of Burkshire, Tremen of Southby."

"And now of Burkshire," the old priest said. "I would welcome you, but as I am sure you are already well aware, you are the lord over a very troubled land."

"Then you have already heard?"

Father Michael again bowed his head. "I have. And I have heard of your kind offer to allow us refuge at your noble keep. However, as I was telling your wife, it would quite impossible for us to leave at this time. We cannot evacuate Monmouthe, nor will I allow it to become a military fortress," he said, giving Hallie a mildly chiding look.

"Father," Tremen said slowly, puzzled over the priest's refusal of their help. "I think you do not fully understand the situation. The Danes—"

"Are a menace," Father Michael finished for him. "And a very dangerous one, at that. But what you do not understand, lord of Burkshire, is that the pilgrimage of Saint Eadgyth is already underway. In less than a month, we will have hundreds of thousands of faithful pilgrims flocking to these halls to pray over the bones of that noble woman. We will be as ready for them this year as we have been in the last fifty. The first are expected to arrive any day now, bringing with them their gifts to the church in the hopes of obtaining from Saint Eadgyth a divine healing. Many of these people will be sick, the strength of their faith being just strong enough to bring them here. We cannot abandon them, my lord. We must be here to help them in any way we can." "Everyone within these walls will be killed if you are attacked," Tremen said bluntly.

"As I said," the old priest smiled again, "these are troubled lands. Please do not think I am being ungrateful. I do understand that you are trying to help. But it is the timing of this all that forces me to decline your invitation. We cannot abandon Monmouthe. Not now. Whatever happens will be God's will, and I am at peace with that."

"What about the Danes' will?" Tremen snapped, his tone much harsher than he'd intended.

"My life is dedicated to believing God's is stronger." The old man clasped his hands over his narrow waist. "I cannot leave. I will not."

And Tremen could not afford to protect priests here, not when he had other obligations. And now, dear Lord, he was going to have to send patrols to protect the pilgrims on the roads from bandits and Danes alike. He turned from the Father, hands on his hips and walked a few short steps away before stopping again. He stared helpless up at the open sky. For the survival of his people, he knew he had no options here, but to abandon the brothers to their inevitable fate did not sit well with him.

Tremen shook his head. Over his shoulder, he grimly called, "Hallie, we are going."

"What do you mean 'we are going'?" she demanded. "At the very least be man enough to post sentries at the gates!"

Tremen spun back on her so fast that she jumped, taking two involuntary steps back as he stalked back to her. He seized her arm, pulling her ominously close. "I have had enough of your insults. Keep them behind your teeth, Daughter of the Strong, or I *WILL* give you a thrashing unlike anything you have ever experienced before, one which you so richly deserve, right here in front of God and everyone."

Hallie clamped her mouth shut and kept it like that, lips pressed tight together. It was a supreme test of his will for Tremen to release her arm rather than simply follow through with his threat. But in the face of his anger, she had begun to tremble and a wife that feared him was not what Tremen wanted. Obedience, yes. But not fear.

"My lord?"

Tremen turned on Father Michael, half expecting an admonishment for his treatment of his wife and more than ready to drag Hallie from the monastery by her hair, if need be, leaving the monks to their fate if he got it.

Instead, the Father only pressed his hands together and asked, "I wonder if you would do me one small favor?"

Tremen swallowed twice, keeping his teeth clenched firmly together until he was certain that his anger was tamped down and he could be civil again. "If I can."

"I cannot leave the monastery, however we have here several oblates given to us by their parents to be raised in the Order. The youngest is four and the oldest eleven; I would not want them here if we should fall under attack. If I send Brother Thomas to watch over them, would you extend to them the same offer of shelter and protection that I have refused?"

Tremen managed a nod. "Ready them. We will take them with us now."

While Father Michael went to summon Brother Thomas, Tremen turned to face Hallie. Arms folded across her chest, she didn't meet his eyes. Instead, she pretended to study the herbs.

"Well?" he asked.

She raised her chin to glare at him. "Well, what?" she quipped.

The muscles of his jaw bunched as he clenched his teeth once, then twice, and then he said, "I am done bending over backwards to extend to you my friendship. Since you are so determined to keep us at crossed swords, then at crossed swords we shall be. Just remember, what happens between us now, my darling Hallie the Disobedient, you have brought upon yourself."

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Chapter Six

There were eighteen warriors gathered in the hall of Sweyn Forkbeard, eating and drinking at his table, seated upon animals furs and the floor since the only savage with a chair was Sweyn himself. It took everything Robert had to keep his disgust at their manners from showing. They stank of sweat and animals, belched and passed wind without apology, and none thought anything at all of blowing their noses in the same water that they passed around to wash their hands with. It turned his stomach to watch, so Robert kept his eyes averted and when the bowl of water was finally passed to him, he ignored it. Disgusting animals though they might be, he still needed them.

"You have heard my offer," he told the leader of their camp. "What do you have to say to it?"

The Danes stared back at Robert with veiled expressions, their faces obscured by shadows and long beards and halfclosed eyes that glittered in the torchlight. Sweyn was just as hard to read. Short and stocky, with a barrel chest and massive arms, he was a hardened warrior with many raiding years behind him and wealth enough from his successes to have his own hall, his own ship, and more slaves than a man could count on two hands. Robert had dealt with him many times over the past few years. But this was the first time he had ever come uninvited to his home.

"We have long been friends with the Britons of Burkshire," Sweyn said slowly, chewing on a piece of bread. "Why should that change simply because you are no longer friends with them?"

"I am Burkshire," Robert told him, his voice trembling with the effort it took to remain calm. "The man who has stolen my keep has been appointed by the Unready specifically to keep you out of England. You are no longer welcome there, and shall not be again for as long as he rules my house."

"Then take up your sword and take back your house." Sweyn took another bite of the hard bread.

"It would take more than one man to oust that devil." Resting his arm upon the table, Robert leaned towards the Viking leader. "My man harry him. They will keep him tired and uncertain. But I need your men to kill him. You already have the King's wrath."

Sweyn scoffed.

"Exactly," Robert agreed, spreading his hands. "A little more would mean nothing to one as strong as you. But to me, it would mean the difference between keeping what I win back and having to urgently fortify it against a royal siege. My head would be on a pike by the year's end. Consider my offer; it is more than fair." He paused to allow the massive Dane to do just that. "Everything you can carry will be yours—women, gold, food, whatever you desire. Just leave me Burkshire and the Lady Hallie for my wife, and you will again have Burkshire as your friend."

* * * *

Tremen was one of those few men who liked to keep his word, as Hallie discovered the minute they rode through the gate. Since he had sent her horse home with his man-atarms, she'd had been forced to ride behind him, her hands upon his shoulders to help keep her balance; she'd cut her own arms off before she put them around his waist. But no sooner had they dismounted and Tremen passed his horse to Cray in the stable, he took a firm hold on her arm and marched her all the way to their bedchambers.

"What did I tell you to do when you rode up behind me on the beach?" he demanded even as he dragged her to the stool by the hearth.

She had known it would come to this. Hallie stared down at the stool and then at his huge-seeming hand upon her arm. Her knees weakened, almost buckling beneath her. Now that this moment had come, she would have given anything and everything to delay it just a little while longer. "You sent me home." Her voice was trembling as badly as her legs, and that little bit of weakness helped to stiffen her spine and raise her chin. She met his hard gaze, her own eyes sparking with remembered indignity. "Like a recalcitrant child."

"You are a child," he snapped back. He sat down on the stool, dragging her down with him and tossing her over his lap so quickly that she couldn't even brace her legs against his tug. "You are disobedient and defiant." He grabbed the hem of her skirt and tossed the folds of her dress up over her back to bare her clenching bottom.

Hallie grit her teeth against an involuntary squeal and her hand snapped back, trying to catch her skirts and shove them back down again. But the instant she gripped the folds of her dress and tugged, Tremen took hold of her wrist and pushed it under her belly as he wrapped his arm around her waist, pinning her down.

"Let go!" she grunted, her hips bucking as she kicked her legs.

"Not a chance," he said grimly and the flat of his hand came down with a mighty clap that flattened the hills of her nates and brought an instant flush of color to her pale skin.

In all, the spanking could only have lasted a few minutes, but as one sharp slap after another landed with devastating force against her, those few minutes became like hours. Hot, painful, agonizing hours in which she had more than enough time to reconsider her defiant actions. He took her to the point of tears, and then ruthlessly pushed her beyond it, scolding all the while, "I am done with your insults. I will not accept any more of your petulant defiance."

And Hallie had no choice but to lie across his knees and accept one smack of his hardy palm after another, until it hurt so much that she couldn't even wiggle to break free anymore. She just lay wilted across his thighs, one hand gripping his legs and the other caught in an unbreakable vise beneath her.

Until it was over.

"I'm tired of doing this," Tremen said grimly, his hand coming to a rest on her fiery backside. He shook his head. "I really am tired of this. Villain am I? A conqueror? Daughter of the Strong, you have no idea what a real conqueror is."

He dumped her on the floor, and for the first time Hallie, sobbing, her face as red as her battered bottom, caught hold of her nether cheeks with ginger hands. She bent until her forehead almost touched her knees, letting the rushes absorb her tears as he slammed out the door.

* * * *

Her bottom was still throbbing and burning later that evening when he finally returned. He got undressed without looking at her and, without speaking, climbed into bed. Once again, Hallie opted to sleep on the floor. With a pillow and a blanket her only comforts, she faced the hearth so she wouldn't have to look at him and tried to find a comfortable position in which to sleep. Lying on her back put pressure on her aching bottom. Trying to sleep on her sides was equally uncomfortable when the rushes scratched the tender skin of her behind. Which left sleeping on her stomach as the most comfortable pose and to be honest, that made the small of her back ache. Still, it was better than pressing her throbbing bottom against the stones, so she tried to maintain the position for a few seconds longer before, with a muffled groan, she rolled back onto her side.

"You know," Tremen said dryly. "There is a nice, soft, comfortable bed that you could be enjoying if only you were not so stubborn."

"I am a thousand times more comfortable on the floor," she sniffed, "than I could ever be up there with you."

He laughed at her. "Of course you are." She heard the bed shift as he folded his hands behind his head. "If your precious boy-man were betwixt these sheets instead of myself, why do I think you would hasten yourself to bed down here?"

She scoffed. "Do not be absurd."

"What is so absurd about it?" he demanded. "A blind man could see how he looked at you."

She raised her head to glare at him, but the mattress was too high and she couldn't see over his feet. "Robert was my friend."

"A friend you were about to marry," he pointed out. "And one who would have loved nothing more than to raised those skirts and tup that sweet honeypot of yours."

Hallie's jaw dropped. "How disgusting!"

Now it was Tremen's turn to sit up. "Why?" he asked. "For thinking he would want to tup you, or for mentioning your honeypot?"

"Both!" she snapped.

"Oh." He lay back down again. "You are right. There is more vinegar there between the silky softness of your thighs than there ever was of sweetness."

Grabbing her pillow, Hallie flung it onto the bed at him. "Beast!" She knew her aim was good when he grunted.

Then he laughed. "Thank you, my dear Hallie the Quick Tempered. I could use another pillow."

"Stop calling me by those silly names," she spat. "I am not your anything!"

