

GRACE DRAVEN

Author of MASTER OF CROWS



ENTREAT

ME

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A NOVEL

Grace Draven

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The Shrew and the Beast

Ambrose had said she was a widow, and Ballard could only guess how her husband must have worked himself into an early grave trying to remain master of his household with such a wife. This woman was accustomed to issuing edicts and having them obeyed. “If I agree, what do you intend to do while you reside in my castle, eating my food and using my firewood to warm yourself? Ketach Tor requires a lot of upkeep and we’re a reduced household. Everyone here attends to several tasks.”

He thought her spine might snap if she stiffened any more. She crossed her arms and scowled. “Cinnia and I aren’t leeches, my lord, nor are we unskilled. I brew a vile ale and can burn this place down around your ears trying to cook; however, I’m an accomplished spinner and silk thrower, an adequate seamstress and an exceptional scrivener. Cinnia apprenticed under Marguerite de Pizan as a scribe, illuminator and bookbinder. Neither of us are noblewomen, nor do we fear hard work. I’ve scrubbed plenty of floors, laundered linens, cared for the sick, and helped bury the dead. What do you wish of me?”

Ballard listened to her passionate dissertation without interrupting. Louvaen Duenda had an answer for most things and an argument for everything else. She didn’t debate; she went to war. His respect for Cinnia blossomed. The girl had a stronger backbone than he credited her for if she hadn’t yet buckled under the weight of her sister’s imposing personality. Fascinated, he succumbed to the temptation to tease Mistress Duenda and maybe render her tongue-tied.

“What do I wish of you?” He paused, his gaze sweeping over her from the top of her head to the tips of her toes peeking out from her hem. Her hands, long-fingered and pale, gripped her upper arms. “You, in my bed,” he said.

~**~

Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for wither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me.

— *Ruth 1:16-17, KJV*

To the strong women in my life:

My beloved mother-in-law Lucy T. Shaw—the finest human being who ever breathed.

Sherry Simmons – the epitome of unwavering tenacity and grace under fire.

Lora Gasway, Mel Sanders, Shiv, D.M., and my sister Kim Sayre – who expand my mind, keep my feet on the ground, and make me laugh.

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PROLOGUE



From the highest window in the keep, Ballard looked out upon the forests and fields of his family's demesne and waited for his wife to die. A westerly breeze blew in the green scent of clover, along with the peppery musk of pine and ash that heralded the coming spring and the summer soon to follow. Summer had been Isabeau's favorite season, but she wouldn't live long enough to see this one or the bloom of her beloved roses.

The creak of an opening door behind him marked the arrival of his sorcerer. Ambrose's robes whispered dusty spells as they swept the floor boards. He paused just before he reached the window.

“Dominus.”

Ballard didn't turn. “Is it finished?”

“Soon enough.” Ambrose's voice took on a worried note. “She's asking for you.”

Ballard abandoned the view of his lands and faced his magician. The man couldn't have surprised him more if he said there were purple mermaids cavorting in the fish pond. “She's delirious then.”

Ambrose shook his head. “No. Quite clear-headed. Be careful.”

A pointless warning; he always remained wary when dealing with his wife. He gestured to the wet nurse in one corner of the room. “Give him to me.” She rose at his command, carefully cradling a swaddled bundle that twitched and snuffled. He lifted the baby from her arms and gently pushed aside the blankets to reveal a pink-skinned creature with curled fists, a cap of fine golden hair and bright infant blue eyes that might change as he grew older. Ballard's hands, dark and battle-scarred, spread over the boy's small body as he turned him enough to view his back. For countless generations, children of Ketach blood bore a sickle-shaped mark just above their buttocks. Ballard had it, as had his father and grandfather before him. Smooth and unblemished, this child's back revealed a truth Ballard suspected. He'd not been the one to sire Isabeau's child.

“You can give him to another family. Lesser knights with barren wives wanting children of noble birth. One would take him, raise him as his own.”

Ballard disregarded Ambrose's suggestion, bewitched by the infant's fine features and the tiny hand clasping one of his fingers. The baby's eyes blinked and slowly focused, catching Ballard's gaze and holding it for one eternal moment, stripping him down to the bare essence of his spirit. For the first time in his memory something moved within him, thawed and stirred—a ferocious instinct to claim and protect. He bent and brushed his lips across the baby's forehead. This child might not be his by blood but was his nonetheless; his son, his heir, the next lord of Ketach Tor and all the lands under his claim. If he thought she'd appreciate it, he'd thank Isabeau for giving him so gracious a gift. He looked to Ambrose who watched him with inscrutable eyes, to the wet nurse who turned her gaze to the window. "This is Gavin de Lovet," he said in a soft voice, "son of Ballard, son of Dwennon, son of Udolf, heir of Ketach Tor."

"Proclaimed and recognized." Ambrose bowed low. The wet nurse curtsied.

Ballard returned him the baby to the nurse. He didn't want to abandon this peaceful chamber with its newborn hope and promise for the future, but another awaited him. She'd summoned him with a dying breath. Isabeau had delivered his heir. He owed her this.

Her bedchamber smelled like a battlefield after the slaughter was done and the crows picked their way among the fallen. The indefinable odor of death hung in the air, thickened by the suffocating heat billowing from the hearth's fire. In health, Isabeau had borne the title of loveliest woman in the kingdom. Now, wasted away from blood loss, she lay in her bed, a shrunken wraith flattened by a mountain of covers.

Only her eyes, as blue as her son's and bright with malice, gleamed with life. Her gaze tracked Ballard as he approached.

“Isabeau.” In the months of their marriage, she'd made no secret of the fact the sight of him sickened her. He never guessed she might wish to spend her last moments with him.

She ran the tip of her tongue over her cracked lower lip. “Water,” she croaked.

He poured a dram into a cup and helped her sit up so she could swallow. “Drink slowly,” he said. For once she did as he instructed without protest. He lowered her gently to the bed when she finished.

Her chest rose and fell on a labored breath. “It should be you here instead of me.”

Softly spoken words made razor sharp with hatred, they might have drawn blood had he felt anything for her. “I can't ease your mind, wife. I'm sorry you suffer this way, but I'm glad it isn't me.”

She laughed, a wheezing cackle that incited alarm instead of pity in Ballard and raised the hairs at his nape. “Just as well,” she whispered. Her mouth stretched into a flat smile that never reached her eyes. “I couldn't give you my gift otherwise.” Her pale fingers spidered across the blankets, drawing mysterious designs in the weave. “I leave you with your precious heir,” she declared. “To him I bequeath my bitterness, my rage, my hatred.” The blue eyes burned with more than fever now, and Ballard resisted the urge to step back from her bed. “When he puts childhood behind him, they will manifest. The savage you are shall raise up the savage he'll become. No woman will love him. All your machinations—your deceit—have brought us to this.” Isabeau gripped the

blankets until her knuckles turned white, and she heaved herself upward. “No woman born will ever love you,” she said. “And the son will destroy the father.”

Her mouth worked in a rictus and she spat, her aim true. Ballard wiped the hot spittle from his cheek. Were he of a less pragmatic mind, he might fancy it burned. The effort drained her completely, and she collapsed against the pillows, eyes closed, breath whistling from her mouth. Despite her venomous declaration, he stayed by her bed, kept vigil and sweltered while Isabeau’s breathing shallowed, quieted and finally ceased. Her death had been more peaceful than her life. He left her to her women and found Ambrose waiting in the corridor for him.

Part of him was relieved. The fighting and clawing were over. Still, he had regrets. They had bargained, the two of them, and she had kept her part of the agreement. He would have honored his after a fashion, given her the freedom—if not the lover—she so desperately craved. He hadn’t willed her death, hadn’t prayed for it, but he didn’t grieve her passing. “It’s over,” he said.

In the hall’s flickering torchlight Ambrose’s eyes sparked. “Are you certain?”

“Aye. Her parting words commended the boy to me, along with her hatred. Then she spat on me.”

The sorcerer’s eyebrows snapped together. “What exactly did she say, *dominus*? Every word. I need to hear them.” Ballard repeated them. Ambrose muttered a string of epithets and began to pace. “Her hatred for you ran deep. She’s cursed her own son as revenge.”

Ballard shrugged. Ambrose was a suspicious sort, and Isabeau had always unnerved him. “I don’t believe in curses.”

The other man snorted. “Now is a good time to start. Isabeau possessed the wild magic. Curses fired by the left hand path are powerful, even wielded by an unskilled hand.”

Ballard strode toward the stairs. “I don’t have time for your doom-saying, Ambrose. I’ve a son to raise and a wife to bury.”

Ambrose hurried to catch up. “Where do you want her buried? With her roses?”

He paused at the question. Had she been other than his wife, he might have considered the idea, but she was lady of Ketach Tor. In death, she’d lie in the family crypt, next to the wives of the lords who came before her. “No. Her women will prepare her. She’ll be interred with the rest of the family.”

The boundaries between liege and subject thinned as Ambrose clutched his arm. “Are you sure, Ballard?”

“She was my margravina. By virtue of marriage she is of Ketach Tor.” Ballard clapped him on the shoulder. “She’s past caring where she rests anyway, my friend.” He left Ambrose on the landing, the sorcerer’s warning following him down the stairs.

“Don’t count on it.”

CHAPTER ONE



372 Years Later

“Isn’t there anything else he should be doing besides bothering Cinnia? Has he no duties?” Louvaen Hallis Duenda scowled at the couple seated together on the garden bench outside the kitchen door.

For the fourth time in as many days, her sister Cinnia entertained the young swordsmith newly hired at Montebianco’s armory. Like every male in a six-league radius, Gavin de Lovet, only son of Lord Ballard de Sauveterre, had been taken with Cinnia’s beauty and set to

courting her. To everyone's surprise—and no small amount of envy in some cases—Cinnia had enthusiastically accepted his courtship. For three months they'd spent every free moment together, usually under Louvaen's watchful eye. People already made bets as to when they'd hear a betrothal announcement. Right now the pair huddled in their cloaks, heads bent, too engrossed in each other to notice the light drifting of snow powdering their shoulders.

Mercer Hallis left his seat at the table to join his oldest child at the doorway. His low chuckle made Louvaen scowl even harder. “By the look of her, I'd say he's more of a pleasant distraction than a bother. He's a decent enough lad, and he makes her smile. What don't you like about him, Lou?”

Louvaen abandoned her post at the door to put a kettle on the hot grate for tea. “I never said I didn't like him.” Were he not sniffing at her sister's skirts, she'd be very fond of him. Over the weeks, de Lovet had impressed her with his honest manner and polite interaction with her family. She especially admired his steady gaze, the green eyes calm and unflinching, even under her most intimidating stare. Only a few years older than Cinnia, he was as breathtakingly handsome as Cinnia was lovely. Tall and muscled, he had a face that sent the ale wenches at the Bishop's Knickers pub into a swoon every time he walked by. Like Cinnia, he was blond and wore his hair in a simple queue tied with a black ribbon. Were they to marry and have children, their offspring wouldn't just be beautiful; they'd be ethereal.

She shuddered at the thought. Such beauty wrought its own misery, and Louvaen's fear for her sister's future didn't lessen, even at the idea of a good match. “He's as any other

male who's laid eyes on Cinnia—knocked stupid. However, she's as fond of him as he is of her, and it scares me. We know nothing about him except what he's told us.”

“I've asked at the Guild Hall. A promising young man with a talent for swordsmithing,” Mercer said. “It's a highly-paid skill. He'd provide well for Cinnia.”

“True, but why is the only son and heir of a lord working as a swordsmith? Has anyone heard of the de Sauveterres? Dame Mona hasn't, and she knows every family, rich, poor and in between in a dozen towns. She doesn't recognize the surname. He's a criminal for all we know.”

Mercer resumed his place amidst a scatter of open ledgers and receipts. “A well dressed one then. If his clothing is anything to go by, his family isn't hurting for silver.” He sighed and raked a hand through his thinning hair, all humor gone. “I wish we could say the same.” He shuffled pages of ledger accounts. “I can't churn these numbers any better than you've already done. Jimenin will call in his markers, and without the cargo from that last ship, we've no way to clear them.”

Despite her own feverish, late night calculations which pointed to absolute bankruptcy, Louvaen had hoped her father might find something she'd missed—anything to bring down the debt. No such monies had appeared, and she mourned the inevitable loss of her home and remaining livestock that would be sold to help pay her father's outstanding accounts.

A series of sharp knocks broke the kitchen's tense quiet. Louvaen peered down the hall to one of the parlor windows that looked onto the street. The tell-tale ripple of a black cloak fluttered beyond the glass. She growled. “Speak of a devil,

and it appears. Jimenin's at the door, Papa. Keep him busy. I'll get Cinnia."

The cold air cut through her shawl, and she blinked lacy snowflakes from her eyelashes as she trekked across the garden. Cinnia didn't notice her, but Gavin did. He released Cinnia's hand and rose, bowing to Louvaen.

"Mistress Duenda." Those wary green eyes watched her. Louvaen suppressed a smile. She'd never exchanged a cross word with de Lovet but suspected he'd heard plenty from the townsfolk, and even Cinnia, about her sharp tongue and ferocity where her sister was concerned. More than a few would-be suitors had come away bloodied from an encounter with her, figuratively and once in a while literally.

She acknowledged him with a brief nod. "Sir Gavin. You need to leave." She interrupted Cinnia's rising protest with her next statement. "Jimenin is here.

"I wish to stay." De Lovet crossed his arms and planted his feet in the snow.

Louvaen frowned. Heroics had no place in business affairs, and devious subtlety was the only way to battle Jimenin. Besides, this was Hallis business, not de Lovet's. Handsome he was; rich he might be, but she owed him nothing more than an abrupt "No."

He didn't move, and his mouth thinned and firmed. Louvaen tried to recall where in the stables she'd placed the pitchfork when Cinnia came to her aid. She sidled up to Gavin and laid a delicate hand on his arm. Her great brown eyes, which had slain a thousand hearts and made an equal number of enemies, implored him. Louvaen inwardly counted the seconds until Cinnia reduced her victim to a quivering heap.

“You must go, Gavin. Jimenin is a serpent but one we can handle. If you stay, you’ll just make it more difficult for us.”

To Louvaen’s surprise—and growing admiration—de Lovet didn’t fall so easily to her sister’s persuasion. Then again, like recognized like, and she wondered if he’d used a male version of that same seduction on others and was immune to its power. He glanced at her then back to Cinnia, his handsome features revealing the conflicting need to protect and his wish to appease Cinnia. For her part, Cinnia hammered the last nail home by stroking his arm. “Please, Gavin,” she begged in her soft voice. “We’ll see you tomorrow?”

Louvaen knotted her fingers together to keep from applauding her sister as de Lovet wilted and surrendered. “As you wish.” He clasped Cinnia’s hand and brought it to his lips in a polite kiss. “Until tomorrow, sweet Cinnia.” He bowed a second time to Louvaen. “Mistress Duenda.” He glanced once toward the house to catch a glimpse of the Hallis’s latest visitor before letting himself out the back gate.

Cinnia’s gaze followed him until he disappeared from view. She turned to Louvaen who frowned. “What?”

“When did you become just ‘Cinnia’ and he just ‘Gavin’?”

Cinnia’s chin jutted out in a stubborn angle. “It isn’t improper.”

“It’s certainly familiar.”