"Come sleep in the bed," he beckoned. "It's big enough for us both and I promise not to touch you. Besides, without a pillow now you know you will find no comfort down there. In the morning you shall be as crooked as a crone."

He was right, but still Hallie scowled into the darkness and didn't move.

"We shall divide the bed right in half," Tremen offered. "I will even lay my sword between us."

"Ha!" she snapped. "Do, and I shall skewer you in the night."

"So long as one of us is eventually skewered in this bed.... "Tremen muttered.

She scowled fiercely, but since he couldn't see her face, the disgruntled expression was completely wasted on him. After a while, she crawled up onto her knees and glared at him, cradled in the softness of goosedown. "All right, villain. Get your sword."

Tremen tossed the blankets aside and got up to fetch his broad sword. Nearly four feet in length, not including the powerful hilt, when he lay it on the mattress between them it all but divided the bed from pillows to footboard.

Hallie was settling down under the covers and fluffing her pillow by the time he was ready to crawl back into bed beside her. "Happy?" he asked.

"No," she grumbled. "But I will attempt to be contented with the arrangement."

"You are a hard woman to please," he chuckled, pulling the blankets up to his waist and rolling onto his side. Cushioning his head on his arm, he looked at her. Or rather at the back of her head, since she had stubbornly rolled away from him. "So, my lovely Hallie of the Flowing Locks, tell me about yourself."

She half twisted back her head to eye him suspiciously. "Me?"

"It is you my eyes are fixed upon, and no one else is present."

She blinked, and then her eyes narrowed slightly. "What do you want to know?"

"Anything you would tell me," he said agreeably enough. "I know you are the Strong's daughter and that you are prickly, dislike villains and never do as you are told. But it is the woman beneath all of that that I would come to know."

Slowly, Hallie rolled onto her back, breathing in sharply when her bottom and mattress came into contact with one another, and quickly wriggled onto her side to ease the discomfort. "Give me a for instance?"

"All right." Tremen thought a moment. "If you could do anything in the world, what would you do tomorrow?"

"They will have shorn the sheep in Dwellan. My help will be needed in making the dyes."

"You would do that for fun?"

She snorted. "It is not fun."

"Well then, pretend that you will not spend tomorrow making dyes. What would you like to do?"

She watched him mistrustfully a moment more, and then sighed. "All right." She narrowed her eyes in thought this time, and was quiet for a very long time before some of the fine lines eased around her mouth and she said, "I would go swimming."

Tremen blinked in surprise and almost started to laugh. "Swimming? In the ocean?"

She drew back. "No, of course not!" She wrinkled her nose. "The ocean is too cold. It's full of jellies that sting and

fish that bite." She gave him another suspicious look before reluctantly confiding, "I have a secret place where I go. Tis inside a cave that is surrounded by trees and the water that comes up from the ground is warm. The pool is just big enough for me to swim and I go there when I want to be alone."

Tremen smiled. "I am glad you have a place like that. Perhaps someday you will allow me to come with you."

The look she gave him suggested he might not want to hold his breath in anticipation. But all she said was, "What about you? What do you like to do?"

"Dancing," he said with a smile. "I enjoy dancing."

She gave him an incredulous look and then began to laugh.

"What?" he asked, half smiling back at the lovely picture she made just then.

"You," she said honestly. It was, perhaps, the first time she had spoken to him without a trace of rancor anywhere in her tone. "I find it very hard to imagine you in dips and turns, strutting to the courtiers' music, on the arms of all those fancy ladies. How do you do it without tripping?"

He arched his eyebrows at her. "No need to be insulting. Perhaps I am not as good at it as some other men, but I think I would not leave you too embarrassed should you dare to take a tour upon my arm."

She laughed again, shaking her head. "I would not do that."

Smile fading, Tremen rolled onto his back. "Of course not. My villainous arm is a poor substitute for the Beardless Wonder's."

"It's not that," Hallie protested. "Well, you are still a villain, but I would not dance upon Robert's arm any more than I would yours. I would not because I cannot dance. When I was nine, my father sent for a tutor but it seemed a silly thing to learn when there were much more important things to do."

"Like sword play, riding a horse into battle, and learning how to use a bow?"

She sniffed at him. "No, actually. I did not learn to use a bow until I was twelve. Besides, a woman should learn how to do boy things. How else is she supposed to be self-sufficient?"

"Nobody is self-sufficient," Tremen told her. "But I can understand the desire."

Rolling onto her back, she hissed a quick breath and instantly turned onto her side to face the wall again. "Oh, my poor bottom. I really do hate you."

"Your bottom would not pain you nearly as much if you would only practice a little kindness towards me. And, failing that, politeness would work."

She grumbled. "'Tis hard to be polite to a—"

Tremen held up his hand. "Don't say it, Daughter of the Strong. We are only just now beginning to have a good night; let us not ruin it."

She remained quiet. That was a good sign. Maybe she didn't want to argue any more than he did.

"How about if we make each other a promise?" he suggested. "Tomorrow, we will start the day with a pleasant breakfast, followed by courtesy and politeness all day long you will refrain from insulting me and I will not add to the fire in your already well-roasted nethers—and as evening draws to a close, without a single argument between us, we will both retire for bed with smiles on our faces. Perhaps you will even allow me to kiss you without any overt shudders meant to destroy my manly ego. Would you be agreeable?"

After a long moment, she twisted her head to glance back over her shoulder at him. "You will only kiss my cheek right?"

It was a good thing she was so beautiful.

"Yes," Tremen sighed. "I will kiss your cheek and nothing else."

"Hm." She faced the wall again. "I will hold you to that, villain."

His mouth tightened and in an instant his hand flashed out to swat her. While Hallie yelped and grabbed her wounded rump indignantly, he rolled over to face the opposite wall.

* * * *

Hallie awoke the next morning to the feel of the sun's warming rays splashing across her face. Her bottom felt equally warm, by the sun she first thought, until she realized that she had rolled onto her back sometime in the night and the warmth she felt was the lingering effects of the day before. She groaned and covered her face with both hands. The last thing she wanted to do was think about the spanking. "Good morning."

Hallie parted her fingers and looked up at Tremen, and then groaned again. After a moment, knowing she couldn't fake still being asleep, she uncovered her face. "Good morning," she croaked.

Standing over her, Tremen smiled. At least he was dressed, albeit in only a tan pair of britches and a plain white shirt that hung to his thighs because he hadn't bothered to tuck it in. He hovered over her, holding out a cup like a peace offering. "Ale?"

"Ugh." She really didn't like him.

Hallie pushed herself into a sitting position, rubbed the sleep from her eyes and reluctantly took the cup. As their fingers brushed, she opened her mouth but he held up a warning hand.

"Remember," he said with a smile, "we promised nothing but courtesy and politeness between us today."

She groaned again. "Oh, and a kiss." She briefly closed her eyes.

"You enthusiasm to receive it overwhelms me." Still smiling, he turned towards the hearth and the table already laden with food. "Come and break your fast."

"How long have you been awake?" she asked, staring at the table, surprised that she hadn't heard the servants bring the trays to their room.

"Almost an hour."

"I probably will not eat but a bite or two," Hallie hedged as she slipped out of bed. "I am not really all that hungry." As she was reaching for her wrap, pulling it on over her nightgown, her stomach rumbled loudly. Hallie froze with one arm in and one arm out of the wrap. She looked at Tremen, who was looking back at her with that maddeningly charming smile on his face.

"All right," she conceded, a warm pink stain flushing her cheeks. "I might be a little bit hungry after all."

"Come and eat," he said again, and pulled out a chair for her. As she drew near, he asked, "Would you like a pillow to sit upon?" Again, Hallie froze in step, her cheeks burning even hotter until he quickly added, "I am not trying to start an argument, nor am I rubbing your nose in yesterday's misadventures. I am merely seeking to make you comfortable."

Swallowing her pride and a sharp retort, Hallie said primly, "No, thank you. I think I will be fine."

And she was. The hurt from yesterday had receded into little more than a mildly uncomfortable heat when she sat down. As he was scooting her chair closer to the table however, he took advantage of her distraction and kissed her on the cheek before she realized what he was about.

"You said you would not kiss me until bedtime," she protested, one hand flying up to touch the place where she could still feel the tingling imprint of his lips.

"Is it so unheard of for a man to kiss his wife good morning?" Tremen asked with a grin. His blue eyes were dancing with suppressed laughter and, captured in the morning sunlight, he looked so handsome that it was getting increasingly harder to remember just how villainous and vile the man truly was.

He was just becoming familiar, she scolded herself. Stop looking at him.

"I never saw my father kiss my mother," she grumbled, forcing her eyes to the empty plate that he put before her. "I never saw him kiss anyone else, for that matter, either." While he filled her plate with slices of fresh baked bread, cheese, apples and grapes, she tried to recall one time that she had seen her father display even the smallest amount of physical affection. She blinked several times, but could recall nothing in particular. "He patted my back once," she finally said. "I shot an arrow into the center target from two hundred yards."

There was a notable pause as he was shifting to slices of warm chicken onto her plate, and then he cleared his throat. "That was well done."

"Yes, that is what he said, too." Hallie brightened a little and popped a grape into her mouth.

Sitting down beside her, albeit at the head of the table, Tremen began to serve himself while she thought on the subject some more.

"I saw Helen kiss the stableman's eldest son once," she finally said.

Tremen looked at her. "Did you?"

"Yes, but I doubt if that counts."

Tearing a smaller piece of bread off his larger slice, he quirked an eyebrow at her. "Why not?"

"Because cook saw it too and gave her the birch, both for that and having hay in her hair. You could hear the poor girl's howls all the way to the stable."

"Well," Tremen cleared his throat a corner of his mouth twitching as he buttered his bread and spread a spoonful of tart strawberry jam on top. "I, for one, saw my mother kiss my father every morning, every night and, on most days, often in between. Which goes to explain why there are so many of us little Southbys running around Wessex."

Beginning to enjoy their breakfast in spite of herself, she was just about to ask how many siblings he had when they were interrupted by a loud knock at the door.

"Come in!" Tremen called.

Hallie picked up her first piece of cheese, but it never made it to her mouth. The minute she saw Marston's face, she stopped eating.

"Five people were killed on the road to Monmouthe," Marston told Tremen. "We got the news this morning from a man from Dwellen. He thinks he might know where the raiders are camped."

Standing up, Tremen began to tuck his pants in. He sighed, "Get the horses ready."

Hallie jumped up from the table and ran to get dressed.

"What are you doing?" Tremen asked as he retrieved his sword and strapped it around his waist.

"I am going with you." She pulled yesterday's gown over her head, wriggling into it in record time.

"No, you are not."

Hallie spun around, her hands flying to her hips as she glared at him. While Marston did his best to be unintrusive, Tremen picked up his boots and sat down at the table to pull them on. "I can be useful to you," she reasoned. "Nobody knows these lands better than I do."

"This could well be dangerous," he told her. Boots on, he then reached for his armor. "I want you here where 'tis safer."

She clenched her jaw, struggling to keep her temper in check. "I am not a simpering maid who needs protecting. I have lived here a lot longer than you have."

He didn't look at her but continued to buckle himself into his armor. "Remember, we agreed to one day of no arguments."