The girl peered into the kitchen’s open door and changed the subject. “Doesn’t Jimenin have something else to do besides lurk around here?”

Louvaen's lips twitched at the similarity between Cinnia's complaint and her own about Gavin. "Not until he can squeeze every last farthing out of us."

Cinnia sighed. "What am I sick with today?"

"Take your pick."

"Leprosy." She grinned. "Wait. Scurvy. We haven't used scurvy yet."

This time Louvaen laughed. "I think he'd believe something a little less dramatic. A headache should suffice."

Cinnia headed for the door with a long-suffering sigh. "I seem to get a lot of those lately."

Louvaen followed her inside as far as the kitchen and watched as she tiptoed up the back stairs to her room. Jimenin didn't believe a word of their tales regarding Cinnia's many illnesses, but he hadn't challenged them yet, and Louvaen happily played the game for as long as necessary to keep him away from her sister. She brushed the wrinkles out of her apron, took a calming breath so she wouldn't succumb to the temptation of strangling their visitor with her bare hands and marched into the parlor.

She found both men seated near the small hearth appearing like two friends enjoying each other's company on a winter's day—at least until she looked closer at her father's expression. Pinched, hunted, and pale with desperation, Mercer caught sight of her. His shoulders slumped in relief. "Louvaen, my dear, Don Jimenin has been kind enough to stop by and inquire about Cinnia's health."

Louvaen inclined her head to their guest who stood and offered her a courtly bow. Dressed in elegant garb of

embroidered blacks and grays, Don Gabrilla Jimenin cut an impressive figure. A wealthy landowner with investments in everything from caravans to ships, he was Monteblanco's most influential citizen. Men courted his favor and women his interest. His was a regular face, saved from banality by a sensual mouth and an oddly entrancing pair of eyes that looked out upon the world with cool hauteur. He styled his brown hair in the latest fashion of tight curls confined in a neat queue. Louvaen loathed him and knew he heartily returned the sentiment.

His gaze swept over her before he glanced past her shoulder to the empty kitchen. His lips quirked in a cold smile. "You're looking well, mistress."

She suspected she looked murderous, but this man had a knack for bringing out the anger in her. "Most kind, sir," she said in a flat voice. "May we offer you tea?"

He dashed her small hope he'd refuse and leave when he resumed his seat. "Thank you, Mistress Duenda. I humbly accept."

"Of course you do," she muttered and stalked to the kitchen to add another teacup and prepare the tea.

By the time she returned and set the service on the small table between the chairs, tension had thickened the air to a soup. Jimenin helped himself to one of the cups and sipped. "A fine brew, mistress." When Louvaen didn't respond, he continued. "How is Miss Cinnia today? She was feeling ill and had taken to her room during my last visit."

Louvaen seethed at his familiar use of her sister's name. "Mistress Hallis," she bit out between clenched teeth, "is still

poorly I'm afraid. Headaches and fatigue. Change of seasons I think." Snakes in men's clothing more like it.

Jimenin glanced at Mercer. "Your lovely daughter has a delicate constitution."

Mercer nodded. "Yes she does." He downed his tea in a single gulp.

"Any news of the third ship? I hear wreckage from the first two has started washing ashore."

Mercer slumped even further in his chair. Louvaen, who'd taken up guard duty behind him, squeezed his shoulder with one hand and clenched her skirts with the other. The bastard taunted her father. Everyone knew the loss of those ships had made the Hallis family nearly destitute. The hope the last ship had survived the storm which destroyed the others was fast fading.

"None, but with a little luck it will arrive in harbor any day now."

Jimenin stretched his legs toward the fire. "You're an optimistic man, Mercer." He gestured with his teacup. "It's been nearly four months since we had word the ship might have made it through the storm intact. I suspect it sits at the bottom of the ocean with its sister ships." He bared a set of yellowed teeth in the parody of a smile.

If her house wasn't at risk of burning down, Louvaen would have wished for a back draft of flame to rush out and consume him.

"I think a little more patience and we'll..."

Jimenin straightened in his seat and slammed the cup down hard enough to make the service rattle and tea slosh in the teapot. His pale eyes reflected back the hearth fire, reminding Louvaen of a wolf's gaze caught in a sliver of moonlight. "My patience is done! I want the balance on the investment and the accompanying interest."

Mercer raised his hands in surrender. "We have nothing left," he babbled. "Only Louvaen's house and a draft horse."

"We'll sell the house, Papa." She glared at Jimenin. He wasn't here for money, but he'd use their debt to strong-arm Mercer into giving him Cinnia. Louvaen vowed they'd live wild in the woods before she let that happen.

Jimenin's gloating laughter scraped across her ears. "You could sell six of these houses, and they'll only cover a portion of the debt."

She fisted her hands on her hips. "Liar," she spat. "I check the accounts. I know the numbers. There's no way we owe you such a sum."

He cocked one eyebrow. "Oh? Didn't your father tell you about his venture with me into a caravan of saffron? All documents signed, witnessed and stored at the Merchant House." He shook his head in mock sorrow. "An unlucky year for many of us, I'm afraid. Bandits attacked the caravan. Our goods were a total loss."

The revelation stole her breath. Louvaen gripped Mercer's shoulder until he turned to her. "Papa?"

His shame-filled expression verified Jimenin's story. "I'm sorry, Lou. It seemed a sure thing at the time."

No, no, no! She wanted to scream. She wanted to shake her father for his gullibility until his teeth rattled, and then she'd put a round of lead shot into Jimenin for his trickery.

Jimenin's smile grew, his gaze feral. "I'm a man with deep pockets and a compassionate nature." He ignored Louvaen's snort. "Give me Cinnia as wife, and all debt will be forgiven."

She'd seen it coming months earlier, had warned Mercer to have nothing to do with Jimenin, but his extortion still made her gasp. Mercer's outraged "Absolutely not. I'll not sell my daughter under any circumstance," rang in her ears.

Her mind spinning with a hundred ways to outmaneuver Jimenin, she interrupted. "Would you take a widow instead?"

"Louvaen!" Her father gaped at her.

She kept her gaze trained on her adversary. "Don Jimenin?"

He rose from his chair but didn't venture nearer. He usually only offered Louvaen a brief disinterested nod, his focus solely on Cinnia. Now his gaze raked her from her worn shoes, over her apron-covered gown, to her upswept hair. Louvaen squelched the need to scratch at her crawling skin. His eyes glittered for a moment as he considered her offer. He gave a dry chuckle. "You're a handsome woman, Mistress Duenda, and still young enough to bear children, but some time in my life I'll have to sleep. I don't relish waking up skewered with one of my swords."

Louvaen didn't realize she'd been holding her breath. Relief warred with disappointment. She'd never marry the vile goat in a thousand lifetimes, but his acceptance and

expected courtship would have bought them a little more time to plan. She'd lost the advantage with his refusal, yet the greater part of her thanked merciful gods he wasn't interested.

Mercer stood, and for once his outrage overwhelmed Jimenin's smug superiority. "Neither of my daughters is for sale or trade, Jimenin."

"Then you give me something of equal value or equal pleasure." Jimenin poked him in the chest, and Mercer staggered. "You have a fortnight to decide. Afterwards, I call in my markers and strip you of everything you own. You can ponder your precious daughter's innocence from a gaol cell."

Louvaen strode to a small cupboard behind her father's chair and retrieved a carved box. She lifted one of her husband's pistols from its silk lined compartment, turned and took aim. Jimenin's eyes rounded. "Get out," she said in a low voice. "And don't shadow our doorway again."

He tried for a taunting grin, ruined by his chin's nervous quiver. "That's not loaded."

The click of the flintlock's hammer made him blanch. Louvaen's heartbeat thudded in her ears. "You think not?" Her finger curled around the trigger.

He backed slowly toward the door, his features sharpening with hate the closer he got to safety. "You and me, bitch. We're not done."

Her arm hurt with the weight of the pistol, but Louvaen's grip remained as steady as her voice. "We will be," she promised.

The door's slam rattled the pewter plates displayed along one wall, and Jimenin disappeared in an indignant flap of

black cloak. Louvaen lowered her arm and carefully lowered the hammer down. Only the crackle of embers in the hearth sounded in the parlor as she returned the gun to its case and put it back in the cupboard.

“Lou, you almost shot him!” Mercer’s eyes swallowed his face and wisps of white hair stood straight up on his head as if he’d caught a bolt of lightning. Were Louvaen not struggling to keep her shaking hands hidden in her skirts and her stomach out of her throat, she might have laughed.

“Thomas is likely rolling in his grave that I didn’t, Papa. First rule: if you aim a pistol, you better shoot. I broke the rule.” The shock of her confrontation with Jimenin rolled over her, and she collapsed in the chair he vacated. Mercer poured her a cup of the now lukewarm tea, and she gripped the fragile piece hard to keep from spilling.

“What possessed you to offer yourself to him? You despise Jimenin.”

She sipped, praying her hands might halt their palsied dance. “I’d never wed such a loathsome tarse. I’d torch the house before I’d ruin my mop cleaning him off the floors.”

Mercer’s forehead knitted into a map of puzzled lines. “Then why?”

“To buy time.” She glanced at the ceiling. Cinnia’s room was directly above them. “If he had any honor, which he doesn’t, he’d court me. And since I have no honor where he’s concerned, I’d break the engagement after finding a way to either pay him off or get you and Cinnia away from him. I’ve no debt to him, and a broken engagement won’t earn me time in the gaol.” She still might see the inside of a cell and the outside of a gallows. Any confrontation after this and

someone was definitely going to die. “Too bad he understands I’d sink a knife between his shoulders at the first opportunity.”

Mercer took his seat across from her, once again hunched in a defeated slouch. “We are in his debt. He’s a right to payment.”

“Yes, but no right to demand Cinnia in trade.” Her hands shook in anger now, not fear. “Why in all the gods’ names did you enter another venture with him, Papa? A saffron caravan? Didn’t you realize how risky such an investment was?” Louvaen desperately wished her stepmother were still alive. While Mercer had once been known as a successful businessman and merchant, it was his wife Abigail who possessed sound business sense, who understood profitable investments and hard negotiations. She’d been the family scrivener and could account for every ha’penny that left Mercer’s pockets. Louvaen was not hers by blood, but she’d inherited a similar mind for money, and Abigail had taught her everything she knew. Mercer’s fortunes only declined once Abigail died and Louvaen married. She still reeled over how quickly he’d managed to ruin his business and squander the family’s savings when no one was watching.

Mercer stiffened. “Of course I knew it, but Jimenin promised a huge return in profit once we got it to market.”

“If you got it to market, which you didn’t.”

“How was I to know bandits would attack the caravan?” He gripped the arms of the chair. “Gods, Lou, you’re like a dog with a bone.”

He was lucky he was her father, or she would have bitten through instead of just gnawing on him. “Are you serious?” Her fingers tightened on her cup, threatening to crack it in her

grip. “Everyone knows the Ladlelow Hills are bandit country. The only surer bet to be made is the sun will rise each morning.”

“You’ll watch your tongue, miss! I’m still your father and head of this family.”

“Which you’ve managed to beggar with your bad judgment. You and Cinnia aren’t homeless right now because you’re living in my house!”

Mercer’s flushed face bled of all color, and Louvaen recoiled from the humiliation in his eyes. Guilt roiled the tea in her stomach, and she stretched out a supplicating hand to him. “Forgive me, Papa...”

“Is he gone?” Cinnia poked her head around the corner, gaze darting about the room.

Louvaen never took her eyes off her father. “Yes. Do you want tea? It’s only warm now.”

Mercer rose. Shoulders hunched, he shuffled out of the parlor, pausing long enough to hug Cinnia. “I’m off for a nap,” he told her. “I’ll see you at supper.” He didn’t look back at Louvaen. Both women listened as his footsteps thumped up the risers and then over their heads towards his room. At the snick of a door closing the two faced off.

Cinnia glared at Louvaen. “What did you say to him?”

Louvaen turned away to stare into the fire. “Nothing that wasn’t true.” True or not, she’d flayed her beloved father, shaming him in the harshest manner.

“Nothing that was kind either I’ll bet. You’re heartless sometimes, Lou.”

“Maybe if some of us thought more with our heads instead of our hearts around here, we wouldn’t be in this mess.” Louvaen rubbed circles at her temples with her fingertips. “Jimenin is calling in his markers. He’ll forgive the debt if Papa trades you to him in marriage, otherwise he’ll have Papa tossed into debtor’s prison.”

Cinnia gasped. “Can’t we pay him?”

“Not enough. I’ll sell the house, the land, what little furniture we have left and the rest of the livestock, but that will only cover a fraction of what’s owed. Jimenin convinced Papa to join another failed venture. We might have been able to pull him out of the pit he dug himself into before that arrangement. Not any longer.”

Cinnia rushed forward and knelt before her sister’s chair. She clutched Louvaen’s hand. “Gavin can help. His father is wealthy. We’ll borrow from him.”

Louvaen looked into the breathtaking face that often made life so difficult and squeezed Cinnia’s fingers. “Absolutely not. We trade the evil we know for the one we don’t.”

Cinnia dropped Louvaen’s hand as if scorched and jerked to her feet. “Gavin de Lovet isn’t evil!”

“Maybe not, but he might be a liar. You’ve known him what?” Louvaen snapped her fingers. “Three months? A fair face, good manners, fine clothes. Those don’t make a good man, Cinnia, or an honest one. We’ve never met his family. No one here has seen or heard of the de Sauveterres.”

Cinnia stamped her foot, quivering with indignation. “He wouldn’t lie to me! I believe him.”

Louvaen shrugged. “Good for you. I don’t. Even if he’s all the things you say, we’ve nothing left to trade. Pay off Jimenin with another man’s money, and what do we offer de Sauveterre in exchange? We’re right back where we started.” She frowned at the sly look entering her sister’s eyes.

“If I were Lady de Lovet...”

Ah, the crux of it all. It wasn’t a bad idea except for one missing key component. “Well you’re not, and he hasn’t offered for your hand.” The headache threatening to crack her skull since she first caught sight of Jimenin lurking at their threshold struck her behind her the eyes. “You’ve wasted half the day flirting and accomplishing nothing, and I need to think. Go next door. Dame Niamh promised me a basket of rovings.

Cinnia crushed her skirts with hands curled into delicate fists. Her face flushed a becoming pink. “I am not an idiot! You never listen to me!”

“I would if you offered me a workable idea. What makes you assume de Lovet is rich and will just blissfully hand over his family’s money to us if you flutter your eyelashes at him.” Louvaen groaned as Cinnia’s face went as ashen as their father’s had earlier. She’d be drowning in apologies before the evening was over. “Cinnia—”

The girl spun on her heel and fled the parlor. Louvaen winced as the back door’s slam reverberated throughout the house and through her pounding head. Well, she’d manage to cock it up but good with all the members of her small family.

Supper was a silent, brooding affair. Louvaen decided the next morning would be a better time to beg forgiveness, as neither Cinnia nor Mercer were inclined to even look at her

much less speak to her. With the mostly uneaten meal put away, Cinnia offered to read from Mercer's favorite book of poems. He kissed her hand and led her to the parlor. Cinnia shot a baleful glare at Louvaen with the message she wasn't welcome to join them.

Louvaen blew out the kitchen candles and went upstairs to her room. She unlaced her gown and draped it across the foot of the bed. Her shift brushed her skin like cold wings, and she shivered in the dark room. The bed was equally chilly, but she'd grown used to it since Thomas's death. Her vision blurred as she thought of her husband. Kind, stout-hearted, always knowing the right words to smooth ruffled feathers, he'd been the perfect foil to Louvaen's sharp edges, and oh gods did she miss him. She hugged his pillow to her breasts and buried her face in its softness. His scent was long gone, but she still imagined she smelled him on the pillow and the sheets. "Thomas, my love, what am I going to do?" Only the whisper of snow against the window replied.

When she finally dropped into slumber, she slept poorly, tossing and turning until she'd cocooned herself in the blankets. She woke several times in a sweat, plagued by nightmares of Jimenin dragging a screaming Cinnia away by her hair or Mercer dying of neglect and mistreatment in a prison cell. The sun hadn't broken the horizon when she rose from the bed, bleary-eyed and dim from lack of sleep, to wash and dress. The house was quiet as she tiptoed downstairs to light the hearth and set out the pots to make porridge and tea. At dawn she trudged back up the stairs, prayed for guidance, and knocked softly on Cinnia's door.

It creaked open at her touch. Puzzled, Louvaen pushed it a little wider. "Cinnia? You awake?" The room was dark

and freezing. Her heart lurched at the sight of the neatly made bed and open window. The curtains gusted under the draft sweeping the chamber. A snapping sound drew her to Cinnia's writing desk where a sheet of parchment fluttered beneath the weight of a candlestick. She pulled it out, crushing the edges in her hand. Cinnia's familiar handwriting scrawled across the paper in loops and curls of black ink.

I've left with Gavin for his family estate in the north. I'm not running away. I'm helping Papa. My idea is workable, and I'll see it through with or without your blessing. If you want to help me, keep the letter with you. It's ensorcelled and will lead you to Gavin's home. Give Papa my love.

Louvaen swayed; terrified by Cinnia's reckless actions, horrified at the idea she had been their catalyst. The last recriminating line of the letter had her breathing in panicked gulps of air.

You should have listened.

CHAPTER TWO



Ballard admired the fact that even with her clothing askew and straw sticking out of her mussed hair like an Unseelie crown, his betrothed was still the most beautiful woman in the kingdom. Her lover Cederic, however, couldn't boast the same comeliness. The obvious tussle in the stable loft had left him rumped and sneezing until his eyes ran with tears and his nose with snot. He wiped his face on his sleeve before presenting his arm to Isabeau. She hesitated, her flawless features pinched into an expression of revulsion before she finally placed one hand over his while the other plucked the last few bits of hay from her ruined coif.

Another man might be enraged by this blatant proof of his intended's faithlessness, but Ballard had earned his reputation as a ruthless warlord lacking both heart and soul. He felt nothing for his Isabeau, or she for him. She was welcome to Cederic and any other lover who caught her fancy—as long as those lovers didn't try to claim her lands. His parents' union had been a cool, cordial one of mutual benefit by united lands and increased power. Both had taken lovers during their marriage, but the land had stayed firmly within his family's control. The union between him and Isabeau would be no different—a contract signed when they were children, a betrothal made, a dowry of a fiefdom with rich farm land, water rights, toll bridges, and an heir to control it all once Ballard died.

The couple passed him where he stood within the shadows of one of the king's castle walls. They laughed together, Isabeau's lilting giggles playing harmony to Cederic's seductive chuckles. Ballard watched them until they disappeared into the crowd milling about the inner bailey. Of all the lovers Isabeau took, none was more dangerous to him than Cederic of Granthing. A clever vassal of lesser power than Ballard but of equal ambition, his lands bordered the other side of Isabeau's dower properties. Ballard suspected at some point in the near future, he'd have to kill Cederic. He looked forward to that day.

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Ballard liked the gloom of winter, its sickly light and the rattle of sleet against the horn shutters that kept the full blast of freezing wind out of the solar. Clotted in shadows thinned by the low fire in the hearth, the chamber held his secrets and hid his twisted figure. Here in the darkness he could almost forget

the curse, the suffering it brought and the guilt that made him willingly bear it. His hands ached, as did his back and shoulders. Ambrose would tease and say age had finally reached him, though both men knew otherwise. The flux coursed through his blood in a poisoned tide, heralding the curse's rise and the havoc it wreaked on his mind and body.

A set of stinging jabs along his shin and calf yanked him from his musings. A rose vine, so dark a green as to appear black had crept through the space left by a broken shutter slat and crossed the solar to reach his chair. It twined around his leg, sinking thorns like grappling hooks into his breeches. They pierced flesh, anchoring the vine to his inner thigh. Ballard swallowed a groan at the sharp tug of thorns on punctured skin but kept still. He had no wish to add to the scars earned from previous wrestling matches with Isabeau's malevolent rose.

Blood trickled hot to his ankle as the vine finally halted its sinuous climb at his hip. Tipped by a flower as lush and red as royal velvet, the plant arched upward until it hung eye-level with his gaze. There it stopped, swaying gently back and forth. Petals, neither blackened nor withered by the freeze, curled in pristine beauty.

Despite the pain needling his skin from calf to groin, Ballard smiled. "Eager for the flux are we, witch's pet? Want to see the beast chained?" The hypnotic swaying never altered. "Sorry to disappoint. Roses don't grow in dungeons."

The rose struck at him. Ballard jerked away a half second too late, and a curved thorn scored his jaw. He clenched the vine in his fist, ignoring the blood that seeped through his fingers and down the back of his hand as it looped

around his wrist and spiked more thorns into his palm. The rose writhed in his grip, petals opening and closing on a hiss. He cupped the flower, admiring its soft caress against his palm and over his claws. The perfumes of rose and death drifted to his nostrils. He gently squeezed, stifling the angry hiss.

A reciprocal pain burst behind his eyes, making them water. He ignored the agony and crushed the rose a little more. How very tempting to strip every petal off the stem and smear each one under his boot. The side of his face throbbed, a twin warning to the pain behind his eyes. Ballard relaxed his grip, but the rose remained where it was, bound to his palm by the nest of black thorns embedded in his skin. He caressed a wet petal with a fingertip. “Whose blood made this so beautiful, Isabeau? Yours or mine?”

The vine wrenched itself free. Ballard gasped and arched in his chair as thorns ripped flesh and cloth, taking bits of both as it slithered along the floor toward the window. The rose, glowing scarlet in the hearth’s sullen light, offered a last hiss before disappearing over the sill.

Ballard followed the crimson trail left in its wake and limped to the window. He opened the shutters in time to watch the rose scuttle down the keep wall to entwine with the web of vines and blooms spread across the tower’s northern face. Even in the dead of winter, the brambles frothed with green leaves and flowers in full, ravenous bloom.

Ballard’s bloodied palm slipped over the ice-sheathed woof of the casement. “Mercy, Isabeau,” he entreated. The plant stirred once more, every blossom turning its face toward the fortress gates and away from him

He looked to the gates and caught sight of a cloaked horseman emerging from the narrow barbican. A pack horse plodded behind him. Both paused, and the rider raised a hand in greeting. Ballard saluted him in return. Hauled back to Ketach Tor by the rising flux, Gavin had returned from his journey to the outside world. All of Ballard's hopes rested on the day he might see his son depart Ketach Tor forever, finally freed from the prison of his inheritance.

Shadows cast by torches trailed Ballard down the stairs that wound from the keep's second floor to the great hall. He breathed in the fragrance of the rosemary and sage Magda used to scent the water she sprayed across the rushes. Gavin had finally given up wheedling her to abandon the practice and lay down the woven rugs he'd brought back from his many travels.

Ketach Tor's formidable cook and housekeeper met Ballard in the kitchen. She held a mortar in one hand and wielded a pestle like a club with the other. "What do you want?" Her gaze traveled over him, pausing at his cheek and hand before moving on to the glistening ribbons of blood that striped his leg and splotched his low boot. She motioned to him to sit at one of the benches near the hearth. "The witch's familiar come to visit you again?"

Ballard sat with a pained grunt and stretched out his bloodied leg. "Aye, and made sweet love to me."

"One of these days, someone's going to hack that blasted weed to bits, and I want to be there to help." Magda pointed a finger at him. "Stay put. I'm off to get bandages and honey." She abandoned him for the larder, and he took the time to shuck his boots and carefully peel off his torn breeches.

The wounds left by the thorns added to the mural of scars decorating his thigh and calf—souvenirs from long-ago battles when he'd fought men instead of demonic plants. These he could look upon and not have his stomach twist. The others he bore made him turn away. Wild magic, fueled by hatred hundreds of years old, had carved an illustrated testament of his failures into every part of his body.

He jerked when a pile of bandages landed in his lap. Magda set a crock next to him and dropped to her knees for a better look at his injuries. She motioned to one of her maids hovering nearby. "Fill a bowl with hot water and bring towels."

Ballard held still as she poked and prodded first at his hand and then at the line of torn flesh gouged from calf to groin. He growled when she pressed on a particularly tender spot. "You're about as gentle as a battering ram with those hands."

She sniffed. "You complain more than a babe with a wet nappy. Now be quiet and let me work."

The rustle of robes against the stone floor heralded Ambrose's arrival. The sorcerer almost danced into the room. Ballard's eyebrows rose. Gavin's return trips to Ketach Tor were bittersweet for the remaining denizens of the keep—joy at his safe return, sadness that the flux drew him home. While Ambrose always celebrated Gavin's homecoming as much as everyone else, he was practically jumping out of his skin with excitement this time. "Gavin's returned," he declared in the voice of a man announcing the arrival of a conquering hero.

Ballard spoke through clenched teeth as Magda did her best to excavate his veins out of his leg with a wet cloth. "I

saw him from my window.”

“He’s brought someone with him.”

The breath in Ballard’s lungs froze. He didn’t notice when Magda spread a sticky dollop of honey across three of the puncture wounds and covered them with bandages.

She cast a doubtful look at Ambrose. “Has he now?”

Stupid boy! Stunned by the news, Ballard couldn’t wrap his mind around such a foolish action. Whip-smart and cautious, Gavin had never shown a hint of impulsivity, but this—to bring someone with him to Ketach Tor, and during the rise of a flux... “Tell him to get rid of them,” he snarled. “Now.”

“I’m afraid it’s not so easy.” Ambrose spread his hands in a helpless gesture. “He’s brought a woman. She’s waiting in the hall with him.”

This time Magda abandoned her role of nursemaid and stood. “The hall?” She tossed the bandages on the table, and Ambrose took a wary step back. “With no fire and it sleeting outside.” She flapped a hand at her daughter hovering nearby. “Clarimond, get that hearth lit, and bring her to the kitchens to warm up!”

Ballard gaped at her. “Now?” He glanced down at himself, half naked, smeared in honey and wrapped in bandages, his scars and disfigurements on display. “Won’t this be a welcoming sight.”

Magda tossed his breeches and boots at him. “Hide yourself, you daft fool. I’ll physic you later.”

Ambrose helped him stand, fully in Magda's camp as he nudged Ballard toward the steps leading down to the buttery. "I'll see to the welcome. Magda will thaw her out. I'll send Joan with your cloak." He gleefully rubbed his hands together. "This may be our redemption, *dominus*."

Perched on the top step, clutching his clothing, Ballard wondered when he'd lost control of his castle. He scowled at his friend. "Don't raise your hopes too high. The air is sparking with wild magic. If your idea is right, it should have subsided with her arrival."

The other man shrugged. "A rescue then. Lost traveler. But a girl alone?" His eyes were bright with a hope Ballard hadn't witnessed in any of his retainers in centuries. "I'll see you in a moment."

The door shut behind him, leaving Ballard in the gloom. His toes curled against the cold stairs as he followed the flicker of rush lights bound in nippers lining the walls. At least they'd exiled him with the ale and wine. He descended into the vaulted chamber and quickly dressed before an audience of stacked barrels, some filled with vintages Gavin had carted home, others with the brew Magda and her girls concocted in the kitchen. His leg and hand ached, and his cheek still sported the deep scratch left by the rose's curved thorns. Were it any wandering traveler who'd somehow managed to break through Ambrose's wards and find Ketach Tor, he'd march out to the great hall, uncloaked, bare-shinned and brandishing a sword or crossbow just in case said visitor didn't understand the words "Get out." This, however, was different. His son had brought a woman to Ketach Tor—something he'd never done before—and caught Ballard's household by surprise. For Gavin, he'd endeavor not to be the

savage Isabeau once accused him of. He would hide the marks of the curse and not scare their guest into leaping onto the closest horse and bolting for the drawbridge, screaming her head off as she galloped away.

Joan met him at the top of the stairs with his cloak. She bowed. “They’ve returned to the hall, *dominus*. Waiting for you.”

She followed him out as he tossed the cloak over his shoulders and pulled the hood deep to cast his face in shadow. Magda and Clarimond were nowhere to be seen, and he eyed a kettle hanging over the hearth’s flames. It whistled angrily as water bubbled and spilled onto embers that spat and hissed in steamy protest. The sound of footsteps running toward the kitchen made him tense. He rested his hand on the dagger at his belt and lowered it just as quickly when Ambrose entered, this time as breathless and giddy as any maiden at her first court presentation.

Ballard scowled at him. “What’s wrong with you?”

“My gods, Ballard.” His hands fluttered, sketching tracers of blue luminescence. “This girl—there are no words.”

Ballard’s lips twitched. “That bad, eh? I always wondered what might catch his eye. With his handsome face, he could choose any wench. Should I be disappointed?”

Ambrose grinned. “Come look.”

He followed Ambrose into the great hall where a small crowd made up of Gavin, his mysterious guest, a wide-eyed Magda and equally stunned Clarimond and Joan gathered by the now lit hearth. Gavin and the woman had their backs to them but turned at their approach. Ballard halted in his tracks.

Bundled in an evergreen cloak with her hands gloved in rabbit fur mittens, the girl who faced him might well have inspired not only songs and works of art, but battles between empires for her hand in marriage. Even his long-dead wife, renowned for her beauty in her time, couldn't touch this fair creature. Her hair, bound up in a simple ribbon, reflected summer light and hearth fire.

Every person, even the loveliest, sported some feature flaw—a chin a little too weak, eyes too wide-spaced, a nose slightly crooked. Not this one. Skin as fine and delicate as porcelain, a straight nose and large brown eyes shadowed by eyelashes thick and dark, graced a face that must have left Gavin staggering the first time he'd seen her. Ballard couldn't make out her form in the concealing cloak but suspected her body matched her face in its perfection. It was as if the gods had decided to bless one human with all their physical glory, and this was the result of their endeavor. It had taken him centuries to do it, but his son had brought home the most beautiful woman in the world.

Gavin led her forward. “Father, I wish to introduce Cinnia Hallis of Montebianco, Fairhaven Province.”

She offered him a pensive smile before dropping into a deep curtsy. When she rose, she stretched out a hand to him. “I'm honored to meet you, Lord de Sauveterre,” she said, voice lyrical and sweet. “Your son has told me much about you and your home.”

“Has he?” A bubble of bitter laughter swelled in his throat. Beauty at its most sublime resided at Ketach Tor now, alongside hideousness at its most wretched. The irony nearly choked him. He didn't take her hand but let his cloak fall back

to reveal his hands. She inhaled sharply and shrank back. Gavin captured her fingers in his grasp and scowled at his father.