"That day may well have to be tomorrow if you insist on treating me like a piece of porcelain!" When his head snapped up to glare at her, Hallie wisely decided to change tactics. "All right. If you do not want me with you where the heart of the danger will be, then fine. I will take a small group of men and we can begin escorts for the pilgrims. We could stop them at the border, wait until we get larger groups together," her voice began to rise as Tremen shook his head, "and then make the journey to the monastery enmasse—Why not?!"

"I want you at the Keep. I will have enough to worry about without having to worry about whether or not you are still in one piece."

"I can take care of myself, Tremen!" she snapped. "I am not a child, and I resent your treating me as if I were!" "You may not be a child," he snapped back, "but you will do as I tell you anyway."

"When pigs fly!"

Tremen stopped tightening the buckles of his armor and took two ominous steps towards her before he stopped. Gritting his teeth, he looked from her to Marston, who quietly retreated from the room and closed the door.

Hallie stiffened her back as he approached her. She lifted her chin, stubbornly facing him down although his expression alone was enough to make her knees shake and her hands dart back to protect her bottom, even as it clenched in apprehension.

"Do not ever contradict me in front of anyone ever again," he told her darkly. "I have told you my preference, and I will expect you to adhere to it or there will be consequences. If you want to feel useful, there are wifely obligations a-many right here at home you could attend to. Or, failing that, a moat just outside these walls that still needs to be dug!"

Though he turned on his heel and stalked towards the door without laying so much as a hand upon her, Hallie didn't stop shaking until the door had closed behind him and he was long since gone.

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Chapter Seven

Robert had defied God on the voyage to the Danish settlement; God remained silent the whole journey back again. The ocean was as calm as ever he'd seen it and the skies were black as pitch. Not even the stars dared to shine tonight and a fog had rolled in over the waves, blocking the land from sight. But the Danes were experts at this. They navigated the fog as if it were clear daylight, bringing the boats unerringly along the shore to the mouth of a narrow river. No one spoke, no one made a sound, but the night was alive with noises.

The water rippled, it lapped in whispers against the shoreline as they rowed their way up the river, and with every dip of the oars that swished them ever closer to Burkshire, Robert heard the muted roar of victory. Somewhere in the darkness, a hunting owl screeched it and the pounding of his own blood in his temples heralded his triumph over The Interloper. The savage Vikings all but guaranteed it.

Robert turned his head to look at the shadowy figure of Sweyn. From the angle of his head, he knew the man was staring back at him. If the Vikings did as he said, if they killed the intruder, then nothing more would keep him from taking possession of what was rightfully his.

But what if Sweyn decided he wanted Burkshire rather than simply filling his boat full of her wealth. What if he decided he wanted Hallie? Robert stared at the Viking's shadow. Every push of the oars that brought them closer to their destination made his blood race in his veins. He felt powerful. He felt invincible. He wondered if it would be enough to kill a Viking.

* * * *

Marston took off his glove as he dropped to one knee and held his hand flat over the fire pit a few inches above the coals. After moving his hand in a slow circle above the charred remains, he dropped his palm to within an inch. Turning half-burned log over, he bent down and, careful to pull graying locks out of the way, gently blew on the white ash. Bits of charcoal blew away, but on his second slow puff, a flicker of orange was uncovered. It flared with the air Marston fed it, the wood popped and then a small flame leapt back to life.

Marston put the log down and sat back on his heels. Glancing back at Tremen, he said, "This was last night's camp. We are getting closer."

As one, both men turned to look at the fast-running creek not ten yards away.

"That is deep enough for a boat," Tremen observed.

"Aye," Marston agreed. "But following it will not lead to the monastery."

"Eventually though, it will bring them close to the Keep and then to the ocean." Tremen drew a deep breath, his eyes narrowing in thought. "Judging by the tracks I see here, I do not think they are foolish enough to attack there, regardless. I doubt if there are more than four, five men at the most. I am tired of chasing their footprints. We are going to do this differently. I want sentries of three posted every two hundred yards along the road for the next five miles. They are to signal by horn if they catch sight of these raiders and run them to the ground. Inform the serfs if they wish our protection they may bed down in the Keep at night and work their fields during the day, when 'tis safer."

Perhaps that would appease his lady wife, he thought, a corner of his mouth twisting wryly upwards. At the very least, perhaps it would make her more willing to forget their argument of the morning so they could still enjoy a relatively peaceful evening.

"Aye, milord." Marston signaled to two nearby soldiers and moved off to speak with them while Tremen wandered down to the creek.

Standing on the sandy bank, he squatted down to get a better look at a footprint there. His eyes narrowed again and, with forearms resting upon his knees, he studied the tracks. There was a funnel in the sand made by the bottom of the boat as they'd pushed it back into the water. Something bothered him about these tracks; something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Reaching down, he lightly traced the outline with his gloved fingertips. They weren't acting like Vikings, he suddenly realized. Rather, they were acting more like decoys. * * * *

Hallie twisted her long brown hair into a single, fat braid and then wrapped it into a bun at the back of her head to keep it from getting dirty. She wore her oldest dress, a gown that had been turned so many times and let out to accommodate her teenaged growth that the only part of the dress that still retained its once vibrant blue color was along the seams. But though the gown was faded and the stitches worn and weak, for today, this was the perfect dress for the job.

Taking a deep bracing breath, Hallie picked up her shovel and the hem of her skirt and climbed down into the moat with the rest of the men already hard at work. These were her men, her people, and they knew her force of will. Instead of arguing, they only moved over and gave her room.

Her slippers became instantly saturated with the foul smelling mud as she waded into the muck, sinking in almost to her knees. But unlike the day before, she kept her revulsion locked firmly within and took up a position in the deepest, unworked section beneath the bridge. It was the first time in all her life that she had ever dug a hole, but she had eyes. She watched what the other men did and copied them, holding the handle of her shovel the way they did, copying how they drove it into the ground, and then lifting as much of the runny muck as she could before dumping it into a slop bucket.

Hallie had always thought herself a strong woman, but by the time she had filled her first bucket, she was already panting, sweating, and her muscles were beginning to feel the effects of the work she forced them to. And yet, when the first bucket was lifted away and a second lowered down to her, Hallie only drove her shovel back into the ground and filled that one as well. She was angry and determined. She would show Tremen she was not some useless ornament to be kept locked behind safe walls. The head of her shovel scraped the rocks as she stabbed the ground again and again, lifting out the filthy muck one bucket at a time. She would show him....

She cleared out the space beneath the drawbridge and moved into the bright sunlight on the other side. The earth here was harder, the sun working to dry up what little water remained of the moat, but it quickly proved to be no friend to her. Beating down on her head and shoulders, as Hallie continued to dig the sun pierced through her clothing to burn her skin. She tried her best to keep her back to the rays, protecting her face as best she could, but her hands from the tips of her fingers to her wrist where her sleeves began turned a bright lobster red. Eventually, no matter how she turned, as the sun rose to its zenith, she could no longer shield her face.

She panted, every muscle in her body feeling the strain of having to lift the shovel, but she drove herself onward. Even roughened by years of wielding a sword, as her hands moved upon the wooden handle of the shovel, driving it into the earth over and over again, her skin began to tear. The handle turned red with her blood, but the pain that accompanied every scoopful was echoed by that of all the rest of her body, making it easier to bear. Her muscles were agonizingly tight, particularly between her shoulders and in the small of her back. And the sweat streaming down her stung her eyes, no matter how often she swiped at them with the back of her sleeve. It soaked into her dress until it felt as if it weighed a ton.

Still, she kept digging. Her stubborn determination kept her in pace with the other men, although she seemed to break more often than they did when the water bucket came around. Anna brought it down to her twice, each time begging, "Please come up, milady. Yer look right ready to fall!"

"It has to be done," Hallie told her, the raspiness of her own voice surprising her the last time Anna pleaded with her to stop.

The back of her hands, her wrists, neck and face all stung under the punishing sun. Sweat dripped from her face, stinging her eyes and her lips, trickling from her shoulders to the small of her back. She could even feel droplets sliding down her legs beneath her hot skirts. The other men in the trench did little more than remove their shirts and get back to work, their bronze, hard backs shining in the sunlight and rippling as they dug. How many sunburns had they endured before their skin had tanned like that, she wondered. Like Tremen's.

Resting heavily against the shovel, needing just a moment to rest, Hallie signaled for a cup of water. More than anything, she would have liked to climb back out of the muck and go back inside. She wanted to soak her aching hands and then maybe sleep for a year. She lifted her eyes to judge the height of the sun, which seemed to have frozen directly above her, and then shook her head at herself. If she went in now, then Tremen could be justified in thinking her weak and useless. He could be justified in keeping her trapped at home, behind the safety of stifling walls.

A tiny part of her wondered if he would.

Of course he would, she argued with herself. He was a villain first and a man second, and all men thought that way.

Except perhaps for her father. Although if forced to be honest with herself, Hallie wasn't all that sure if her father had ever noticed her boyish ways long enough to care one way or another. But at least, with a sword in her hand, once in a while she succeeded in capturing his attention.

Having come too far to quit before the job was done, Hallie drank a cup of cooling water, swishing it through her dry mouth before swallowing, and then went back to work.

One shovelful at a time, they removed the foul smelling mud until they reached the good earth below. Her shaky knees buckled and more than once she fell in the mud, but by God, if she wasn't still working when the job was finally finished.

A single cheer went up among the men; Hallie just sat down in the dirt, panting hard, tired to the very bones and aching all over. She hadn't realized just how badly she'd hurt her hands until she looked at the bloody handle of the shovel. It was almost completely bathed in dark red. Turning her hands over, she hissed when she saw them.

She did her best to pick away the dirt and the flaps of torn skin from her trembling fingers and the soft pads of her palms, but then gave up. Trying to find a clean spot on her undershift was just as difficult, and in the end she settled for as clean as possible. She tore two strips with which to wrap her hands until she had time to clean them properly, and then joined the line of men at the ladder, each awaiting their turn to climb up and out of the moat. As she stood waiting, a soft sound from behind caught her attention. Hallie turned to see two young men dumping buckets of dry dirt into the bottom of the moat. Belatedly, she remembered the second half of the job: the new moat that still needed to be dug

She was the second to the last to take her turn on the ladder when, just as she was reaching for it, a shadow crossed in front of her, blocking out the sun. That minute of blessed relief was ruined by the sonorous voice of Tremen as he said, "What in God's name are you doing down there?"

Hallie lifted her head to glare at him. Her mouth was dry and anyway she was in no mood to snipe back. Taking hold of the ladder about halfway up, she pulled her muddy skirts out of the way and made herself step up onto that first rung. Each step after that was like a specially designed torment for her arms and legs. As tired as she was, it took all her strength just to climb to eyes-level with the drawbridge.

A hand dipped down in front of her eyes. "Come on," Tremen said tiredly. "Let me help you."

She frowned at the brown, broad fingers, his nails being just as dirty and broken as hers, and then she raised her eyes to his. "I do not want your help."

"Take it anyway," he coaxed.

She just plain hurt too much not to. She reached up to clasp his wrist and grit her teeth against the involuntary cry of pain as the aching muscles of her arms and back were forced to stretch. He lifted her the rest of the way to the bridge and helped her to her feet. She staggered towards the shade of the Keep, so tired that the weight of her gown felt as if it were pulling her to the ground. She all but swayed on her feet and her knees kept trying to buckle. It was a relief when she was finally able to put her back to the wall. Leaning against it helped to keep her standing.