Ballard shrugged. Beautiful Cinnia Hallis might be, but if Gavin had any mind to keep her here for more than an hour or two, she'd have to grow a spine and deal with his appearance. He'd wear the cloak but had no intention of hiding in the buttery the length of her stay so he didn't offend her delicate sensibilities. "How long are you staying, Mistress Hallis?"

"Father, a word please. Ambrose as well." Gavin kissed the back of Cinnia's hand before pushing her gently toward Magda. "Go to the kitchens with Magda, my love. You've had a long journey. She'll take care of you."

Magda placed a hand on the girl's shoulder. "Come with me, my girl. Let's get you fed. Men forget these things until their own bellies are gnawing at their backbones." She ushered Cinnia out of the hall with Clarimond and Joan following behind them.

Ballard crossed his arms and eyed his son. "Exactly how much did you tell her? She almost leapt out of her skin when she saw my hands."

"I told her as much as I could without breaking the curse's strictures." Gavin cocked an eyebrow. "You can't deny you're still a startling sight."

Ballard conceded the point. "Who is de Sauveterre?"

"You are." At Ballard's questioning look, Gavin shrugged. "Ketach Tor is too specific. Sauveterre could be

any place, and it's common enough among the southern provinces as is the name Lovet."

Ballard chuckled. "I doubt there's anything common about a 'safe land.' In fact, you'd be lucky to find such a place in the world." He tipped his chin toward the kitchen. "I thought the fruit of this trip was to be more books for Ambrose or another cask of wine. That isn't a book or a cask."

Gavin looked sheepish. "I heard rumors that the Montebianco markets carried rare grimoires. I stopped to have a look, maybe bring something back for Ambrose. I saw Cinnia at the market one morning. She's a bookbinder." He cleared his throat, obviously abashed at how quickly he'd fallen to her charms.

"I've never beheld a more beautiful girl," Ambrose said in a reverent voice.

Gavin's moonstruck expression mirrored Ambrose's sentiment. "She is. And kind as she is beautiful. I've been in Montebianco for three months now, courting her and working as a swordsmith at the town's principal smithy."

"Courtship?" Ballard slid a glance to Ambrose who met it with a sly one of his own. Gavin had known many women during his travels and kept several as mistresses, but he'd never pursued a formal courtship nor lingered in one place for too long. And he had never before brought one of those women to Ketach Tor. This was serious. If the sorcerer's suppositions regarding the curse and how to break it were correct, then a union based on love between Gavin and his chosen bride might save both father and son. Ballard refused to ignite that small fire of hope and concentrated on the fact that Gavin brought the girl home instead of marrying her in

her village. “Why did you bring her into these isolated wilds? I find it hard to believe Ketach Tor is a more hospitable place than her own town, especially in winter.”

Gavin ran a hand over his eyes, and for the first time since his arrival, Ballard noted the exhaustion in his face, the unkempt state of his clothing. He’d traveled hard and fast to get here. “Her family’s in trouble. A wealthy townsman holds her father’s markers, and he can no longer pay. The man demands Cinnia to forgive the debt, or her father will face imprisonment.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. Why did you bring her to Ketach Tor?”

“Protection. Time.” Gavin began to pace. “I need the time to court her and keep her safe while I do it. I can’t if Jimenin...”

Ambrose interrupted him. “Who?”

“Don Gabrilla Jimenin. The man who holds Hallis’s markers. I can’t court her with him stalking her and threatening her father every minute.”

Ballard still didn’t understand the problem. “Then just kill him and pay the *blot wite*.”

Gavin laughed. “If he challenged me I would, but that isn’t how it works. Don Jimenin is a powerful citizen of the town. Influential and rich. He has a private militia of mercenaries and henchmen. The only reason he hasn’t outright abducted Cinnia is he wants to maintain a good name. Besides, blood fines are obsolete. No court in the land will accept one. I’d swing from the gallows instead.”

Ballard snorted. Things had changed a great deal in a few centuries. A man's reputation had once rested on his prowess in battle and his loyalty to his king, not the manner in which he got his bride to the altar.

Ambrose worried the embroidery edging one of his sleeves. "You could have stayed in Monteblanco to protect her, but you've been called back by the flux."

"Aye. I started feeling the effects last week." Gavin looked to Ballard. "I couldn't leave her, Father. Her widowed sister is a capable guardian and a force to be reckoned with but still no match for Jimenin."

The girl had a sister. Ballard wondered idly if the siblings resembled each other. He pitied their father if such were true. One child with the face of a goddess would be hard enough to defend; two, a nightmare of constant vigilance. "If you're called back and the flux runs high, then either Ambrose's conjectures are wrong..."

Ambrose gave an indignant huff. "They're not wrong."

"Or Mistress Hallis doesn't love you. It's obvious she came of her own accord, but did she do so because she returns your affections or because her father needs money to avoid a prison cell, and she wants to avoid an unwanted bridegroom?"

Gavin shrugged. "All three. They aren't ignoble reasons, and it was I who offered to pay her father's debts. She didn't ask. Even her sister rebuffed me when I made the offer."

"Can you blame them? Beholden to one man or another, they're trapped by their sire's debt, and the girl is reduced to nothing more than a *halsefang* to keep him out of prison."

“I don’t see her as payment,” Gavin snapped. “I want her to wife because I love her. I just need time to court her. Even if she rejects me in the end, I’ve promised her family will hold no debt to us.” His tone turned beseeching. “Cinnia cares for me. Away from Jimenin and without worries that her father will be jailed, I believe she’ll come to love me and agree to be my wife.”

Ambrose stroked his beard. “It might work, *dominus*. Winter’s set in. No decent roads for traveling, even in this age. She has only a father and sister, so I doubt we’ll have an angry pack of relatives descending on us to defend her honor.

Gavin chortled. “I wouldn’t say that. You haven’t met the sister. Louvaen Duenda is her own militia. Expect her at the gates in a few days to rescue Cinnia from our clutches.”

One of Ballard’s eyebrows rose. It didn’t speak well for Cinnia’s father that one of his daughters would play the savior to the other one instead of him. “When the flux peaks, you’ll have to give your beloved some reason for the noises below the hall and why you’ve taken to your bed. Are you willing to lie?”

“For now yes.”

Ballard clapped a hand on his son’s broad shoulder. “Take what you need from the treasury. Once the flux is in ebb tide, you can return to Montebianco. If you love this Cinnia as much as you say, be ready to crawl and beg Hallis’s forgiveness for taking his daughter. A chest of gold might sweeten his mood but don’t assume so. Were I her sire, I’d break both your legs.”

“Were Mercer Hallis like you, Cinnia would never be caught in this trap.” Gavin embraced him, pounding his back

hard enough to make Ballard's teeth rattle. "Thank you, Father." He bowed. "I take my leave of you." He grinned and took off for the kitchen.

Ballard and Ambrose watched him leave. The sorcerer addressed Ballard without turning. "Did you notice his eyes? They weren't like that at the last flux."

Ballard's gut clenched. He'd hoped it had been a trick of the firelight or his own imagination suddenly turned fanciful, but Ambrose had noted it as well. Gavin's green eyes glinted yellow in just the right light.

Ballard sighed. "I'm like a bucket filled to the brim. The curse is bleeding over. Once it consumes me, it will take him. If that happens, Ambrose..."

"It won't," Ambrose swore in a low voice. "This girl may be the key. He just has to make her fall in love with him."

"Then pray to your gods Gavin is more charming than I am and wins her soon." He displayed one of his hands with its black claws and large knuckles. Spirals of dark blood coursed just below the corpse-white skin as if writing spells in his veins. "We're running out of time."

CHAPTER THREE



Louvaen pinched the corner of Cinnia's letter between two frozen fingers as if it were a wild thing with snapping jaws and a nasty bite. The words scrawled on the parchment were unreadable symbols in the growing twilight. She knew each one by heart, had memorized every sentence during her miserable trip to this equally miserable fortress. The letter fluttered in the gusts of snow-laden wind and glowed with the magic mixed into the ink.

She despised magic. The purview of every charlatan, snake oil brewer, and bride-stealing nobleman, it did nothing but cause trouble and create misery. Her own mother had wielded her gift with some skill, or so her father liked to brag.

Gullveig Hallis would have been right at home in this gods-forsaken landscape where the air shimmered blue and hung thick with the stench of sorcery. Louvaen wanted no part of it. She opened her hand and watched the wind snatch the letter away, sending it fluttering and spinning like a frantic bird caught in a whirlwind. Curtains of falling snow soon obscured it as it floated across the gorge separating her from the ominous hulk perched on a spike of jagged rock.

Massive, dark with age and the soot of old fires, the fortress gripped the mount with buttressed claws built of stone. Pieces of the curtain wall were gouged from the west corner, leaving the shell of a tower teetering dangerously high above her. Louvaen fancied she heard it creak and rumble in the hard wind howling up from the abyss. A drawbridge stood flush against the citadel's entry gate, anchored by chains strong as those that anchored ships. This was no gentleman's estate, with manicured grounds and forests tamed to formal landscapes crisscrossed by level gravel roads. Whatever the de Sauveterres' wealth—or lack thereof—might be, the family had chosen not to spend coin on a residence to impress the neighbors. This one fended off foes and friends alike with its lattice-barred gate, murder holes and arrow slits. Louvaen shuddered as much from dread as from the bitter cold cutting through her layers of wool. “Gods' knickers, Cinnia,” she muttered into her muffler. “What have you gotten yourself into?”

The sky's bleak gray had deepened while she stood on one side of the ravine trying to figure out how to attract the attention of someone in the castle so they'd lower the bridge. “Hello the house!” The wind shredded her hail to silence. She cursed and tried again. “Cinnia! De Lovet!” Glimmers of

light appeared then disappeared in the blacker spaces of windows. As inconstant as will-o'-the-wisps, the lights danced from one window to another, from one level to another, never stopping in one spot for longer than an indrawn breath. A more superstitious person might fear they watched the active haunting of this dark place, but Louvaen didn't put believe in ghosts and haints. She did believe in people carrying candles up and down stairs.

She growled her frustration. "I don't have time for this nonsense." A week of hard travel, the terror of finding Cinnia injured or dead, and the strange whip and pull of a magic spell that instantly transported her and her horse hundreds of miles to halt in this barren spot stunned and disoriented, had left her short on patience and long on temper. Hugging the edge of the world in a snowstorm while shouting herself hoarse didn't improve her mood.

She dismounted and led the horse away from the drop-off to the stand of trees marking the forest behind her. A rush of hot air warmed her neck as her mount whuffled at their roaming about in the dark and the cold instead of sheltering in a comfortable stable. Louvaen stroked his nose and tied his reins to the low branch of a leafless birch. "You're a patient lad, Plowfoot. We'll be out of the wind soon enough." She lifted the flap of a saddle pack and reached inside. The flintlock she'd leveled on Jimenin a week earlier rested heavy in her palm. Far better if she'd brought both pistols, especially traveling alone, but Louvaen refused to leave her father unarmed while Jimenin plotted against him. At least she had two spare rounds of shot in the pouch. She'd waste the one in the pistol getting the castle's attention, use the second to blow

a hole through Gavin de Lovet if he'd hurt Cinnia and keep the third for the journey home.

Snow fell harder, shrouding the hood of her cloak and covering her tracks as fast as she made them on her return trip to the lip of the crevasse. The empty expanse between her and the fortress, along with the pistol's short range, ensured her shot would fall harmlessly into the blackness below, but the noise she'd make would damn well signal her arrival. She full-cocked the pistol, aimed at the base of the stronghold and pulled the trigger. A corona of bright powder flash blinded her as the pistol fired a boom that thundered across the ravine. Temporarily blinded by the flash and deafened by the discharge, Louvaen closed her eyes and retreated from her precarious spot. Behind her Plowfoot whinnied in panic, yanking on the reins that tethered him to the quivering birch. He settled under her touch and the soothing cadence of her voice. "Easy, my lad. Nothing to be done for it." She slipped the pistol back into the pouch, promising herself she'd remember to reload.

Ears still ringing, she watched as every window on the fortress's first floor lit with golden light. A silhouette, only slightly darker than the descending night and obscured by falling snow, appeared on the battlements near the gate. Louvaen marched back to the place where she'd fired her shot and waved. "Lower the bridge, you lackwit!" Whoever lurked up there might not have heard her inside, but Mercer Hallis had often said his eldest child possessed a powerful set of lungs when she was angered, and Louvaen suspected the solitary watcher had heard her just fine, even above the singing wind.

The groan and squeal of a turning windlass sounded, along with the rattle of chains as the drawbridge slowly parted from the gate and stretched across the breach. She untied Plowfoot's reins from the tree but didn't remount. Reason told her if the inhabitants in the fortress had wanted to kill her, they would have already put a half dozen arrows in her. Still, she felt better walking next to the big draft horse, partially shielded by his bulk, instead of high and exposed in the saddle.

Geysers of snow erupted as the bridge landed on her side of the crevasse with a dull thud. Louvaen hesitated at the edge and peered downward. The wind blew harder, a restless spirit whirling and whipping in blasts strong enough to push her straight off the expanse of wood and down into the gorge. She didn't fear heights; she did fear falling to her death, and it was a long way to the bottom. Her heart pummeled her breastbone. She'd grown used to that particular rhythm since this trip started. Fear for Cinnia and now for herself. She'd be gray-haired before this was over.

The dark figure watching from the battlements never moved except for the flap of a cloak. Louvaen frowned. She'd get no help from that quarter. She positioned herself leaside to the horse. It would take far more than a few angry gusts to push Plowfoot off anything. Just to be safe, she looped an arm through the stirrup and held the reins loosely in one hand. They started a slow walk across the bridge, Louvaen counting each clop of Plowfoot's hooves to distract herself from the temptation to gaze over the edge and into the trench. Wood planks thrummed beneath her feet, supplicant to the wind's keening dirge.

They made it across in minutes that felt like decades. Louvaen's hands were frozen in her gloves, her lips cracked

and stinging. An iron portcullis rose to allow her entry, winched upward by an unseen hand. The tone of Plowfoot's clops changed, signaling the transition from wood planks to stone pavers. They passed through a narrow barbican pockmarked with murder holes. She'd read of these things. Defensive measures used during attack and siege. Louvaen hunched her shoulders. The likelihood someone lurked above her with a pot of boiling pitch or hot sand was slim, but the idea still made her twitch and tug a little harder on the horse's reins to hurry him out of the funneled passage.

Woman and horse halted in a deserted bailey. Sheltered by the castle's towering bulk and the high curtain wall, the ward lay protected from the scream and bite of the wind. Snow fell in lazy veils to shroud the buildings hugging the perimeter. She made out a stable, forge, and the spavined remains of an abandoned bakery. More of the golden light seeped from shuttered windows, revealing the startling sight of rose vines in full bloom clinging to a garden wall and climbing the height of the tower keep.

She'd never seen the like, especially in the heart of winter. In the fey light of dusk, blossoms spilled down the keep wall in a crimson river to stain drifts of pristine snow. Louvaen had the unpleasant notion she gazed upon a wound in the castle's stone façade from which poured living blood. She paused and stared harder at the flowers. Either she was more tired than she thought and her eyes were playing tricks or the vines moved. Twisting and eeling over themselves in an ever-shifting thorny carpet, they squirmed over the ground. Louvaen backed up against Plowfoot as the flowers stretched their petal faces towards her and hissed.