"You cannot think I was serious when I told you to dig," Tremen chided as he reached back down to help pull up the shovels. He stopped, however, when he was handed the one with the bloody handle.

He stared at it for a long moment, before turning back to her. She met his look with tired defiance until his eyes drifted down to her bandaged hands. When they stayed there, growing uncomfortable, she folded her arms across her chest to hide them from sight.

"Give me your hands," Tremen said. Dropping the shovel, he headed towards her.

"No." She rolled on the wall until her back was to him. Feeling almost sick, she closed her eyes as if that alone could keep him from hassling her. She didn't want to deal with this now. More than anything, she wanted something to drink and then to sleep.

Catching her elbow, Tremen forced her arms apart. He caught his breath when he saw the spots of blood beginning to seep through the dirty bandages. "How could you have done this?"

"I did what you wanted," she snapped, yanking her hand out of his. "Dig the moat, is that not what you told me?" Turning on her heel, on shaking legs, she picked up her bloody shovel and headed for the line of men already excavating the new moat. And over her shoulder she yelled back, "I can take care of myself!"

She needn't have yelled; he was right behind her. She got no more than a dozen steps before his hand clamped down like a vise on her shoulder, spinning her around. "And what a splendid job you are doing of it, too!"

Hallie began to shout, "Do not—" but he ducked down and his shoulder hit her midriff, lifting her off the ground. She dropped her shovel and grabbed his back to keep from falling as he tossed her over his back like a sack of flour, turning all the world upside down. A sharp stab of pain rocked through her skull and her stomach almost rebelled. "Let me go, Tremen! Put me down!"

"Be quiet!" Holding her legs, Tremen carried her back into the shadow of the Keep. A servant opened the Hall door for him and Hallie's cheeks flushed even hotter than her sunburn when she saw the grin on the man's face.

Her fury erupted. She beat on his back and kicked her feet, bucking on his shoulder until he very nearly dropped her. "I said put me down, you over-bearing—"

His hand struck her bottom like a thunderclap, the sound echoing sharply through the Hall and shocking her into momentary stillness. "Oh, you bastard!"

Tremen started up the stairs, growling, "My mother would argue."

A wave of dizziness had Hallie bracing her hands against his back to lift herself up. Hanging upside down was beginning to make her hot head pound like a beaten drum and her stomach was churning, threatening upheaval. "P-put me down ... I-I mean it..."

"No." He swatted her bottom again. "You never listen to reason." A third hard clap had her stiffening and thrusting back a hand to protect her already stinging bottom from further assaults. "But I never thought—" WHAP! He caught her bottom sharply mere inches below her splayed fingers.

"Oh!"

"—that you—" WHACK! "—would injure—" SMACK! " yourself—" WHACK! "—like THIS!" WHAP!

"Stop it!" Hallie shouted and tried to grab his arm before he could spank her again. It was like wrestling with a dragon. His arm pulled effortlessly out of hers and he vented his frustrations all over her smarting backside.

Already burning from a day under the sun, the added fire his hand was igniting underneath her skirts was more than she could suffer through. Grabbing his thigh with both hands, Hallie sank her teeth into his upper left buttock and clamped down hard.

"Aargh!" Tremen almost dropped her, and she let go. He roughly set her back on her feet at the top of the stairs. He grabbed where she'd bit him, craning his head first to stare at his trousers and then at her with a darkening mixture of both fury and shock. "You bit me!"

Swaying on her feet, Hallie wasn't feeling well enough to attempt smugness. But she did lift her chin, holding one hand out wardingly as she slumped against the wall. "You humiliated me first, villain!" He grabbed her arm and marched her the rest of the way to their room. He slammed the door so hard behind him that it shook the walls. Hallie barely saw him reaching for his belt. Ducking out of his reach, she clapped a hand over her mouth and ran to the bed. Collapsing to her knees, she only just got the chamberpot beneath her when her stomach began to heave. Every drop of water that she had left within her was violently expelled.

She had no idea just when Tremen knelt down beside her, but in midst of the worst of the spasms her hair was pulled out of the way and one of his hands came to rest on her back and stayed there until, her sides aching, with nothing left inside her to vomit up, the heaving finally stopped.

Panting, as limp as a wrung-out rag, Hallie pushed the chamberpot away. She sagged against the floor, unable to move, her sunburned face was so hot that it actually felt good when she pressed her cheek to the side of the porcelain pot.

Slowly, she rolled onto her back and closed her aching eyes. Aching, at this point, was a very good way to describe the whole of her. Her back, her hands, her neck, her head, and her bottom now, thanks to Tremen. Even her lips hurt, and she tentatively moistened them with the tip of her tongue. When she felt his hand work its way beneath her knees, she whispered, "Do not touch me, villain."

Shaking his head, Tremen ignored her. He slid one arm under her legs and the other carefully beneath her shoulders, picking her up anyway. "I no longer know if you are stubborn or just a fool." He carried her back to the table, placing her gently on one stool and smoothing stray sweat-dampened wisps of her hair back from her scorched face and neck. He then retrieved the pitcher of fresh water and the basin from the nightstand. He filled a cup for her and held it to her lips.

"Do not drink," he told her. "Swirl it through your mouth and spit it out in this." He held the basin to her chin and waited for her to comply, then gave her another sip of water. "Again."

Hallie was too weary not to obey, and as soon as her mouth was empty again, he set the basin aside and pulled up a stool to sit in front of her.

"Show me your hands," he ordered.

"I can do this myself," she said stiffly, folding her arms across her chest to hide her hands from him.

Cursing under his breath, he grabbed her arm and pulled her right hand over the basin.

"Do you ever take 'no' at face value?" she snapped.

"Do you?" he countered irritably. "Unfurl your fingers."

She kept her hand clenched at first, but then he glared at her and with her bottom still stinging from her last spot of defiance, she slowly opened her hand for his inspection. She hadn't realized just how bad her hands were hurt until the dirty strips of her underskirt were unwrapped, revealing crusted blood, dirt and the oozing sores beneath.

"Damn it, Hallie," Tremen chided. He shook his head as he stared at the damaged flesh of one palm. Then he reached out and took hold of her other wrist, forcing her fingers open so he could see the extent of the wounds. Sighing, he positioned her hands over the basin and picked up the pitcher of water. "What were you trying to do?"

Despite his harsh words, his calloused hands were extremely gentle as he washed away the dirt, revealing open, oozing sores. The water both stung and felt good at the same time, not just as it poured over her broken flesh, but as it dribbled over the sunburned backs of her hands and arms.

"I was trying to be useful," she snapped back. "It was the only way you would allow."

"I did not mean for you to make yourself sick by actually digging out the moat," he scolded. "Villain you call me, but when have I ever treated you that way? What good will it do either of us if you get sick or your hands become crippled from infection?"

Her face burning now for reasons other than the sunburn, she started to pull her hands out of his. "Let go of me."

In no mood to argue, he grabbed her wrists and pulled her hands back over the basin of bloody, dirty water. "Stop fighting me, Hallie. Just stop."

"Or what?" she countered, her voice rising sharply. "You will spank me again?"

His mouth flattened into a tight, unfriendly line. "Do you want me to?"

Neither one of them moved.

"No," she said thickly, and tried again to pull her hands away. She turned away on the stool, but his hands refused to let her go.

"Then why," he asked, "do you keep forcing me to it?"

Gritting her teeth, in a burst of fury, Hallie ripped her arms out of his grasp. "Because I do not like you!" she shouted. Her eyes clashed against his, angry one moment but then, against her will, she felt the uncontrollable burn of tears. Her bottom lip began to tremble and her chest heaved, but she struggled to suppress those tell-tale weaknesses as she insisted, "I do not like you."

His irritation seeming to die with the arrival of her tears, Tremen reached down to pick up the cloth once more. He dipped it into the pitcher of cool, fresh water and again reached for her hand. She slapped his away, but he kept coming. In desperation, she folded her arms across her chest, stubbornly tucking her hands up into her armpits to keep from having to endure his touch.

He was nothing if not just as stubborn as she. He closed his fingers around her left wrist and gently but firmly pulled her hand back out where he could minister to it. "Tell me, Hallie," he said softly. "Is there anything ... anything at all ... that I could have done that would have made you feel any differently the day I first came here?"

Hallie bit her bottom lip, but it wobbled anyway. Tears began to trickle down her sunburned face and though she tried not to make any sound her next breath came as an indrawn sob, almost choking her. "No," she whispered.

Tremen nodded, not blinking, not looking away. He unfolded the cloth to find a clean spot upon it, remoistened it in the cool, clean water, and then reached up to cup her face. As he pressed the cool comfort to first one burning cheek and then the other, he asked, "All right then, how do we move beyond that obstacle to the rest of our lives?"

Unable to keep them back, Hallie lost the fight against her tears. They spilled from her eyes without stopping. Her shoulders shook and every breath was a ragged, sobbing gasp. "I don't know!" She turned her face away, trying to push back his hands, but he only dropped the cloth and pulled her onto his lap. "Don't!"

She struggled against him. But somehow her head found his shoulder anyway, and his arms found their way around her. She couldn't remember the last time anyone had held her like this, and she cried even harder as he began to rock her.

"Shh," he murmured in her ear. "It will be all right, Hallie. Eventually, everything will be."

"No." Hallie pressed her burning eyes into his shirt, letting it absorb her tears as she shook her head. Her nose was running and she could barely catch her breath between sobs so hard they were hurting her chest. "No, it won't."

She struggled to get her tears to stop and had almost managed it when he asked, "What makes you so certain of that?"

Hiccupping and snorting and barely able to breathe, every muscle hurting and so tired she could barely bring her aching hands up to push the hair out of her sore face, Hallie shook her head. The unmentionable had locked itself within her mind, but she dared not give voice to it.

"Why not?" he asked again.

His gentle persistence was her undoing. It brought back a whole new wave of unstoppable tears that poured from her eyes and racked her shoulders with sobs. "Because I do not hate you," she confessed. Sobbing loudly, she punched him in the shoulder and then sagged against him, hiding her face in her bloody hands. "I just wish I did!"

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Chapter Eight

Four ships made the trek across the ocean and, hidden from the shore by a shroud of thick fog, glided into the mouth of a narrow stream at least twenty miles from Burkshire. They sailed two miles inland before reaching the first sandbar which was high enough to force the men out of the boats. Without complaint, they formed a line to either side of each vessel, picked them up and carried them across to deeper water. After that, the currents moved more slowly and they made quicker progress as they paddled upstream.

The oars dipped in and out of the water with great pains taken toward silence. At night, the fog echoed even the smallest sound, distorting and amplifying them, until Robert all but jumped at the croaking of a frog.

In the dark, he felt Sweyn's eyes on him, burning holes through his skin to his soul, and that only served to increase his unease. Sheer force of will kept his eyes locked on the tree-shadowed darkness. He stared as far ahead of them as the fog would allow and his mind stayed locked upon his most immediate goal: to reclaim Burkshire, the keep that should have been his by right. Nothing else mattered by that.

The Danish raiders pushed on, continuing up the stream until the fog began to lift and a soft grey light began to paint over the stars, signaling the arrival of the sun. In the low light of the fading darkness, Robert spied two deer drinking at the edge of the stream. Beside him, Sweyn saw them, too. Sweyn stood up. Drawing his bow, he notched an arrow and took careful aim. The gut thong twanged and the arrowstruck the deer in the neck, sending an arch of blood spurting through the air. The buck leapt in three panicked springs before falling to the ground at the water's edge.

"We camp here today," Sweyn said as he sat back down again, laying his bow across his knees. He turned from the deer and looked at Robert. "You have good hunting here."

Robert made himself smile, then turned to look out across the water at the approaching shore. The deer still kicked its legs, its blood feeding into the tall cattails. The Viking meant to take Burkshire for himself. His jaw clenched, and then clenched again.

Patience, he told himself. He had to be calm. He had to be clever. He had to wait until Sweyn and his men got rid of Tremen. One problem at a time. But before the week was out, he knew, he was going to have to kill Sweyn.

* * * *

Hallie spent the next few days in bed, regularly soaking her hands in a pot of warmed wine in an effort to avoid infection. The rest of the time, she hovered near the window where she could watch all that was happening outside. From the shadows of her room, she observed the progress being made on the new curtain wall. At least thirty men, both soldiers and serfs, had beaten back the encroaching vegetation of the forest, designated and leveled the path of the new wall, and even laid the first stone block. Another thirty more, she knew, were busily cutting stones from the old quarry that had birthed Monmouthe over two centuries ago. Although there were still well over two hundred serfs free to work their farms, Hallie couldn't help but harbor concerns for the winter. Last year had been particularly cold, with the snow falling sooner and lasting longer than it had in the last ten. If this year was even half as bad, then she—or rather Tremen—would be forced to take what few pearls, wool or dye remained after paying the King's danegold and trade with neighboring towns for enough food to get them through the hard months.

Hallie supposed she ought to consult with Tremen about it, but he was not in Burkshire. Stifling a sigh, she scanned from the courtyard to the training camp beyond the new moat, though she knew well enough that Tremen wasn't there either. These days, he spent most of his time riding patrol with his men, escorting pilgrims when they found them, but no closer to catching the murderous raiders than she could catch her own shadow. Picking at the dead skin on her palms, she rested her forehead against the sill and sighed again just as Anna came into the room.

"Ye'll pardon my saying," the maid tsked as she walked around the bed, carrying a stack of fresh bandages for her hands. "But ye've brought this on yerself."

The comment drew an instantly grumpy frown from Hallie. "Not that it's entirely yer fault." Anna lay the bandages on the side of the massive bed and, slightly mollified, Hallie was about to turn back to the window when the maid added, "Rather t'was yer father's." Hallie snapped around, her hands clenching into fists. Her nails dug painfully into her palms. "You take that back!"

Anna looked up in surprise. "'Tis the truth, beggin' yer pardon, m'lady. 'E never should 'ave let yer run so wild, teachin' yer things best left to the men, and naught o' what a woman needs to know. Small wonder yer poor 'usband 'as 'is 'ands so full!"

Poor husband?! Hallie snapped her gaping jaw shut with an audible clacking of her teeth. She had to swallow three times before she could make her tone a coldly civil one rather than an outraged shriek. "People who begin their comments with 'Pardon my saying' would probably do better to keep their mouths shut!"

Snapping back around, Hallie faced the window again. She folded her arms over her chest, hugging herself tightly and clenching her fists. It hurt to do it, but the pain helped to keep her temper in check.

Behind her, Anna cleared her throat. "Yer right, ma'am. I should have said aught; t'wasn't my place."

As had been happening all too frequently these days, a tickle of sad fragility began to prick inside her. Softly, she said, "I do not think my father a bad man for the way he raised me."

"Course not," Anna soothed, coming up behind her. "T'wasn't 'is fault at all yer mum passed on so young. I misspoke meself. There isn't a one of us not proud of all yer've tried t'do for us. It's just if yer'd been born a boy, there wouldn't 'ave been no problems." Hallie tsked. As if she weren't already very well aware of that!

"Come on, m'lady," Anna said, reaching to take Hallie's hands. She looked at her wounded palms critically. "We should get these taken care of."

The maid tugged and Hallie followed, sitting down on the edge of the bed to endure the stinging discomfort as Anna washed the wounds yet again before bandaging them in the clean, fresh strips of linen. But within a moment of the maid's leaving, Hallie found herself back at the window. More restless now than she could ever remember being before, she watched the people working and training where she could not join them. Although her skin was already beginning to itch and peel, for the most part her face, neck and hands were still brightly burned. Soaking her hands was a necessary torture that she had to endure, but the agony of coming under the heat of the sun did more to keep her in her room than Tremen's threats of turning her bottom a hot shade to match the rest of her.

Turning, Hallie walked around the bed to retrieve her short sword. Perhaps she couldn't go outside, but that didn't mean she had to languish in immobility.

The pleasure of lifting the blade almost overwhelmed the pain of wrapping her hands around the hilt. Within her, the restlessness found appeasement in simply holding her sword and in taking up the first pose of a familiar fighting stance.

Hallie closed her eyes and, as she had so many times in practice, began to move. She swung the weapon in a gentle arch, letting it swoop through the air as she twirled a half turn around into her second stance. It was almost like dancing, she supposed, a slight smile curving at her mouth as she thrust and parried in practiced measures around her bedroom. Somehow, she doubted if these were the turns Tremen took with his fancy ladies in the King's company.

"You have some skill."

Hallie started, even as she recognized the voice as Tremen's. Her hand convulsed on the hilt of the sword and she gasped, very nearly dropping it out of reflex. The tip of the blade clattered against the floor as she spun around.

Standing in the doorway, Tremen held up his hands. "I apologize. It was not my intention to frighten you."

"I was not frightened," she snapped defensively, her tone much sharper than she meant it to be. "I-I could have taken your head off."

A crooked half smile tugged at his features and he slowly came towards her. "A few days ago you probably would have just to prove you could. How fortunate I am that you no longer hate me."

Hallie looked away, blushing just a little. Her behavior where he was concerned hadn't exactly been a shining example of her best. She cleared her throat. "That still does not mean I like you."

"Oh, of course not," he agreed. "And, to be honest, I expect nothing less from the Daughter of the Strong. After all, what are we without the strength of our convictions." He came to a stop in front of her, that oddly charming and yet slightly irritating smile on his face. Gesturing to the weapon, he said, "You do that very well." Reluctant to take a compliment from him, Hallie only scoffed. "You must be the only person in the world to think it not a scandal for a sword to be in the hand of a mere female."

Now it was Tremen's turn to scoff. "There is nothing 'mere' about you." After a moment, he held out his hand. "May I?"

Her frown deepened, but Hallie turned the blade away from him and lay the hilt in his palm.

"Very nice," he complimented, feeling the weight and balance. She watched as he cut the sword through the air, making a smooth and practiced thrust at an invisible foe. He held the sword vertically straight up and down while he examined the edge of the blade, turning it to best catch the light from the window. "Very nice, indeed." He looked at her. "Do you want to know what you did wrong with it?"

Hallie's spine went instantly broom-stick straight. "I did nothing wrong with it!"

He cocked an eyebrow at her and waited.

She clenched her jaw once. Then twice. Then, rolling her eyes, she reluctantly gave in, grumbling, "All right. What did I do?"

"Your grip was off center." Tremen moved around behind her, putting the sword back in her bandaged hands. His arms came around her and he closed his hands over hers, moving into that first fighting stance. "If you grasp the hilt too far forward, you obstruct your own range of motion. Your jabs become short and more predictable for your opponent."

"Yes, but too far back and I lose control," she protested.

"And here is the happy medium." He adjusted her hands upon the hilt. "Do you feel it here?"

At the moment, all she could feel was the heat of his chest burning into her back. His arms were hard, strong and defined, and his hands completely covered her own, his thick fingers concealing her bandages. And that wasn't all. Above the cushion of her bottom, pressing almost against the small of her back, she could feel a strong bulge at his hip level.

Hallie glanced back at him over one shoulder. There was a molten look in his eyes that made her mouth run dry. A heady awareness warmed between her thighs, heating in the pit of her belly, and as she drew in a slow breath she could feel the tightening of her nipples as they scraped the inside of her shift. The softest linen became like the coarsest wool. As his gaze dipped from her eyes to her lips, for clarification she asked, "Exactly which sword is it that you wish me to feel?"

His smile spread like sun-warmed honey, turning decisively wolfish at the corners. "I would happily spar with you with either, my dear Hallie the Enrapturing." He reached up to brush her a wisp of hair back from her eyes and the warmth of his palm came to cup her cheek. "My Hallie the Beautiful."

"You already said that once."

"Have I?"

She may as well have been out too long in the sun all over again. An odd weakness was creeping through her limbs, causing her knees to shake.

His thumb caressed her cheek. "You are trembling." "No, I am not," she lied. His laugh was low and throaty. "Yes, you are. I suppose I am to blame for this as well."

"You should not be surprised," she whispered, her voice not trembling too as his hand upon her cheek drifted down to press flat upon her stomach and his breath caressed her ear. "You have done terrible things to me since the day you arrived."

"Horrible," he agreed, his lips barely brushing the shell of her ear.

That slight touch was equivalent to having her legs knocked out from under her. Had his arms not been around her, she would have fallen. As it was, she barely knew it when he took the sword from her hands altogether and dropped it on the floor at their feet.

She turned in his embrace and, as he pulled her close with one arm, his other hand gliding up to cup her nape, Hallie raised her chin.. Even her breath was shaky as it fled her body. She wanted to watch it happen, but as his lips drifted down to hers, her eyes closed of their own accord. Every nuance within her waited intently to feel his kiss, but it never came. Instead, the sound of horses' hooves galloping over the drawbridge and shouting in the courtyard startled them both apart.

"We have them on the run!"

Tremen all but tossed Hallie aside in his haste to get to the window. Tripping on her own feet, she fell on the bed.

Tremen shouted down into the courtyard. "Marston?"

"We have them!" Marston shouted back.

Tremen spun from the window, an odd mix of excitement in his eyes and suppressed anger darkening his face. "I must go," he said, running to the door.

Hallie ran after him as far as the door, but then turned and went back to the window. She leaned outside, watching as Tremen ran out the front, virtually leaping onto the back of the horse the Cray brought out for him. People scrambled to get out of the way as they galloped out of Burkshire together.

Her eyes narrowed. They both of them looked so grimly pleased with themselves that there was only one thing that she could think of to cause it. They had found the raiders.

* * * *

The hooves of his horse pounded over the moist dirt, crashing through dead leaves and beds of crawling ivy. The low hanging branches of the trees swept past his head and, if Tremen hadn't ducked at the last second, one would have knocked him right out of his saddle.

There was excitement in the thundering of his and Marston's horses as they galloped hard and fast through the woods, following the broad path of upturned earth that the Danes and pursuing Burkshire men had left behind. This moment had been a long time in coming and, as they drew close enough to hear the shouts and clashing steel of drawn swords, Tremen felt a sudden rush of exhilaration in his veins.

Their horses burst through the trees into a storm of arrows. There were eight battle-hardened Danes with axes and swords in hand, and two in the bushes with bows and arrows. Marston rode for them first, and Tremen swung out of his saddle to the ground, pulling his sword free as he turned to the fray.