Plowfoot's ears flattened against his head at the sound. He shied away from the roses, Louvaen stuck to his side.

More sorcery. Ketach Tor drowned in the stuff. What crazed person enchanted roses to slither and hiss? She kept a wary eye on the plants and put more distance between them. At that moment she'd hand over her last coin if it bought her a rake and a torch.

She nearly leapt out of her shoes when the castle doors opened on a rusted shriek. Light poured from the entrance and across the steps. A familiar shape, cloaked and hooded, raced toward her. A lifetime of habit ruled Louvaen, and she held up a staying hand. "Cinnia! Stop running before you fall and break your neck!"

Her command went unheeded. Cinnia launched herself into her sister's arms with a sob, knocking them both against an affronted Plowfoot. "Lou! Oh, thank gods, you made it safely!"

Despite the fact she wanted to wring Cinnia's neck for scaring the life out of her and their father, she hugged her back hard enough to make her squeak. A gloved finger caressed the line of Cinnia's nose. "Are you well?"

The girl grinned, her eyes bright in the shadow of her hood. "Yes, very well!" She kissed Louvaen's hand. "But you're an icicle! Let's get you inside and by the fire. Someone will see to Plowfoot." She peered past Louvaen's shoulder, and dread replaced her smile. "Where's Papa?"

Louvaen gave her arm a reassuring pat. "Not in a cell. He came down with a cold. I left him in Dame Niamh's care."

"She's always liked Papa. She'll treat him well."

“Oh, I’m sure she will.” Their attractive widowed neighbor had been casting lascivious smiles at Mercer Hallis for years, ever since Cinnia’s mother died. Louvaen didn’t doubt the woman would coddle her father and try to seduce him into her bed. She kept that bit of conjecture to herself.

She let Cinnia lead her by the hand up the castle steps. Behind her, a cloaked figure led Plowfoot toward the stable. The mysterious watcher on the battlements had disappeared.

“What’s wrong?” Cinnia tugged on her arm. “He’ll be fine. The stable is warm, and he’ll have a stall with oats and fresh water.”

“There was someone on the battlements when the drawbridge lowered. Was that de Sauveterre?”

“No. The family’s sorcerer, Ambrose.”

Louvaen halted in the snowfall and dropped Cinnia’s arm. “They keep a magician in their household?” That explained why the property stank of magic.

Cinnia rolled her eyes and clutched her elbow. “He’s a decent sort. Reserved but kind to me since I’ve been here. You’ll meet him tonight.” She shook Louvaen’s arm in warning. “Be civil, Lou. If you’ll remember, it was magic that led you to Ketach Tor.”

“Aye and I’d not have to resort to the stuff if you’d just stayed home!” She yelped and slapped Cinnia’s hand when the girl pinched her.

“I’m not discussing this in a snow storm while there’s shelter and a fire waiting for us. We can fight this out over a cup of ale. Now come with me.” She all but dragged Louvaen through the doors.

They entered a large hall brightened by a mix of torches, candles and a lit hearth opposite the entry. Shadows cast by the dancing flames cavorted across lime-plastered walls and fled toward a ceiling supported by a ribcage of age-blackened timbers that reminded Louvaen of a ship's hull flipped upside down. The twinkle of steel caught her eye, and she half turned to view one wall covered in an array of weapons—swords, axes, glaives and spears. Shields lined an adjacent wall, interspersed by tapestries depicting both hunting and battle scenes from an age long passed. Rushes crackled underfoot as she followed Cinnia to the fire, and Louvaen caught a whiff of dust and rosemary.

Waves of welcoming heat billowed toward her. The hall was antiquated but not neglected. The hearth was modern and sent smoke up an unseen flue instead of directly into the chamber. The snow on Louvaen's cloak melted, turning it and her into a sodden mess. She shrugged it off her shoulders and held the dripping garment in an outstretched arm with a grimace. "Where can I put this?"

"I'll take it, mistress."

Louvaen whirled. The woman holding out her hand for the cloak was a small creature, no taller than Cinnia, but wiry with sharp features and brown hair streaked gray. She raked Louvaen with a gaze that measured, examined and judged. Whatever she saw made her eyebrows arch, and she offered a faint smile.

"Lou, this is Magda, housekeeper and cook for Ketach Tor." She plucked the mantle out of Louvaen's hand and passed it to the woman. "Magda, this is my older sister Louvaen Duenda."

Magda inclined her head in polite greeting. “Welcome to Ketach Tor, Mistress Duenda.”

Louvaen returned both the gesture and the smile. “You keep a fine hall, madam.”

The housekeeper’s chest puffed up with pride, and her eyes sparked approval at Louvaen’s compliment. She held the dripping cloak and gestured with her other hand. “Give me your stockings and shoes. They’re bound to be soaked through. You can warm your feet by the fire.”

Cinnia pushed Louvaen gently toward one of the two chairs facing the hearth. “Sit there. I’ll fetch some dry stockings. No slippers, mind. Your feet are bigger than mine.”

In no time, Louvaen was comfortably ensconced in a chair with a blanket draped over her shoulders, a mug of warm ale spiced with nutmeg in her hand, and a pair of Cinnia’s stockings encasing her feet and legs. Magda had vanished with her wet things, remarking over her shoulder they’d dry faster at the kitchen hearth. She disappeared behind a set of wooden screens carved in linen fold patterns.

Cinnia sat across from her, clasping her own mug. “Is Papa very ill?”

Louvaen shrugged. “A dry cough and a touch of fever. Nothing bad, but he shouldn’t be out in this weather.”

“No one should, not even you. You could have waited until the weather turned.”

“There were no snow storms until I was magicked to the edge of a cliff, dear.” Louvaen sipped her ale in an attempt to blunt her tongue’s sharpness. “I wouldn’t be here at all if you hadn’t run off with de Lovet.” She took in the hall once more

and peered upward to the mezzanine and second floor.
“Where is he, by the way?”

Cinnia shot her a wary glance from under a sweep of blonde curls. “Gavin? Why do you ask?”

Louvaen scowled. “So I can shoot him for spiriting you out of Montebianco.” She pinched the bridge of her nose between thumb and forefinger. “Do you understand what you’ve done to your reputation, Cinnia? I’ve told more lies in the past week than I have in my entire life trying to explain why you vanished.”

The girl had the grace to flush with embarrassment but raised her chin. “I’m sorry I made you and Papa worry, but you read my note. You knew I wasn’t in any danger.”

“I knew no such thing! What we know of Gavin de Lovet is only what he’s told us.” She gestured at the hall. “Wealthy or not, and I’m wagering on the ‘not,’ the de Sauveterres live in a fortress. A fortress, Cinnia, built on a spit of rock surrounded by a gorge. There are drawbridges and arrow slits and a hall filled with every manner of sharp implement. I can only imagine what the kitchen must look like. These people obviously have made enemies, ones who want to do great harm to them. You shouldn’t be here; neither should I.”

Cinnia thumped her mug on the floor. A frown line marred her brow, and she crossed her arms. Louvaen signed and braced herself for at least an hour of fruitless arguing. “This castle was built hundreds of years ago, Lou. Those enemies are long gone.” She passed a hand over her bodice. “As you can see, I’m perfectly well. Happy too. Besides, I

don't care what a bunch of old crones in the sewing society think of me."

"You should care if you intend to marry one of their sons." Cinnia was beautiful, intelligent and sweet. She was also mule-headed, and Louvaen fought not to tear out her own hair in frustration.

Cinnia stuck her nose in the air. "I'm not interested in any of their precious sons."

Louvaen half rose out of her chair. "For gods' sake, stop being so daft. A young, unmarried woman who runs off with a man makes herself a target for every Jimenin and his ilk to try and make her his bawd, willing or not." Cinnia's eyes, soft as a doe's, filled with tears. Louvaen's heart lurched. She abandoned her seat and sank to her knees in front of her sister. Cinnia's hand trembled as Louvaen pressed her palm against her cheek for a moment before turning to kiss it. "That is a bitter life, my love. Something you'll never suffer while I live."

Cinnia's sad smile was uncannily wise. She ran her thumb over the curve of Louvaen's cheekbone. "You can't be my savior knight forever, Lou."

"Watch me."

They both laughed. Cinnia sniffled and blinked back her tears. "Did you know 'Sauveterre' means safe land?"

Louvaen snorted. "That's rich. What ancestor enjoyed a fine turn of phrase to choose such a title?"

"It's fitting. I'm safe here—from Jimenin and anyone else who'd force me."

“And Gavin and his family?”

“They treat me like a lady of the manor. Gavin courts me as any fine gentleman, and Ambrose is the epitome of courtesy. You’ve met Magda.” Cinnia grinned. “She reminds me of you quite a bit. I think she’d flatten anyone who so much as blinked at me cross-wise.”

Louvaen liked Magda more and more. She noticed Cinnia hadn’t mentioned the patriarch of the family. “And Lord de Sauveterre? Is he as genteel as his son and his retainer?”

This time Cinnia hesitated for a second. “I’ve met Ballard de Sauveterre twice. He prefers his solitude.” She lowered her voice. “He’s disfigured and goes cloaked and hooded so none may gaze upon his face.” Her brown eyes glittered with pity. “Poor man; I’ve seen his hands. Mangled things with black claws.”

“Claws?” Louvaen leapt to her feet, still holding Cinnia’s hand. She tugged the girl up beside her. “What manner of man sports claws?” The same panic that had driven her to Ketach Tor through a sleepless week of teeth-chattering cold returned. “Find my boots and cloak and dress yourself warmly. We’ll have to leave whatever you’ve brought. I’ll meet you at the stable. Plowfoot is big enough to carry two. We’ll ride pillion.”

Cinnia jerked her hand away. “Stop it,” she snapped. “Neither of us is in any danger, and I’m not going anywhere. You’re welcome to stay here with me.” Anger and pleading warred for prominence on her features. “I want you to stay with me, at least until Gavin can bring money to Jimenin to pay Papa’s debt.” She crossed her arms again. “But you’ll not

make me go with you, no matter how much shouting and ordering you do.”

Louvaen slapped her palm to her forehead. “Gods, when did you become so stubborn?”

“When I stopped being ten years old and understood that while you’re my older sister, you aren’t my mother.”

Cinnia’s remark, declared in a matter-of-fact voice, stole Louvaen’s breath. She collapsed in her chair and gazed at her sister for several quiet moments. Something profound had just shifted between them. When Mercer’s second wife Abigail died, the thirteen-year old Louvaen had assumed the running of the household and the parenting of the five-year old Cinnia. While difficult in many respects, the tasks had come naturally to her, and both father and younger daughter had fallen easily into the pattern of following the forceful oldest child’s direction. Louvaen grew queasy at the idea that over the years she’d turned into the family tyrant in her bid to protect those she loved. For the first time, Cinnia had truly rebelled against her, and Louvaen floundered.

“If I return without you, Papa will never forgive me.” She reached for Cinnia’s hand. “Please, come home with me. We’ll figure out a way to defeat Jimenin.”

Cinnia clasped her fingers and squeezed. “Papa will understand and wish me well when you tell him I’m perfectly fine and enjoying my stay at Ketach Tor. And we already have the means to appease Jimenin.” She offered a tentative smile. “For once, you’ll have to trust that I can not only rescue myself but help our family just like you do.”

Louvaen studied her stocking feet, exhaled a long sigh and finally met Cinnia’s calm gaze. “I often tell people there’s

far more to you than a beautiful face. Maybe I need to remind myself of the same occasionally.”

Cinnia grinned. “Maybe.” The grin transformed to a relieved laugh, and the two sisters embraced. “Will you stop arguing with me long enough to have some supper and see the room Magda readied for you? Even if I agreed to go with you, we’d have to wait out the weather.”

Louvaen’s stomach gave a loud gurgle. She patted it into submission. “I can use a bite.” She captured Cinnia before the girl could run off to the kitchen. “First, you tell me why your courtly Gavin isn’t here by your side to guard against me stealing you back from him.”

The most blood-chilling cry she’d ever heard answered her, reverberating up through the floor as if some poor creature was being butchered alive. The fine hairs on her nape stood on end. She wouldn’t be surprised if those on her head were doing the same. “Merciful gods, what was that?”

Besides a pitying flinch, Cinnia appeared unconcerned by the inhuman shrieks echoing throughout the hall. “Lord de Sauveterre is...ill.”

Louvaen gawked at her. “With what? He sounds like he’s being drawn and quartered!”

Cinnia cringed as the screams reached a crescendo before falling off to keening moans.

Horror wracked Louvaen with shudders hard enough to make her teeth clack together. “What in the name of hell is going on, Cinnia? No man makes noises like that.”

“Those who are tortured do.”

Both women jumped at the new voice. Louvaen stumbled back against her chair, tipping it over so that it hit the rushes and stirred up a small cloud of dust. A man emerged from behind the screens separating the kitchen from the hall. Short, compact and dressed in robes of faded azure shot with silver and embroidered with arcane symbols in black thread. White tufts of hair stuck from his head like the bristles of a frightened hedgehog. He peered at her and Cinnia with eyes made unnaturally large by the spectacles perched on his nose. That nose twitched—along with his pointed beard—as if he smelled something new.

“Ambrose. I’m glad you’re here.” Cinnia rushed to him and curtsied.

“The magician,” Louvaen said flatly.

“The magician,” he agreed and held out a bejeweled hand.

Unsure if he expected her to kiss one of his rings—for which he’d stand there waiting until he rotted—Louvaen took his fingers in a hesitant grasp. He brushed dry lips across her knuckles and straightened. “Mistress Duenda. Your sister and Sir Gavin have regaled us with tales of you and your father.”

“I’ll bet they have,” she murmured. She suspected Gavin’s commentary had been less than complimentary.

He released her hand, the thin smile curving his mouth indicating he’d heard her remark. “Your horse has been stabled for the night and a room made ready for you.”

Louvaen blinked. What strange madness gripped this place that no one—not even her sister who’d been known to weep over a crushed spider—seemed bothered by the

horrendous sounds emanating from the castle depths? She recalled Ambrose's first greeting. "Who is torturing Lord de Sauveterre? And where is his son?"

"He's sick as well and in his room." Cinnia gave her a weak smile.

"Is that so? Someone's tearing his arms off too?"

Cinnia gestured to Ambrose, begging silently for his help. The sorcerer folded his hands in front of him and eyed Louvaen as if she were an interesting, if not particularly bright child. Louvaen suddenly understood why Cinnia snarled at her sometimes for what seemed like no reason. "Ketach Tor, mistress, lies in the center of a pool of wild magic. Sometimes the magic is weak, other times powerful—in flux. We call the strong periods high tide. Most of us suffer no ill effects from the flux. The most I deal with are potions reacting badly or spells turned backwards. The master and his son, however, are sickened by it. Gavin is bedridden with fever. His father suffers the worst."

"Is there nothing you can do to relieve his suffering?" Louvaen wasn't one to cry over a crushed spider, but the idea of a man repeatedly broken on such a brutal wheel made her sick to her soul. Gods, how she hated magic.

Ambrose shook his head. "No. The *dominus* is strong and the flux temporary. He'll get through it."

"Are you sure? He sounds like he's being hacked into several pieces right now."

"I'm sure. This isn't the first time he's survived a flux. It won't be his last."