Tremen could not count the number of battles that he had fought for Ethelred the Unready, but in the all the years that he had stood with sword at the ready, he could only count on one hand the number of times he had actually looked forward to the fight. For this one, he did though. Fighting for his own home, he discovered to his surprise, made all the difference in the world.

The first of his men fell to an arrow just as Tremen charged into the fray. He took the fallen man's place, meeting the hacking force of the smaller Dane's berserker blows with almost unthinking ease. By God, it almost felt good, the teeth jarring vibrations that rattled up his arms and sank into his bones as he stepped protectively over his injured man. But winning this skirmish would feel even better. As would riding home victorious to Burkshire, and to Hallie, proving once and for all by the sweat of his brow and the blood in his veins that he could defend this keep and her people.

Tremen forced the Dane back one step after another, only vaguely aware of the injured man crawling out from under his feet. Though smaller in stature, the scars on his opponent told a story of their own. He was not an untried boy, inexperienced in war. So when he suddenly ceased to give ground and instead bellowed, lunging and slashing at Tremen's neck, Tremen abruptly switched from offense to defense and got the hell out of the way.

It was the Dane's own strength that killed him in the end. He put all the power of his body into that attack, and when he missed, he could not stop the motion in time to block Tremen's thrust. Tremen buried his sword into the smaller man's side, sinking the point of his blade into his ribs between the clasps of his armor and all the way through his chest.

The feel of steel scraping bone was as much a mistake as it was an unmistakable sensation. Tremen felt it in his fingers the exact moment when, as the Dane was falling, his sword became caught. It was wrenched out of his hand and Tremen almost tripped as he struggled to get it back again.

A hard force collided with the back of his knees, knocking him over backwards. He hit the ground, landing half on the dying Dane he had dispatched to Valhalla mere seconds ago. Exactly what had swept his feet out from under him, Tremen didn't know. But as he scrambled to wrench his sword free of the body beneath him, from the corner of his eye Tremen saw his death approaching. The shadow of another Dane rushed in to meet him and Tremen had no blade with which to defend himself.

Abandoning his trapped sword, Tremen grabbed instead for the Danes, yanking it out from under the man and rolling onto his back in time to know he wasn't going to survive this.

Already his next opponent was directly over him, battleaxe upraised and a roar of absolute victory spilling from his mouth. It was the sound of a man fully prepared to take the life of another, and it was a sound that was abruptly cut short in the next instant when the shaft of an arrow suddenly appeared sticking out of his throat.

Time slowed down to an awkward crawl. The Dane's eyes bulged as blood spurted from his mouth on a rising fluidy gargle. Unable to hold onto his axe, he let it fall behind him as he staggered, reaching for the arrow instead. Sagging to his knees, the Dane gave Tremen a look of utter shock and then pitched over onto his face.

Rolling onto his knees, Tremen turned to see Hallie, still seated on the back of her horse, her bow in one hand and the other still poised from the arrow she had fired. The feet between them may have been miles for all the men that blocked his way to her, bellowing, shoving, both sides fighting for their lives. And yet when she opened her mouth, throwing down her bow and drawing her sword, as she slid off the back of her mount, it was as if she were murmuring in his ear when she said, "Get up, you fool, and fight!"

Scrambling to his feet, Tremen turned with his sword. He slashed first, feeling the hot spray of blood splatter across his face even before he saw the man he killed. Tremen grabbed the thick, braided beard of the sea-faring raider and shoved him to the ground to finish dying out of his way.

The men of Burkshire were fewer than the Danes by almost half, but in the end it was more of a slaughter than a battle, with the raiders on the losing end. Tremen killed three of them, earning a long, deep cut in his forearm as a result; Hallie killed two, one with her bow and one with the impossibly short and woman-sized blade that she was so fond of carrying.

Tremen's mind boggled at the sight of her wielding that sword, despite her wounded hands and especially against a man twice her size. But the strength of brute force was no match for Hallie's swiftness and their two blades never met once. She fought like other women danced, gracefully twisting out of the way. The first time the Dane slashed, Hallie darted out of reach, but the fury behind his swing caused him to miss badly.

Hallie didn't. Her sword slipped in between the edges of his armor, piercing his side, slipping through his ribs and sinking in to the hilt. It was quite possibly the most brutal and the most magnificent thing Tremen had ever seen. And the whole time, the look on her face never changed; it was completely void of all emotion.

Tremen reached Hallie even as the Dane was dropping to his knees. He caught her in his arms when she turned around, pulling her into a hard embrace. He pushed himself between her and the man she had killed, turning her away in an attempt to shield her from the dying man's death throes, but her gaze remained fixed upon it.

"Hallie!" Tremen shook her shoulders until her eyes snapped to his. "Do not look. It will be all right."

He cupped her face, keeping her eyes on his until the slow gurgling behind him fell silent and the Dane ceased to breathe. His thumbs stroked her cheeks, swiping away a droplet of blood from just beneath her unblinking eyes. "Are you all right?"

"Of course," she said woodenly. "Why would I not be?"

"Trust me when I say I understand the feelings within you right now. I suffered them myself the day I killed my first man."

Stepping slowly back out of his reach, her face an expressionless mask, she said, "What makes you think either of these men was my first?"

As Tremen started, bowing her head, Hallie turned her back to him and walked away.

* * * *

The fire crackled in the hearth, causing a slightly green log to snap and pop, sending a shower of sparks dancing up towards the hole in the ceiling and the shadows to dancing on the wall. Unable to bear the quiet for one moment longer, Tremen rolled onto his side. "All right," he finally said. "So, who was it?"

Bandaged hands folded over her chest, Hallie blinked up at the ceiling. "Who was what?"

"The first man you killed?"

She rolled her head to look at him. "What a thing to ask. Go to sleep, Tremen."

"I have to ask it." He felt a twinge beneath the bandage on his arm as he rose up on it to get a better look at her in the dark.

"No, you do not."

"Yes," he said, exasperated. "I do. You are driving me insane. A woman with a face of an angel has no business being as skilled as the deadliest warrior. If you have killed before, and I do not doubt that is so, who was it and how on God's good earth did such a blasphemy happen?"

Hallie blinked at him, then cast her gaze back to the ceiling. She sighed. "Three thieves attacked two young

women as they were gathering firewood. What they did to those girls was unspeakable." Staring at some vague point above her, she drew a deep breath. "I was riding with my father when we caught up with them. Two of the bandits were killed in the fight, and the third.... My father asked what I would do were it my responsibility to decide. So, on my command, a rope was thrown over a tree branch and the man was hoisted off the ground by his neck."

Tremen did not move, hardly believing his ears, he said, "Your father gave you that decision to make?"

"My father had no sons," Hallie said flatly. "It was important to him that I be strong enough to do whatever was necessary to keep Burkshire strong. Sometimes the necessary decisions are not the palatable ones."

Tremen traced her features in the near darkness with his eyes. Slowly, he lay back down again. "No," he said, staring into the darkness with her. "No, they are not. How long ago was this?"

"Nine years."

His shock had him back up on one elbow, his brows drawing sharply down over his eyes. "How long?"

She looked at him again. "It was nine years ago."

His eyes narrowed. "You are not older than I am."

"I was eleven," she said, folding her fingers together. "The young man I ordered hanged was not that much older than I—maybe fifteen years or so. I have always felt badly about that."

His jaw dropped. "Eleven?"

Studying the ceiling, Hallie gestured to her face, twirling her fingers in slow circles as she recalled, "His face turned blue and he made the most dreadful noises for a very long time. But that was a lifetime ago, and has little to do with what happened today."

Mouth still open, eyes still narrowed, Tremen made himself lie down again. He shook his head at the ceiling, his eyes wide with disbelief. "When I was eleven, I put a snake under my mother's pillow. My brothers thought it was hilarious. As I recall, my father was not quite as thrilled, and I did not sit for two days."

"Had I flinched from making my decision, my father would have guaranteed *I* not sit for two days. He was never one to tolerate weakness. Not in himself; not in me. But I was not thinking of that, either."

"I am almost afraid to ask." Tremen rolled his head to look at her. "What were you thinking of?"

"Burkshire," she said simply.

He grunted, not particularly surprised by that admission.

But she shocked him all over again when she said, "If you had died, things would be worse than if you had never come. Robert is gone, and I am still a woman," her voice dropped to a whisper as she admitted, "I still am forbidden to lead. The Danes would still be out there, we would have no wall and no fortifications, and eventually the King would send someone else to wed me because there is no heir growing in my belly." Folded together upon her chest, she flexed her fingers, folding them into the blankets as she swallowed hard. Then she looked at him and very matter-of-factly said, "I think you should put one there."

Tremen almost injured his neck, he looked at her so fast. "Are you certain?"

She flexed her fingers one last time and pulled the blankets that much closer to her chin. "Take the sword out of the bed," she told him. When he hastened to grab the sword that divided the bed down the middle and rolled to lay it on the floor, she quickly added, "But bear in mind that I still—"

"Do not like me," Tremen said with her. Lifting the blanket out of his way, he scooted in close to her. "I can live with that. Just remember, you instigated this."

"Yes." She pulled the blankets up to her neck. Fixing her eyes firmly on the ceiling, she drew a deep and bracing breath. Then, beneath the blankets, her legs moved wide apart. "Is this right?"

Tremen shook his head. She certainly knew how to take the erotic appeal out of a situation. Half-laughing, he reached beneath the blankets and pushed the leg nearest to him back next to its twin. He moved closer, letting his chest, his legs and all the rest of him in between come in contact with all of her. With his head propped up on one hand, he reached with his other to brush her hair back from her face. Softly, he said, "Close your eyes."

Hallie didn't move. She clutched the blankets to her neck and stared back at him with very wide eyes. "I would rather see it coming, if you do not mind." "I am not about to shoot you with an arrow," he said, trying not to roll his eyes. "Please, for once in your life, just cooperate. Close your eyes."

"Why?" she asked, her breath catching as he caressed the soft bow of her mouth.

"Because I want you just to feel."

He bow his head to taste her lips, but just as they were about to touch, she whispered, "Feel what?"

"Me," he rumbled.

As he moved above her, her hands came to rest upon his shoulders and her body yielded to welcome him in a very feminine embrace. Whoever would have known that the Daughter of the Strong had a soft side? But she did. Slowly, gradually, his kisses found it.

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Chapter Nine

The sun rose over the castle parapet like a shining apology from God. Hidden in the treeline, Robert closed his eyes and drew in a slow, deep breath of cool morning air. This was going to be a good day. He smiled and once more directed his gaze to Burkshire. It would be a simple enough feat to bypass the weakened defenses. The wooden walls were old, and though the Interloper looked to be in the process of building a larger one of stone, it was far from completed and the new moat held no water. Getting past the gaping earth, particularly with archers firing down upon them, would be tricky but not impossible, and once they were over that wooden wall Burkshire would be his.

"You are right," Sweyn Forkbeard said, coming up behind him. Just the sound of the Dane's voice was enough to shatter the pleasure of his thoughts and brought an instant scowl to Robert's face. "There is no other place to be. Even the air fills a man better here."

Robert's eyes narrowed. "You will hold to our bargain?"

Sweyn's face remained unreadable. He turned back to rejoin his equally unreadable warriors. "Have no fear. I will keep my word."

He may as well have bargained with the devil. But if it put him back into Burkshire....