The lackadaisical attitude of de Sauveterre's household toward their master's distress flummoxed her. The noises he made almost had her running through this unknown place in an effort to search him out and do what she could to put him out of his misery.

Cinnia must have read her thoughts in her expression. "There's nothing we can do, Lou, except wait and give him comfort when it's over."

Louvaen had stepped into some twisted fairytale, complete with magic born of the left hand path, a sorcerer who deemed her intelligent as a turnip and a lord tortured in his own home by an unseen tormentor without a drop of mercy. She leveled a long stare on her sister. "Are you sure you want to stay?"

"Yes."

She was bone-tired and the only reason she conceded to that one request. "I'll stay for one night and do as you ask—listen to what you have to say regarding saving Papa from Jimenin." Cinnia clapped her hands. Louvaen raised a finger, and she paused. "I'm not agreeing to anything beyond that, including leaving you here. I'll knock you unconscious and tie you to the saddle if I have to."

Cinnia threw her arms around her. "Thank you, Lou."

Louvaen hugged her back, guilt making her flinch. There was something infinitely wrong when such small a thing as her acquiescence made her sister so jubilant. She gazed at Ambrose over Cinnia's shoulder. He watched her, dislike narrowing his eyes and tightening his mouth. The same curiosity glinting in Magda's gaze earlier tempered his disapproving expression. No doubt her countenance mirrored

his, except for the interest. She planned to stay out of his way while she was here.

“Magda will serve you supper and show you the room where you’ll sleep tonight.” Ambrose inclined his head and left them in the hall. Good as his words, Magda and two younger women entered the hall carry platters filled with bread, cheese and cold chicken and placed them on the long table set near the hearth. The housekeeper introduced her helpers as Clarimond and Joan. Both curtsied, their puzzled gazes going back and forth between Cinnia and Louvaen before they fled to the kitchen. Magda chuckled as she laid out the repast and gestured for the sisters to sit. “They’re looking for some resemblance.”

Louvaen smiled. “Everyone does when they first see us together.” They’d dealt with it all their lives. Cinnia, dainty and blonde, was the perfect counterpoint to the statuesque, dark-haired Louvaen.

“You have the same chin.” Magda tipped the pitcher she carried and refilled their mugs with the spiced ale.

“That’s our father’s contribution.” Cinnia picked at a chicken leg with her fingers. “Otherwise, we look most like our mothers. Papa says Lou’s mother Gull was even taller than Lou.” She popped a piece of chicken into her mouth and chewed enthusiastically.

“Thank you, town crier.” Louvaen gave Magda a dry look. “I’m guessing she’s told you every family secret back six generations?”

Magda laughed outright this time. “Only a few things. I hear you’re deadly with a pitchfork.”

Louvaen glared at Cinnia who blushed. Farmer Toddle had never forgiven her for nearly skewering him in the town stables a decade earlier. Not that Louvaen ever offered an apology. The man should have kept his hands to himself.

The housekeeper retreated to the kitchen with the promise to deliver Louvaen's cloak and boots to her room once they were dry. The two sisters enjoyed their meal together, Cinnia nibbling from Louvaen's trencher and chatting about her stay at Ketach Tor and how wonderful—no, miraculous!—Gavin was. Louvaen listened with half an ear while she ate the food and drank two more cups of ale. By the time she'd finished her supper, her belly lay silent and content, and her head sat heavy on her shoulders. She still fretted over her father's predicament, was suspicious of the strange de Sauveterres, and wondered if the family patriarch would survive the night. Still, the edge of terror that had shoved her heart into her throat as she rode to meet Cinnia had abated. Her sister was safe—utterly wrong-headed in her plan to extract her father from the disaster he'd caused—and apparently happy.

“You're about to fall asleep in your trencher.” Cinnia tugged on her hand. “Come on, let's get you to bed.”

Louvaen followed her up a narrow stairwell until they reached a mezzanine drowning in shadow and another set of stairs. A single lit torch cast feeble light along a short corridor with doors on either side. Cinnia led her to one, her steps loud across creaking floorboards. “You're here, and I'm in the next one.” She opened the door and stepped aside.

Fine candles lit a chamber swept spotless. Louvaen's nostrils twitched at the scent of beeswax. Gavin's garb had

indicated he came from a family possessing a good measure of coin. She'd not fallen for that trap. Many a fop, barely able to feed himself, spent his last copper on fancy clothes to make a good if fraudulent impression in order to lure a wealthy bride to him. This was different. Only the wealthy could afford the extravagance of burning pure beeswax candles. Families of both poor and moderate means used tallow candles or wax mixed with tallow to light their homes. Louvaen wasn't quite convinced Gavin hadn't been filling Cinnia's ears with all manner of tall tales, but this at least offered a hint that he'd been somewhat honest about his family's means.

Candlelight revealed a box bed enclosed by ornately carved screens and a low step built against the lower rail that acted as storage. A mattress piled high with an assortment of pillows and blankets promised a warm and comfortable night's sleep. Her pack sat next to the bed, and someone had laid out one of her two frocks across a chair near the small corner hearth. Her stockings fluttered on a drying horse next to her sodden boots. Shutters made of shaved bone blocked the window from the snow and ice whirling outside. The frigid chamber slowly warmed from the recently lit hearth, and the tapestries hanging on the walls worked to keep the growing heat from escaping through the stone.

Cinnia pointed to a low table set by the chair. "A pitcher and basin for you, and there's a chamber pot tucked under the bed. I'll show you where the privies are tomorrow."

"You said your room is next to mine?"

"Yes. They gave me the bower. It's lovely, and I have real glass in the windows."

Louvaen eyed her sister. "And you're sleeping alone?"

Cinnia crossed her arms. “Of course I am. That’s insulting, Lou.”

Louvaen shrugged. “It isn’t meant to be unless Gavin has seduced you, and you’re lying to me. Then it isn’t an insult, only an insightful question.” Her scowl was fierce. “It best never be an insightful question while you remain unmarried.”

“Gods, you are such a dragon.” Cinnia glided to the door. “It’s late. You’re sleepy and grumpy, and I’m tired of defending myself to you over every little thing. Go to bed. Sleep as long as you like. I’ll see you in the morning.” She kissed her on the cheek and slipped into the hall, leaving a bemused Louvaen staring after her.

“Who are you,” she said softly. “And what have you done with my sister?”

She stripped down to her knickers, chemise and Cinnia’s stockings. The night rail she pulled from her satchel had more wrinkles than crumpled parchment but would keep her warm in the still chilly room. She dressed and blew out the candles. Firelight from the hearth lit her path to the bed. To her delight, she sank onto a feather mattress laid over an under mattress of straw. The blankets were a mix of fleece and fur, with a costly one of green velvet sandwiched between them. A feather bolster ran the width of the headboard, and Louvaen nestled her head into it with a satisfied sigh.

She hadn’t lain in a real bed in five days. The inns along the route she’d taken to Ketach Tor held more vermin than just rats. She’d paid a small amount to sleep in the relative safety of haylofts, her pallet of straw warmed by the horses and cattle sheltered within the stable or barn. She’d slept with the

flintlock by her side and a dagger tucked under the makeshift pillow she'd made of Plowfoot's saddle blanket. Tonight, she'd leave both in their respective places of pouch and sheath. So far, she'd found the denizens of Ketach Tor to be mysterious and downright odd in some cases, but polite and solicitous. And if her supper had been poisoned, well it was too late to cry about it now. Louvaen snuggled deeper under the covers and fell asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR



It seemed as if she'd just closed her eyes when bestial cries reverberating through the very walls jerked her out of a deep slumber. Were the bed not partially enclosed, she would have tumbled onto the floor. Her shoulder struck one of the box bed's sides, snapping her fully awake. Those anguished, tormented sounds made her shudder. De Sauveterre. The tenor of his screams had changed—rage mixed with agony as if he fought against his tormentor and was punished in the most barbarous fashion.

She climbed out of bed, shivering in the darkness. The fire in the hearth had burned down to a paltry glow of embers that tumbled shadows across the floor. Louvaen used a rush

tip to light candles so she could locate her shawl and pull on her damp boots. She blew on her hands to warm them and retrieved the flintlock along with her supply of flint, powder, patch and ramrod. Her fingers chased the remaining two round lead balls inside a small purse before capturing one. She set it on the bed step's surface next to the flintlock. Reloading the pistol was slow work, especially with hands made clumsy by the cold, and she cursed her lack of foresight in not doing so before falling asleep.

What madness possessed these people that they ignored the sounds emanating from the castle's lower chambers? Her own sister showed a lack of concern for de Sauveterre's suffering. Unlike Cinnia, Louvaen didn't believe a word of Ambrose's assurances that his master was not dying nor that his tribulations were both regular and temporary. She refused to cower in her room and hope the screaming would stop. She'd find out for herself what terrible business lay below. At least then she'd know whether she'd have to sling Cinnia on Plowfoot tonight and brave a snowstorm in the dark or wait until morning when the sun was up and could she could see clearly enough to set those repulsive roses on fire before she left.

With the pistol loaded and a candle in hand, she wrapped her shawl around her shoulders and poked her head into the empty, torch-lit corridor. Cinnia's door was shut. Surely she didn't dream the dreadful howling? Another cry split the silence; she was most definitely awake. She tried Cinnia's door. It opened under her touch. Louvaen growled. Did the girl trust so easily that she wouldn't use a lock or bar?

Cinnia huddled under a stack of blankets in a grand bed, partially concealed by heavy drapes attached to the bed's

canopy. She murmured in her sleep, and Louvaen breathed a small sigh of relief. Their family joked about Cinnia's ability to sleep through a barrage of cannon fire. Considering the racket drifting up from beneath the castle, she thanked every god within earshot that her sister slept so deeply.

She had a quandary before her. Awaken Cinnia to have her bar the door and spend the next hour arguing with her or leave her be and make her way downstairs alone. Neither option was palatable. In the end she let Cinnia sleep, reasoning that a sorcerer lived here. No simple lock or barred door ever withstood a powerful spell cast by a skilled hand.

She closed the door behind her and tiptoed down the narrow stairwell leading to the great hall. The hall itself lay in darkness, the hearth gone cold. A flicker of light danced beneath the screens separating hall from kitchen. Louvaen entered the heart of the fortress, following the groans and howls drifting up from another short stairwell situated in one corner. The stairs descended into a buttery leading to a corridor that hooked sharply left. More light flickered at one end, accompanied by voices speaking instead of screaming. She recognized Gavin's first.

"It's much worse this time. I've never known him to suffer like this." Though Louvaen couldn't see him, she heard the fear and worry in the son's voice for his father. One of the knots inside her loosened. At least someone else in this sad jumble of stone besides her wanted to retch at the hideous noises.

Ambrose answered him. "The flux is stronger. Can you tell?"

“Aye. I feel like a mangled rag with the strength wrung out of me. He’s tougher than all of us combined to survive this kind of torture.”

“He always has been.”

Louvaen remained still, shamelessly eavesdropping. She jumped and almost dropped her candle when Ambrose’s voice snapped out of the dark. “Show yourself!”

She gripped her shawl and strode through the low archway separating her from the men. The arch led to a circular chamber protecting a deep well. Storerooms lined the curved walls, some empty, others filled with barrels or sacks of grain. Two were closed off by wooden doors heavily fortified with iron strap hinges and heavy bars across small cutouts. Locks shimmering with blue light held them shut. Gavin and Ambrose stood in front of one, the breath steaming from their noses and mouths in the chilly air. Gavin wore a startled look. “Mistress Duenda.”

Ambrose glared—or so she first thought. He was without his spectacles, and Louvaen wondered if maybe it was more of a squint. “I might have known,” he said. “And armed of course.” The acidic bite of his words assured her it was a glare.

She lifted her chin. “What did you expect? Not even dawn and the poor man is shouting your towers down around your ears.” Cinnia had said Gavin’s father was disfigured. Louvaen wouldn’t have been in the least surprised to learn he was also completely mad. No one lived through this kind of horror with their mind still intact. She raised the candle higher and caught her breath as the flame reflected in Gavin’s yellow eyes. “My gods...”

Ambrose knocked her hand aside as Gavin turned his face from her. “You shouldn’t be here, Mistress Duenda.”

“You’ll get no argument from me, sorcerer,” she snapped. “Touch me again, and I’ll wear your teeth as a necklace.” She turned her attention back to Gavin. “I’ve heard from the trickster here.” Ambrose growled, but Louvaen ignored him. “Now I want your version of the story. What is wrong with your father, and what is wrong with you?” She jabbed a finger at him when he opened his mouth to answer. “Don’t tell me it’s some illness. I’ve seen the whites of a man’s eyes yellow from disease. Yours are different, and I remember they were green a week ago. Now they glow like a wolf’s, and your father sounds like an injured cur needing to be put down.”

Gavin’s eyes closed for a moment. He waved Ambrose away when the man made to protest. “Ambrose didn’t lie. It’s the flux. I’m pulled back to Ketach Tor at the high tide. It’s impossible—painful even—to resist. My father is completely imprisoned by it. He can’t leave our lands, even at ebb tide. I usually take to my bed—weak, sick in my belly. My eyes don’t usually change.

“It’s always bad for my father. The flux twists him so much he’s maddened by the pain. To protect ourselves—and him—we made one of these storerooms into a cell and keep him chained there until the flux ebbs.” The color washed from Gavin’s face and tears glossed over the yellow eyes. “This is the worst so far, and the longest.”

“Satisfied, mistress?” The dislike in Ambrose’s previous expression paled in comparison to the loathing she heard in his voice now.

Louvaen's throat had closed up during Gavin's explanation, so much more heartfelt than Ambrose's had been. She'd come to Ketach Tor with the intention of snatching her sister back and peeling a strip off Gavin's hide for having the short-sighted audacity to steal Cinnia away from Montebianco. A part of her still felt that way, but another smaller part made her want to pat his shoulder and offer any help she could give to both father and son. "I want to meet him."

"No!" Ambrose stepped between her and the cell door.

Gavin stared at her long and hard. Whatever he saw in her gaze must have answered an important question for him. "Show her."

"This woman is an unwelcome intruder with no right—"

"Show her, Ambrose. She has as much right as anyone. She's acting in her father's stead for her sister's protection. Were Cinnia your daughter, wouldn't you want to know what resides in this castle with her?"

Sour-faced and reluctant, Ambrose produced a key from a hidden pocket in his robes. The lock clicked twice at the key's turn. He held out a hand. "Give me your pistol, Mistress Duenda."

Louvaen hesitated. She'd made a few enemies in her life; Jimenin the most dangerous. Until now. "And provide you with the means to shoot me in the back?"

The magician's answering smile was as wolfish as Gavin's yellow eyes. "You'll have to trust my restraint, but I'll not let you in that cell so you can put down the injured

cur.” His fingers twitched in a telling gesture: relinquish the weapon and be quick about it.

“Why don’t I give it to Gavin?” she said.

A small smile eased the somber lines in Gavin’s face. “Because you’re not going in alone. I’m going with you”. He turned grim once more. “The last thing I want is my father somehow snatching your pistol from me.”

Louvaen placed the weapon into Ambrose’s waiting hand. “Excellent point.”

She stood at Gavin’s shoulder as Ambrose eased the door back just wide enough for them slip through one at a time. The smell emanating from the cell made her gag. Blood, urine, sweat and vomit—the odors overwhelmed her, brought painful memories of her husband’s last days rushing back until she thrust them into the corner of her mind. She clenched her teeth and took shallow breaths through her mouth. Her candle’s sickly light cast a halo at her feet but did very little to dispel the enveloping blackness. She clutched Gavin’s arm as her boots hit a slippery patch on the floor, and she slid. The light wavered, and she sighted a hulking shape crouched against one wall.

Gavin stopped her from stepping farther into the cell. “Run your foot along the floor.” She did as he instructed and found a shallow depression cut into the pavers about three steps in from the entry. “That,” he said “is your marker. Don’t go past it. The length of his chain won’t reach this far.”

Her heart squeezed at his words. What child should ever have to say that about their parent?

“Father,” Gavin’s voice was soft, coaxing. “You’ve a visitor. Cinnia’s sister; Louvaen Duenda.”

A gravid silence breathed through the cell, broken by two raspy words. “Boy, why?”

Intent that de Sauveterre not blame his son, Louvaen promptly forgot Gavin’s instructions and stepped beyond the line. “I insisted, my lord. The fault is mine, not—”

The flash of yellow eye shine in candlelight was her only warning before the chain rattled and powerful fingers snaked around her calf to yank her off her feet. Louvaen screamed. The candle shot out of her hand as her back and bottom struck wet stone. Gavin’s and Ambrose’s shouts bounced off the walls.

“Father!”

“Ballard, let her go!”

Grunting and thrashing, Louvaen kicked to break loose of the clawed hand that clutched her leg and dragged her across the slick floor. She held onto Gavin as he wrapped an arm across her stomach and pulled her toward the door. Father and son tugged in opposite directions, fighting over her like starved hounds on a carcass until Louvaen thought they’d tear her apart. She kicked out with her free leg, striking blindly at her attacker. Her foot connected with something solid that instantly gave with a sickening crack. An agonized bellow followed, and de Sauveterre released her as if scorched. Louvaen didn’t pause to thank the gods for the brief mercy. She scrambled over Gavin and careened out of the cell where she fell against Ambrose. The sorcerer looked like he wanted nothing more than to shoot her with her own flintlock.

She didn't care, grateful to be out of the hellish cell and away from its maddened prisoner. She bent at the waist and took several deep breaths of the antechamber's fresher air. Her back ached and the scratches etched into her calf stung, but at least her heart no longer tried to pound its way out of her chest.

Gavin spoke behind her. "Are you well, mistress?"

Louvaen faced him. Other than having a decade scared off her lifespan and being smeared in a black muck that smelled worse than a privy during high summer she was fine. "No harm done except to my dignity. Your father? I know I hit something."

"I think you broke his nose." He breathed as hard as she did. "Magda will pack it with snow once he lets her near him. It's been broken before."

She hoped it wasn't because he'd captured other foolish women who'd made the mistake of crossing the line. "Forgive me. I disregarded your warning."

Ambrose's nostrils flared. "Gavin shouldn't have let you into the cell."

"Fortunate for me then that yours isn't the final word at Ketach Tor." She returned the magician's glare with one of her own.

He waved a hand at her ruined night rail and her bedraggled braid. A dark fluid dripped from the tip. "You call this fortunate? What kind of daily routine do you follow, Mistress Duenda?"

Louvaen clasped her hands behind her back so she wouldn't succumb to the urge to slap the smirk off Ambrose's

face. She knew he waited for her to turn tail and flee up the stairs and out the castle gates. *Not today, you smug pizzle*, she thought. Gavin, on the other hand, stared at her as if she held the worst of all secrets and was about to reveal them to the worst of all listeners—her sister. He was right. As soon as she bathed the grime off her skin and out of her hair, she intended to describe every detail regarding her confrontation with Ballard de Sauveterre to Cinnia.

“Has Cinnia seen him like this?”

Gavin shook his head. “No. What will you tell her?”

“Everything. She needs to know why he’s locked in a cell—that it’s more than angry cries and a few days out of sight below the buttery because the roasted capon didn’t agree with him. She may wish to leave. She may wish to stay, but she’ll make that decision knowing what resides here.”

Gavin gave a defeated sigh. “I can’t fault you for trying to protect her.”

“I can.” Ambrose glared at Gavin. “I still don’t know why we opened the gate to this shrew.”

“Not an issue if your precious lordling here hadn’t absconded with my sister!”

“Enough!” Gavin’s command made the two foes start. “We’ll resolve this upstairs.” His nose wrinkled. “Mistress, you’ll want a bath before you visit anybody. I’ll meet you both in the hall to break our fast, and we’ll hash this out between us.”

Louvaen nodded, still shaken from her encounter with the master of Ketach Tor and sick to death of arguing with every person she encountered in this cursed place. She took

her pistol back from Ambrose and climbed the stairs two at a time.

She found the housekeeper in the kitchen serving a groggy Cinnia a cup of ale at the table. Magda backed away while Cinnia covered her nose and mouth with her hand and spoke through her fingers. “Sweet mother of night, what happened to you? You smell like you’ve been sleeping with the swine.”

“I’ll tell you in a minute.” She placed the flintlock on the table and clasped her hands together in a semblance of prayer. “Please, Magda. A basin of hot water and a cake of soap, and I will be your servant forever.”

The older woman laughed. “Too bad all help doesn’t come so cheap.” She gestured to a small alcove off the hearth. “Get yourself into that corner. You can bathe in the kitchen. It’s the warmest room. We’ll bring out a screen for privacy.”

She eyed Louvaen curiously. “You’re a right mess, and I keep the buttery tidy.” Her features stilled. “Where were you?” The question was rhetorical, the answer reflected in Magda’s eyes.

“Introducing myself to your master.” Louvaen marched to one of the sinks where Clarimond waited to pour a pitcher of icy water over her filthy hands. She gasped at the sensation of cold fire spilling between her fingers. “Gavin or Ambrose will likely call for your help soon. I think I broke his lordship’s nose.”

Clarimond’s grip slipped on the pitcher. Water splashed across Louvaen’s night rail, soaking her to the skin. Cinnia nearly dropped her cup in her lap. “Oh, Lou, how could you?”

Dripping wet and freezing, Louvaen scowled. Magda's guffaw deepened the scowl, but she stayed quiet. As the woman in possession of soap and hot water, the housekeeper held all the power here, and Louvaen knew how to pick her battles.

The two servant girls set up the screens; Cinnia volunteered to bring a change of clothes from her room while Magda whisked away her ruined garb with a disapproving cluck. They left Louvaen to ladle warm water out of the large pot at her feet and wash off the grime from the cell. Her hair had taken the worst of it, and she scrubbed her scalp until it burned. She was in the midst of wringing the excess water out of the wet locks when she heard heavy footsteps and Magda's warning command.

"Keep walking. I've a lady at bath and don't need you hanging about getting in the way."

Gavin's voice drifted to her. "Father needs—"

"Aye, I know. I'll check on Hissel in a moment. He best mind his ways or I'll add a split lip to that busted nose of his."

The booted feet tromped out, and Louvaen poked her head around the screen. "Just us?"

Magda tossed her a drying sheet. "For now, but don't dawdle. They'll be wanting their breakfast, and the threat of finding a naked lass standing in the kitchen isn't likely to keep them away." She gathered up the ladle and shoved the pot aside with her foot. "I'll not say it isn't my place because this is my home, and you're a stranger, so I'm telling you as I see it. You had no business in the well room. His suffering isn't your concern."

Louvaen paused in drying her hair. A mixture of admonishment and pity painted the housekeeper's words. The loyal servant protecting her master—she'd seen it with Ambrose. As much as she disliked and distrusted the wizard she admired his devotion. Chained, imprisoned and half out of his mind though he was, Lord de Sauveterre inspired an impressive degree of loyalty in those who served him. She wrapped the sheet around her for warmth and took the clothing Magda held out for her.

“As long as Cinnia resides here, Magda, everything in this castle is my business.”

“You love that girl very much.”

“Yes, though she can be a right pain in my arse at times.”

Both women grinned at each other in truce, and Louvaen finished dressing to the tune of a milking song Magda sang in the most excruciating off-key voice. By the time Cinnia returned from relighting the hearth in Louvaen's chamber, platters of bread were laid out at the table along with cups of warmed ale for sopping. Louvaen occupied a spot on the bench next to Cinnia to enjoy her breakfast. The girl's smile lit the room when Gavin walked in to take a seat opposite from her. They clasped hands and made cow eyes at each other. Louvaen caught the brief, wary glance Gavin sent her way. Ambrose took the remaining space across from Louvaen. He eyed her first and then his tankard of ale with a suspicious gaze.

Louvaen smirked. “I don't brew potions, sorcerer. If anyone poisoned your drink, I'm not to blame.” She bared her teeth. “This time.”

A hard swat on her shoulder made her jerk away. Cinnia glared at her, a blush dusting her cheekbones. “Lou, stop being so rude!” She offered a conciliatory smile to Ambrose. “My apologies, Ambrose. She’s always been a scold in the morning.”

He huffed and raised his tankard in mock toast to Louvaen. “You must live a life of eternal morning.”

“Ambrose.” Gavin dipped his bread into his ale. “A truce for now.”

Cinnia flattened a piece of bread between her fingers. “Did you really break his lordship’s nose, Lou?” She asked the question with a cringing look at Gavin.

Louvaen sipped her ale before answering. “Lucky shot.” Ambrose wheezed a splatter of foam across his cheeks. “Magda can tell you more when she returns.” She tore her own bread into strips. “Cinnia, Lord de Sauveterre is very ill. I don’t know what you’ve been told.” She arched a challenging eyebrow at the two men across the table. “But he isn’t sick in the way a man might be with the gout or day fever. It’s much worse. Violent, painful symptoms.” She watched Cinnia pale. “He’s mostly incoherent, very aggressive. An animal in the throes of hound madness. Gavin is wise to chain him.”

She turned to Gavin. “Are you certain this isn’t something else? Symptoms of holy fire?” Her husband had buried a man who’d succumbed to the disease, and his behavior had resembled de Sauveterre’s. His death had been a mercy and too long in coming.

“We’re certain. He’s been struck by the flux many times. The behavior is the same, the sickness the same.

Sometimes the madness lasts a day, sometimes a week. Rarely more. He's his old self afterwards." Gavin sighed. "As much as he can be. Holy fire doesn't scar its victims. The flux does."

She might have argued more for holy fire but recalled the inhuman strength of de Sauveterre's grip on her leg and the glow of his eyes as the candlelight caught his gaze. Humans didn't possess eye shine at night, but animals did. She'd seen the bright tapestry in cats, dogs and numerous other creatures. Holy fire also didn't endow the sick with the physical power she'd felt in those clawed fingers.

Cinnia squeezed Gavin's hand. "I'm sorry he must suffer like this. I know you love him." She patted Louvaen's arm. "He's been locked up for days before you arrived. I won't lie. I had quite a fright the first time I heard the screams. Ambrose and Gavin told me of the flux and that his father remains safely locked away until the tide ebbs. I feel safe here, Lou."

"And she doesn't insist on visiting him inside his cell or disregards our warnings," Ambrose cut in.

Louvaen shot him a black look before returning her attention to Cinnia. "Safe from the father maybe, but what about Gavin?" The young lord stiffed but remained silent.

Cinnia started. "What about him?"

"He's affected by the flux as well. You said so yourself. Maybe not as bad as his father, but that's just a matter of time. Did you not notice his eyes, Cinnia?"

"They're green. So?"

Louvaen's mouth fell open. Unless Cinnia had gone blind all of a sudden, Gavin's yellow gaze was hard to miss. She slammed her cup down. "Bastards! You've ensorcelled her."

"Lou!"

The corner of Ambrose's mouth turned up in a sneer. "We've done nothing but offer our welcome to your sister, and to you since you're so fond of the truth."

Cinnia hurled a piece of bread at her. "No one is enchanting anyone. What is the matter with you?"

Louvaen dodged the bread. "I'm not the one with yellow eyes!"

"You should be! You sound like a lunatic!"

She stood and grasped Cinnia's arm. "Get up. We're leaving."

Cinnia jerked free. "Stop it! I'm not going anywhere!"

Louvaen's vision hazed over red. "Yes you are, even if I have to drag you out of this gods-forsaken pit by your hair!"

The younger woman leapt to her feet and bolted for the hall. Louvaen rose to give chase.

Gavin barreled in front of her. "Let her go, mistress."

She slammed her hands into his chest to shove him away. He was an immovable wall of solid muscle. Louvaen growled, spun back to the table for her pistol and spotted Ambrose smirking triumphantly.

The pistol dangled from his fingers. "I don't think so, mistress."

“Mistress Duenda!”

Louvaen turned and glared at Gavin. “What?”

He exhaled and lowered his voice. “Please give me your time. Cinnia has only fled to her room. I want to explain.”

“De Lovet, I doubt there’s anything you can say that will convince me you don’t deserve, at the very least, a sound beating.”

“Give me the chance to change your mind.”

Louvaen peered at him, seeing the earnestness in his handsome face. Even in the yellow eyes with their tinge of sorcerous blue—the tell-tale light of magic. She stared harder. “My gods,” she said. “Cinnia isn’t the one enchanted. You are.”

His shoulders slumped, relief etched in every line of his body. “Yes. I’d never allow someone to bespell her.”

While she still wanted to kill de Lovet for dragging Cinnia to the northern wilds and keeping secrets from her, the knowledge that he hadn’t ordered his magician to enchant her cooled her fury to a slow burn. She resumed her seat at the table and glared at Ambrose. “I want my pistol back when he’s done.”

He sniffed. “We’ll see.”

Gavin sat across from Louvaen. She refused his offer to refill her goblet. He refilled his before speaking. “The night we left, I’d gathered my possessions to return to Ketach Tor. The flux was growing stronger, and I couldn’t ignore its draw any longer. I’d written Cinnia a letter telling her I’d return in a few weeks. When I rode to your house to give it to her, I

found her at the door. She told me she was on her way to find me.”

Louvaen growled. “Sneaking out all hours of the night. I suppose I’ll have to sleep on the threshold and nail her window shut.” She didn’t return Gavin’s faint smile. “Go on.”

“She begged me for my help. I knew Jimenin was a nuisance, a persistent suitor who wouldn’t accept her refusal of him. I didn’t realize the seriousness of your circumstances until she told me that night.”

“You had no reason to know. It was Hallis business.” She crossed her arms. “It’s still Hallis business.” Louvaen didn’t know who she wanted to cuff more now—Gavin or Cinnia. Her sister had made a right mess of things by involving de Lovet.

He sighed. “Mistress Duenda, if this is a matter of pride, it’s misplaced. Your family needs our help. We have the means to pay your father’s debt. You won’t have to sell your house or possessions; your father won’t sit in the debtor’s tower. The solution is simple and readily available.”

Louvaen stared at him until the color ran high in his cheeks. Simple had no place in any of this. “Do you understand what you’ve done by acting as Cinnia’s rescuing knight? You’ve compromised her, threatened her reputation. For all that I prefer the truth, I’ve lied myself blue trying to convince the townsfolk of Montebianco that my sister isn’t a light skirt who ran off with the lad possessing a false nobility. Once we return home it will take all her charm and my good standing to convince our friends and neighbors her visit to a

relative was simply an unfortunate coincidence with the disappearance of Gavin de Lovet.”