Facing the Keep once more, Robert's eyes automatically searched out Hallie's window. Or would she now be in the Strong's old bed.... with *him*?

He stared hard at the window, as if he could see through the wall by sheer force of will until, as if to reward his efforts, a flutter of white nightgown appeared in the dark beyond the sill. Hallie. Like a breath of Spring air, she leaned out into the light of dawn. Robert was frozen by the sight of her, as lovely as ever, her long unbound hair falling over her shoulder and spilling down the wall.

And then like the frost of a lingering winter, the Intruder filled the window behind her. His arms came around her, stopping Robert's heart mid-beat inside his chest. A vine of green ivy dying in the snow, everything within him shriveled and turned black as he watched her smile. When she craned her head back to receive his kiss, his heart crumbled in his chest. She turned in the Intruder's embrace, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, and Robert almost fell to his knees.

The brightness of the sun dimmed, the brush of the soft breeze washing over him felt as nothing as the Intruder reached down to catch Hallie's round, nightgown clad bottom, lifting her up and carrying her back into the darkness of Edward the Strong's old bedchamber. Hallie, his Hallie, had not fought him in the slightest. No, she had welcomed the Intruder's touch. It was too much to bear; he had to look away.

The Intruder had not only taken his home, but he had corrupted Hallie, the woman he had always considered his. Almost without thinking, his hand found his sword and pulled it free. The glint of sunlight on steel struck his eyes with blinding intensity, but Robert just started walking. Sweyn called after him, but he just kept going. She was ruined. Defiled. And she liked it! Robert's fingers tightened on the hilt of his sword. He had no choice now. He was going to have to kill them both.

* * * *

"Oh, that is nothing!" Hallie laughed and began to kick off the blankets that covered her. "I have one better than that!"

Tremen took his finger off the four inch scar that puckered the skin on the back of his left elbow, unable to keep from laughing as she tugged and pulled at the volumes of her nightgown. In the end, she had such a time trying to get off the bottom of her own skirts that he sat up to help her.

Hallie squirmed around to show her back, lifting the folds of her gown all the way up to her neck to reveal the creamy expanse of her naked back. Dozen of tiny, jagged, circular marks decorated her from her right shoulder almost down to her hip, but he only noticed those after he was eventually able to drag his eyes away from her bare bottom.

"You got dragged," he said, recognizing the rough pattern. "Almost sixty feet," Hallie agreed, almost proudly. She swept her hair up to allow him a better look, her eyes fairly sparkling as he lay a hand upon the worst of the scars.

"Not bad." He then patted her back. "But look at this." Climbing off the bed, he stood up, grabbed the bottom of his rumple shirt and pulled it up to show her his side. Raising his right arm, he revealed an eighteen inch long ovular patch that wrapped around his shoulder blade under the arm and across his ribs. "Eighty feet," he told her smugly. "That damn horse dragged me up one hill and down the other side. Halfway to the bottom I managed to kick free, but I continued rolling, unable to stop until I hit a tree. There was only one tree in the whole of that valley; trust me to hit it. See that?" His fingers found a faint circular scar just under his arm pit. "That's where the stump of a branch impaled me."

"Ow," she said, laughing despite her sincerity. Dropping her nightgown, she scrambled to sit on the blankets and showed him her right shin. Or, to be exact, the rough, round scar on the outside of it. There was a smaller one half the size of the first on the inside.

"What was that?" he asked, leaning in to get a better look.

"An arrow." She smiled wryly. "I got that the same day I learned why it was not a good idea to spy on the archers from behind the target butts."

Tremen winced. "Ouch." He shook his head. "'Tis a wonder you survived your childhood." But then, sitting down next to her, he propped his leg up on the mattress next to hers and pulled his britches' leg up to his knee. "Now that," he said, pointing to a jagged scar that ran down his shin about four inches in the middle. "That one was fun to earn."

She reached over her leg to touch his. "What happened?"

"Allow me to advise you," he offered sagely. "When playing Spartacus Escapes From A Second Story Window, when climbing down a rope made of bedsheets, make sure the knots are tight."

"And you consider it a miracle I survived MY childhood?" She laughed at him. Tremen gestured at his leg. "That was only half the injury. Here is the rest of it." He stood up and turned around. Lifting the tails of his untucked shirt, he shucked down his pants and thrust his butt back at her. He pointed to his left buttock. "There, do you see that scar?"

"Oh!" Hallie quickly slapped a hand over her eyes. "Ugh! Don't show me that hairy beast!"

Tremen laughed, "Just look at the scar."

"No!"

"I am not putting my pants on until you look at it," he said stubbornly.

"Oh, for crying out—" Hallie peeled two fingers apart and took a quick peek. Her fingers snapped back together again over her eyes. "Very impressive," she said dryly. "How did you get it?"

"My father," Tremen said bluntly. "The only time in my life that I ever made my mother cry." He shook his head as he pulled his pants back up. "I guarantee I never did either again!"

"Good. I am glad." She playfully shoved at his hip. "Get that out of my face now."

Pulling his pants back up again, he sat down on the edge of the bed while he tied his britches closed. When he glanced up next, it was to find her, her arms wrapped around her knees, smiling back at him. For the span of a heartbeat, he literally could not move. In fact, he probably could have sat there for a long time just looking at her, with the early morning sunshine spilling in across her hair like a halo of gold upon her mahogany tresses. But after a moment, with no further words between them, her cheeks colored self consciously and she looked away.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. "Shall I call for something to eat?"

A flutter of relief relaxed her face. "Yes, please."

Tremen climbed to his feet and headed for the door. He poked his head out into the hall long enough for him to signal a passing servant and request a breakfast tray to be brought to them. By the time he came back inside, Hallie had left the bed and was now standing at the window. She looked lovely, bathed in the early morning light, her hair a tangle of mahogany tresses flowing down her back and her round young bottom pushed back in unwitting invitation as she leaned upon the windowsill.

Tremen smiled and closed the door behind him. He came up behind her softly. Well, perhaps softly was not the right word, because from the moment that he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her back into the cradle of his embrace, soft was anything but what he was feeling.

"Are you tender anywhere?" he asked, doing his best to be solicitous

She lay her bandaged hands upon his arms and smiled up at him. "Are you trying to entice me back into your bed, villain?"

"My sword is up and ready to battle with you again." Loving the smile she wore, he wiggled his eyebrows up and down suggestively. "Come back to bed." "You do realize it is the middle of the morning?" she reminded him, but there was nothing of 'no' in her body language.

He reached down to cup her saucy bottom, lifting her up until she was mouth to mouth and hip to hip with him.

Desire darkened her eyes. "Are you going to make me melt inside again?"

"Oh yes," he rumbled, carrying her to the bed. "You are going to melt and make those soft, breathy moans, as you did when I nibbled my way down between your pretty thighs, taking you into my mouth...."

Her whole body shivered as he lay her down among the pillows.

"I liked that part," she murmured, twining her arms around his neck, welcoming him as he covered her with her body. Her thighs parted to cradle his hips, but his mouth had only just pressed itself to hers when the horn of the castle watch bolted them both upright in bed.

Scrambling back to the window, Tremen swore when he saw the army of Danes marching upon them.

"What is it?" When he turned and ran for his boots and his armor, Hallie dashed past him for the window. "My God," she gasped.

It was the quickest that he'd ever gotten dressed. He grabbed for his sword, swinging his belt around his lean hips even as he headed for the door. What made him look back, he wasn't quite sure, but the sight of Hallie as she bucked her own sword belt around her waist stopped him in his tracks. Without bothering to change her nightgown, she had thrown her dressing gown around her shoulders and donned her shoes, and the very idea of her marching out alongside him to meet the Viking raiders was enough to chill him from the insides out.

"No!" he told her when she started after him.

Hallie looked up in surprised, and then her expression turned as dark as a thundercloud. "Do not treat me as a child, Tremen. You will need every available arm to turn them back, and you know it."

"You will stay here," he said firmly. "I mean it. If you leave this room to do anything more than cut bandages and prepare for the wounded, I will give you—"

"The thrashing of my life," she finished for him, waving a hand in the air. Scowling blackly, she finished buckling her weapon into place. "So you have said before."

He pointed a finger at her in warning. "Do not defy me, Daughter of the Strong. I will spare you no mercy if you do."

Her furious stare burned a hole in his back as he turned to leave, but the sudden certainty that, no matter what he said, she was likely to follow him into battle anyway, had him again pausing at the door. He swung back around. "On second thought..."

Hallie's black glare faltered when he reached for her, and she let loose with a startled shriek when he bent down to pick her up, tossing her over his shoulder like a cumbersome sack of grain. "No! Tremen, stop!"

He threw her down on the bed, grabbing her by the scruff of her nightgown when she tried to scramble off the other side and, without preamble, ripped the hem right off the bottom of her gown.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, yanking at her imprisoned arms while he tied her wrists together.

"I am making sure that, for once in your life, you obey."

She cursed him, kicking the mattress in utter frustration as he then tied her to the headboard of their bed.

"There," he said when he was finished. "Let us see you get out of that." He patted her arm, narrowly avoiding her teeth as she snapped for his fingers, and then turned once more to leave.

"A curse on you, you poxy villain!" she bellowed at his back, her screams bringing Anna running into the room just as Tremen was leaving it.

"No one unties her," he told the lady's maid, who gasped, covering her mouth with one hand as she took in the sight of her mistress. "And remind me to wash the foulness from her mouth when I get back."

"You rat bastard son of a mongrel bitch! You—you villain!"

Tremen left without looking back, although the howl of her frustration followed him all the way down to the Hall.

* * * *

"The master's marching out t' meet them," Anna said breathlessly, cowering in the shadow of the window as she watched the scene unfolding before her.

Kneeling up in bed, Hallie quit biting at the knots that held her just long enough to ask, "How many are there?" "I—I don't know. The archers on the wall are blocking my view. Maybe fifty men. Certainly 'tis more than the master 'as. Why did 'e not take the rest o' the lads with 'im?"

"And leave Burkshire unprotected?" Hallie shook her head and quickly began gnawing at the loosening cloth that bound her wrists again. "He would not do that. If the raiders get past the walls, then the fight to survive will be in the courtyard." She gave a sharp gasp of victorious relief as the last knot finally gave and she wrenched her hands free. "Oh, the blighter!" she hissed, rubbing her wrists and scrambling from the bed. She darted to the window to see for herself just how badly things had progressed.

Tremen had less than half of Burkshire's soldiers with him. The rest were on the wall. Notching arrows to bows and making ready for the fight. There was smoke rising from great vats of oil being heated in the courtyard. Men were running everywhere, wetting the walls and roofs down with water, stationing buckets everywhere, and arming themselves for the siege to follow.

But it wasn't until she saw Robert's familiar form standing out in front of the stationary Danes, his sword in his hand and barely contained fury on his face as he waited for Tremen to close the distance between them, that she realized what was happening. He had come to reclaim her.

"Oh God," she groaned, slapping a hand to her forehead. But in all fairness she could not blame him. She had been fighting Tremen's control so fiercely, how could she not expect Robert to try and rescue her? But Tremen would not see it like that. Not when Robert had brought the enemy's army to their doorstep.

"He is going to kill Robert," Hallie breathed. Because of her. Because she had not accepted Tremen's rightful authority from the day that he'd arrived. Because she had promised herself to Robert. How could he have known the situation had changed?

She had to stop them.

Hallie grabbed up her skirts and ran for all that she was worth. Down the stairs and out the door, across the drawbridge, dodging the outstretched arms of two Burkshire men who tried to stop her. "Tremen!" she screamed, racing to catch up with her husband before he could kill Robert. "No!"

She barely got between them before they started swinging.

"Stop it!" She pushed at Tremen's chest with one hand, shoving him back a half step and insinuated herself between them. But when she turned around to admonish Robert, the flat of his hand caught the side of her face with a slap so hard it set her ears to ringing. She would have fallen had he not grabbed her by the hair and yanked her back to him, using her as a living shield against Tremen's instantly upraised sword.

"You.... filthy whore.... "Robert hissed in her ear. He pulled her sword from its scabbard and threw it away. "You let him have you."

Even with the whole side of her face stinging, for a moment Hallie could not bring herself to comprehend his treachery. She touched her assaulted cheek, but then he wrenched his hand in her hair, yanking her head back all the way to his shoulder and the reality of what was happening began to sink into her.

"Robert," she whispered, her mind racing. "What are you doing?"

"Taking back what was mine."

Tremen's grip tightened on the hilt of his sword, gripping and re-gripping as he stalked Robert with slow and measured steps. "Take your hands off my wife."

"You have come close enough," Robert told him, and raised his sword to lay the blade against Hallie's throat.

"How can you do this?" she demanded. She closed her eyes when he yanked on her hair to silence her, but stubbornly persisted, "You were my friend."

"Friend," Robert scoffed. "I would have been more than that had you let me."

"The King dictated otherwise," she reasoned.

"Your father dictated otherwise, too, when I asked for your hand, but I eventually did change that outcome, didn't I?"

At first, Hallie could not comprehend his meaning. "Y-you asked for my hand?" Despite his painful hold, she turned her head to stare at him, needing to see his eyes. They were alien and cold, like those of a completely different person. "My father said no?"

"Apparently, he had wealthier prospects in mind for you." Robert shook his head. "I have lived here my entire life, but I was not considered good enough for either you or Burkshire."

Hardly able to comprehend what she was hearing, Hallie reached up and grabbed the blade at her throat. The pain of

cutting her fingers felt almost good compared to the agony splitting her in half internally. She wrenched herself around. "You killed him? How could you kill my father?!"

"I would have loved you," he said with all the gentleness of a lover, and with eyes as cold as frost. "I would have given you anything and all you had to do was allow me into your life. But instead you welcomed him."

Hallie was not aware of moving, not until her fist connected with his nose. She heard the crunch of his cartilage, the cracking of her knuckles, and a shock of pain shot up her arm to her shoulder. It did not even occur to her that he had his upraised sword well within striking distance of her until Tremen grabbed the back of her nightgown. He yanked her back behind him so hard that she fell on the ground. Robert may as well have run her through. Hallie lay on the ground, clutching her bleeding hand to her chest, unable to move.

But Robert never got the chance to attack. Instead, his arm was stayed by one of the Danes.

"What the hell are you doing?" Robert demanded. "Kill him! Kill them both, damn you!"

The Burkshire men braced themselves; not one of the Danes moved.

Staring straight at Tremen, Sweyn began to smile. "Tremen of Southby."

"Sweyn Forkbeard," Tremen replied. He stood over Hallie protectively, not lowering his sword even half an inch, though the Viking did not draw his own weapon. "Robert," Sweyn said, mildly chidingly. "You did not tell me my old friend was the new baron of Burkshire."

Face darkening with fury, Robert turned almost apoplectic. "You were brought here for a reason!"

"True." Sweyn looked down at Hallie, still lying on the ground. "But I came for my own reasons." He turned his smile back to Tremen. "I was promised all the wealth my boats could carry."

"We had a bargain!" Robert hissed furiously.

"Provide an end to your problems, that is what you asked and what I have done." He gestured to Tremen. "So, the two of you will try to kill one another. Either way, I will return to my home all the richer for having come ... so long as I am paid."

Tremen's jaw clenched, once, then again, and then he nodded curtly. "Do not grow accustomed to my generosity."

Sweyn reached up to rub his chin and the scar hidden beneath his beard. "Have no fear of that, my old ... friend. Your generosity is one thing I would never take for granted."

Robert's face turned apoplectic as he and Tremen fixed their gazes to one another. What had started out as a conflict between two armies had just become all of Burkshire against one man.

"I let you go once," Tremen said, deep and low, "I can see now that was a mistake." Motioning to his men, he ordered, "Seize him."

Robert shoved away from Sweyn, but the Burkshire men were too many. They quickly overwhelmed him, stripping him of his sword and dropping him to his knees in the grass. "Wait," Hallie said hoarsely. Hugging her injured hand to her, she staggered to her feet. Tremen reached down to help her, but she ignored him. The world had gone red with anger; she shook from it.

"Hallie."

When he reached for her, she jerked away. "Give me my sword," she growled.

"And have this become one more scar upon your soul?" Tremen shook his head. "No, Hallie. This time, it is not your decision to make."

Struggling against the hands that forced him to bow before Tremen, Robert shouted, "Face me, Southby!"

For the first time, Hallie looked down at her hand. The front of her nightgown was streaked with drops of red. Bringing her eyes back to Tremen's, she shook her head. "If you dare let him go, I will never forgive you."

"I have no intention of it."

Hallie turned away as Tremen lifted his sword and headed for Robert. Head down, she walked back to Burkshire as quickly as her legs would go. And though she did not turn around to see, she knew Tremen watched her, waiting until she had crossed the portcullis, until the curtain walls blocked her view. He needn't have bothered; she had no interest in watching Robert die.

* * * *

The Vikings stayed for three days and when they left, they did so with their boats packed high with goods. Tremen was glad to see them go. There had been no fighting and only Robert's well deserved death, but still he did not relax until he saw the backs of them marching across the drawbridge for the final time. The minute the last of them disappeared into the woods, heading for the ocean, he turned to Marston and said, "I want the wall built and the moat back in place, and I want it done right now."

"Right," Marston said, and before Tremen was halfway across the courtyard, every available soldier was put to work either cutting stone blocks, hauling them from the quarry to the Keep, or laying them in place.

As he was mounting the steps, he unwittingly glanced over his shoulder and out through the portcullis gates. From here, he could not see Robert's grave, but just knowing it was there was enough. He probably should have taken both Robert and his detached head and had both thrown off the cliff, but a part of him had thought perhaps Hallie might someday want a grave by which to remember the childhood friend she had lost. So far, Hallie herself hadn't said a word one way or the other about it. Nor had she shed a single tear, but somewhere within that armored soul of hers he knew she had to be hurting. He could only imagine how much. Heaving a sigh and resolved for the worst, Tremen went in search of his wife.

It was laundry day and that's where he found her, in the laundry directing which rooms would be changed and where to put what sheets. Hallie was sitting at a short table making a tallied list of every piece of linen that was brought through to be washed and dried. She had a white, raggedy kerchief wrapped around her head to protect her long hair, and she still looked lovely. He may as well admit it, he thought to himself, he was smitten.

Throwing a large, white sheet into a bubbling pot, one of the maids grumbled loudly, "We'll never get the smell of Dane out of these rooms."

"Just do your best," Hallie told her, without looking up.

"One o' them passed 'is water on the floor," said another maid, a young woman with frizzy blonde hair peeking out from under her kerchief. "Imagine that. Rolled right out o' bed and weed on the rug! My two year old 'its the pot better than that."

As Tremen stepped through the doorway, an older servant glanced up from the linens she was folding and snapped out, "Master's in the room. Stop yer grumblin'."

Hallie's quill stopped its scribbling and she looked up. He must have been smiling because, after a moment, she answered it with a smaller one of her own.

"If you are not too busy," he asked, turning sideways in the doorway to give her the option of preceding him, "might I speak with you for a moment alone?"

For once Hallie didn't argue. She simply lay the quill next to her parchment, capped the ink pot firmly, and stood up. "What is it?" she asked as they stepped out into the hall together.

"Nothing," he said. "I simply wanted to make sure you were all right."

"Of course," she replied airily. Her step quickened as she headed for the main Hall. "Why would I not be?" "Hallie," he called after her, even as he stopped following in her wake. "You do not have to be strong in front of me."

Hallie walked alone for a short distance before she stopped. Ever so slightly, her shoulders sagged.

"Hallie," he repeated softly. "You do not have to be strong in front of me."

Turning around, she looked at him with a sorrowful smile. "It is who I am."

He thought for a moment he saw the shimmer of tears in her eyes again. But then she blinked and they were quickly gone. Brushing her hands on her skirts, she drew herself up proudly again. "Come and help me change the sheets on our bed."

She started walking again and, a huge smile breaking over his face, Tremen quickly fell into step with her. "Our bed," he echoed. "I do like the way you say that."

They ascended the stairs together, but halfway up them Hallie again stopped walking. She turned around to look at him, one step behind her. "I am very glad you came."

Tremen almost laughed he was so surprised. Then his eyes narrowed as he reached up to press his hand to her cheek and then her forehead. "I thought that flush was due to the heat in the laundry, but it seems to be a fever."

She brushed his hand away. "Do not mock me, Tremen."

"You will have to forgive me, but I am more accustomed to hearing you say the opposite."

A sliver of her armored soul cracked and fell away. "I thought he was my friend," Hallie said softly, her eyes filling with that minute sadness again. "Or maybe what I thought was if I wed him, then nothing would ever change. He would take my father's place, and I would be as I always have been." Ever so faintly, she smiled. "Except that he was not my father. He lacked my father's strength of will."

"And you certainly do not," Tremen acknowledged.

She gave him that half smile again. "No, I do not. Had I married him, within the year I would have run roughshod all over him and likely brought to the same fate as my father. But you are different. You are not like my father either, but you do have strength." Her mouth twisted wryly and she reluctantly added, "And you are good for Burkshire."

"You forgot one thing," Tremen said, stepping one step up to be level with her. "You are not likely to run roughshod over me. I know how to keep you in line."

She snorted and started back up the stairs again, "I believe the other day was proof enough that you cannot even keep me in the Keep."

They both stopped where they were on the steps. A quirk pulling at the corners of her mouth, Hallie looked back at him. He was smiling too, albeit darkly and there was a grim glitter in his blue eyes. "That comment alone will keep you sitting on pillows for a fortnight."

When he grabbed for her, she took off running up the stairs. She laughed all the way down the hall, with Tremen fast at her heels. She tried to close the door, but he caught it and it didn't slam shut until after he was already in the room.

Tremen caught her at the bed and they both fell on top of it. She shrieked as he flipped her onto her stomach and wrestled the bottom of her gown up over her long legs. His palm cracked across her bottom, once, twice, and again, before her laughing was too much for him. He flipped her onto her back, pinning her hands above her head and capturing her wriggling body beneath his own.

"I owe you a sound spanking for your defiance," he growled.

"You just gave it to me," she teased.

"Not even close."

Very slowly, the laughter died as her eyes drifted down to his smiling mouth.

"You are," he breathed, "without a doubt, the most beautiful, maddening, outrageous woman I have ever known." Shaking his head, he then kissed her soundly. "Thank God you came with the Keep."