Gavin traced the rim of his cup with a finger, his eyes gleaming almost amber in the light cast by the morning sun through the windows. “She doesn’t need to return. She’s welcomed here.” His hand slid down to grip the tankard’s handle, and his expression pleaded for understanding. “I love your sister, Mistress Duenda. I wish to protect her, court her, and ultimately wed her. Despite appearances, we are a wealthy household. We could satisfy your father’s debt ten times over and do so happily. Jimenin will be no threat to her or your family.”

Louvaen pressed the heel of her palm to her forehead. “For all your protestations of love, you’re lying to her this moment with your magician’s sorcery.”

“I had Ambrose enchant me so I wouldn’t scare her. It’s enough for her right now to listen to my father’s agony. I will tell her everything, but I want to give her time to adjust to us, to Ketach Tor.” He raked a hand through his hair. “I mean her no harm. None of us do. Please trust me. Trust us.”

He didn’t know her character or that what he asked of her was something Louvaen didn’t give easily. “How do I know you aren’t just trying to flip a pretty skirt?”

At this, Ambrose broke his silence with a loud guffaw. Gavin and Louvaen scowled at him as he wiped tears of mirth from his eyes. “Mistress Duenda, take a good look. Is that a man who must resort to hostage-taking just to tup a woman? Your sister is a beautiful girl but not the only beautiful girl in the world, and Gavin is as comely as she is. Why go through

all this trouble for a roll in the hay? He could easily have them lined up outside the barbican if he wanted.”

Gavin’s face flamed even hotter. “Ambrose, please.”

As much as she hated to admit it, the magician had a point. Ever since Cinnia had shown the first hints of womanhood, Louvaen had been fending off what seemed like every breathing male in Montebianco and beyond. Any man who so much as nodded politely to Cinnia in the market was suspect and viewed by Louvaen with a jaundiced eye. Her zealousness as guardian had made her myopic. Gavin was as stunningly beautiful as the woman he courted. Ambrose was right; Gavin must want more than a quick tuppung. Still, she had to ask the one question that haunted her since she’d found Cinnia’s letter in her abandoned room. “My sister came here a maiden. Is she still a maiden?”

He met her gaze with a steady one of his own. “Aye, she is. While I want her as any man would, I won’t dishonor her.”

She wondered if she might faint with relief. Cinnia had said she was still an innocent. She wanted Gavin to confirm it. Such a thing had no real importance were they betrothed, but he had yet to offer for Cinnia’s hand, and the likelihood—no matter how slim—that Cinnia might refuse still existed. “You realize if we accept your aid, it will be trading her to one man over another for money.”

Gavin smacked his hand against the tabletop hard enough to make the cups bounce. “Gods, but that’s becoming a tiresome refrain. There is no trade! It is a gift freely given. I love Cinnia. All I ask is time. Give me the winter to win her hand. If I can’t, she is free to go and nothing owed. She will

be treated as an honored guest of the de Sauveterre household and given all rights of hospitality.”

Louvaen had never considered herself a mercenary sort, but she’d never been faced with a situation such as this. Hospitality included gifts to the guests, and gifts were often money or items of value. She wasn’t at all certain she could salvage Cinnia’s reputation in Montebianco if Cinnia refused Gavin’s suit and returned home. They’d be forced to leave, find another town far enough away that no one would know about the Hallis sister who flew off with the de Lovet lad and ruined herself with him. Hospitality money would pay their way. They’d flee in shame but not in absolute poverty. Her fingers still tingled with the urge to strangle her sister and her suitor.

Ambrose drummed his fingers on his tankard. “What now, Mistress Duenda? Cinnia has told us enough of your predicament. You’ve sold your husband’s business, his lands and his investments. All that remains is your house and some livestock—not enough to pay even a portion of Jimenin’s markers. Your father stands at the prison gates and your sister at a cleric’s door threatened with marriage to a man rumored to have murdered the two wives he’s already buried. Gavin has offered to pay Jimenin with no expectations in return except for time spent with your sister. It’s a small thing—certainly compared to what Jimenin demands, and Gavin is an honorable man.”

Was there anything Cinnia *hadn’t* told them about their situation? “I’m guessing your magic only works so far past Ketach Tor, and with those eyes Gavin can’t be the one to make payment.

“How is it you can still see the change in his eyes when others can’t?” Curiosity had replaced the sneer in Ambrose’s voice.

“If you couldn’t already tell by the look of us, Cinnia and I were born to different mothers. Mine was a hedgewitch. She died birthing me so I have no training, only a sensitivity to magic.” She leveled a hard gaze on Ambrose. “And sometimes a resistance to it.”

“Yet you reject it.” He shook his head, brow furrowed. “Why?”

She snorted. “That’s another tale entirely and one of no importance here.” She turned to Gavin. “My father can’t wait for the flux to end. I’ll bring the money to Jimenin.” She drew a deep breath and prayed she’d made the right decision on her sister’s and father’s behalf. “Payment then for a winter of courtship.” Gavin’s expression lit up and then dimmed when Louvaen held up a finger. “But only if I can return and act as her guardian.”

Ambrose groaned as if someone had just knifed him under the table. “Gods help us.”

Gavin shook his head. “That isn’t within our authority. Not even mine. This is my father’s home. He decides who stays.”

She crossed her arms. “Then no bargain.”

The art of negotiation favored not the one with the better odds but the one who could convince his opponents that his were the best odds. Louvaen waited.

He stroked his lip with one finger, lost in thought. “Time is as much against you as it is us. Would you trust us to

send you home with the payment and a token to guide you back to Ketach Tor? I can't vouch for my father's willingness, but I can guarantee you the chance to speak with him about it. He will be...improved by the time you return. Cinnia remains under our protection, an honored guest." He eyed her with a look of both resignation and respect. "I'm aware her affection for me can turn in an instant if any harm comes to you from a mistake of mine."

It was a fair offer considering the circumstances, and Louvaen couldn't think of another option that worked to her benefit. "If you swear on those feelings you profess you hold for Cinnia to uphold your end of this bargain, then I'll leave her long enough to deliver Jimenin the monies." She held out her hand, along with a warning. "I'm no mage, but I'm familiar enough with the left-hand path. It gives no quarter to an oath-breaker."

Gavin clasped her palm in a firm grip. "I swear it. On my own blood—"

"Careful. She's already extracted some of your father's." Ambrose shook his head, clearly disapproving of the entire plan.

"On whatever you wish. The token we give you will lead you back to Ketach Tor when your business with Jimenin is concluded. You can then speak with my father."

Louvaen nodded. "A handshake is adequate enough." The two shook and Ambrose pronounced the bargain struck.

She stood. "You understand I intend to tell Cinnia every word we've discussed here?"

Gavin nodded. "Yes."

“Then I’m off to gather my things. Can you ready my horse in an hour?”

He rose as well. “Aye. I’ll have the monies in a pack waiting for you. You’re a woman traveling alone. Ambrose can enchant the pack, along with the token, so that it’s unseen.” He bowed and strode from the kitchen.

Louvaen gazed after him while she addressed Ambrose. “I’ll thank you not to give me a bauble that will drop me off the nearest cliff when I return.”

For the first time since she’d met him, she caught true humor in his answering chuckle. “Witch who hates magic, I doubt a mere fall from a cliff would end you.” He drew close and returned the flintlock. “Besides, I’ve no interest in killing you yet. It should be entertaining watching you explain to my liege why your interpretation of ‘hello’ is a boot to the face.” He inclined his head and swept out of the kitchen in a flutter of robes, leaving Louvaen to ponder how much crow she’d be forced to eat in order to sway de Sauveterre into letting her stay at Ketach Tor for the winter.

CHAPTER FIVE



“My lord, the scout has reported back. Granthing and the Lady Isabeau are less than eight furlongs from Valparin Skete. They’re on one horse instead of two. He thinks Granthing’s mount has come up lame.”

Ballard didn’t believe in gods, but he did believe in luck and for now his was holding. He kicked his mount into a gallop, his contingent of armed freemen and vassals trailing behind him as they emerged from the forests and onto the open tract of blooming flax fields separating the Granthing demesne from the king’s waste lands. The riders cleaved paths through an ocean of blue flowers toward a ridge crest rising above the

fields. They chased a lone horse, neck stretched as it raced toward the ridge in full gallop.

He spurred his own mount to greater speed. His quarry would never make it. Even from this distance he saw the horse falter and slow, almost pitching its riders from the saddle. Isabeau's stalwart mare would have carried her mistress across the heavens if required, but her strength only held for so long. With two people on her back, she had no hope of outrunning Ballard's fresher, tougher courser with its single rider.

The pursuing troupe narrowed the gap, with the perimeter riders fanning out to encircle and enclose their prey. Ballard rode center and point, anticipating Cederic's next move once he realized he and Isabeau would never make it to the skete in time. Disappointment almost overcame the cold knot of rage wedged against Ballard's sternum when the mare fell to a canter and finally a trot. He'd hoped to use the crossbow and take down his enemy like the dog he was. Cederic swung from the saddle to land nimbly on his feet, leaving Isabeau to guide her lathered horse away from him. Ballard's own mount never broke gallop before his rider leapt to the ground and charged, sword and buckler in hand. The two slammed together like battling stags caught in rut. They sprang apart, swords raised, each waiting for his adversary to strike.

Cederic's smile promised a gruesome death and a dance on Ballard's grave. "And here I thought you didn't care about her, Margrave." The thrum of steel striking steel as the blades met punctuated his statement.

Ballard refused to be baited. They both knew this battle was over land, far more valuable than the woman who claimed it as part of her marriage right. Ballard had never tried to fool Isabeau into believing empty declarations of love from him. His greatest regret was that her stubborn faith in Cederic of Granthing's lies had brought them to this—an elopement made under false pretenses and a fight in which Ballard would shed his last drop of blood if necessary to defend the properties promised to him in the betrothal contract.

Silent, relentless, he parried his opponent's blows and drove him across the flowering field with his own strikes until Cederic breathed harder than Isabeau's winded mare, and sweat dripped off his brow in rivulets.

“Kill him, Cederic!”

For just a moment, Isabeau's shrill command distracted Ballard, and Cederic struck. His blade raked harmlessly along Ballard's chainmail sleeve, but the buckler found its target, the shield boss striking a glancing blow across Ballard's face. The pop of bone sounded in his ears. A hot burst of pain filled his eyes with tears and his nose and mouth with blood. He staggered, half blinded and gasping. The thin whisper of a blade splitting air gave warning, and only years of fighting as a Marcher lord saved him from Cederic's next blow. He dropped into a crouch, under the sword's swing, and rose again. Cederic's forward momentum carried him into Ballard's reach, and Ballard met him, slamming the pommel of his sword against Cederic's skull.

The fight was over as abruptly as it began. Cederic went down in a cloud of flax flowers, rendered unconscious by

Ballard's blow. Ballard planted the sword tip under Cederic's jaw for the killing thrust.

"No!" Isabeau threw herself across her defeated lover and glared up at Ballard with a face so twisted by hate all her famed beauty had disappeared. "Mercy, I beg you! I'll agree to whatever you want, you loathsome skit. Just don't kill him."

Face throbbing from his broken nose and a belly sick with the blood he'd swallowed, Ballard offered his betrothed a gory smile devoid of humor. "I want what's in our betrothal contract, Isabeau. Your hand in marriage, your dower lands and a son to inherit them. Give me those, or I will give you Granthing's head on the point of my blade."

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"I'll never understand how so timid a man as Mercer Hallis managed to sire a she-wolf like Louvaen Duenda." Gavin stood beside his father at the solar's one window and watched as horse and rider picked their way across the drawbridge spanning the gorge. The wind was up, free of snow flurries but still gusting hard enough to whip the horse's mane high and the rider's cloak stiff. The concealing hood flew back, revealing Louvaen's dark hair before she passed out of sight beneath the gatehouse's span.

Ballard stayed silent, keeping his opinions to himself. Gavin's comment was mild compared to Ambrose's. The sorcerer had earlier proclaimed that Cinnia's sister "possessed the disposition of a badger poked with a sharp stick." Ambrose made plain his dislike of their newest guest, and Gavin was wary of her—as he had a reason to be. Ballard touched a sore spot on the side of his healing nose. The

woman kicked like a mule and had done an admirable job of trying to cave his face in.

“Are you certain you want her here for the winter? According to Ambrose, she’ll be trouble if she stays.”

“She’s prickly, but she loves her sister.” Gavin inhaled the rush of cold air curling through the open window. “When she’s not busy acting as Cinnia’s battle hound, she’s good company. Intelligent, well-read and quick with a quip.” His gaze flickered over Ballard’s bruised features and he winced. “Can you forgive her enough to let her stay? Cinnia wants her here, and they’re close despite the fact they can sometimes fight like two wet cats in a sack.”

Ballard didn’t know this Duenda woman, didn’t recollect her beyond the breath of cloves that had cut through the stink of his cell and brought him briefly out of the flux’s madness. He’d been horrified to find his son standing next to the unmistakable silhouette of a woman. He’d remained sensible only long enough to ask Gavin why he’d done such a thing before the madness took him again. He didn’t remember grabbing her or even the blow she landed which cracked his nose and gifted him with a matching pair of black eyes. He held no grudge for the injury. In fact, she’d earned a modicum of his respect for fighting back, a trait no doubt learned by necessity if her father was as spiritless as Gavin described. “A sharp tongue is harmless enough, and I’ve survived worse than this tap on the nose. If, however, she spends her time trying to turn your beloved against you, you might want to reconsider.”

His son’s features froze, an icy expression reminiscent of his long-dead mother. Ballard shuddered. “I’ll throw her out myself if I discover such a thing.”

Ballard didn't doubt it. "You can always have Ambrose curse her into a mute."

Gavin grinned. "As much as Ambrose would love to, I think it will take more than losing her voice to defeat Mistress Duenda." He shut and locked the window. "I'll send them up. Cinnia wants to make the introductions."

Ballard shouldered on his cloak, pulled the hood lower and took his place by the lit hearth. "The girl's skittish around me."

"It's just respect for the *dominus* of the household. Anyone would react the same way even with no curse. Cinnia is seeking you out of her own accord. Such a thing can only convince Louvaen there's nothing for Cinnia to fear."

Maybe not now, when the flux was weak and his thoughts his own, but if left unbroken the curse ensured no one at Ketach Tor would be safe from him. "One day, son, you'll have to tell her that won't always be true."

Gavin paused, his mouth curving down. "I know. Just not now." He left Ballard alone to await his visitor.

He didn't wait long. After more than two weeks with her traipsing the halls of his home, he now recognized Cinnia's quick steps. The ones that followed were new, longer in stride, more purposeful in tread. "Enter," he called at the polite knock. The door opened, admitting Cinnia, lovely as usual in a blue gown that highlighted her curves and softened her brown eyes. She offered him a hesitant smile and a curtsy.

"Good afternoon, *dominus*." She'd recently adopted the household's form of address for him. "This is my sister,

Louvaen Duenda.” She stepped aside to allow her companion through the door.

Were Cinnia of royal birth, she’d be renowned and fought over by the prince of every kingdom. Bards crafted songs to beauty such as hers and wrote poetry praising every feminine glory from the curve of the brow to the curve of the hips. None would wax poetic over Louvaen Duenda or battle to make her queen. The two looked nothing alike. Where Cinnia was small and flaxen-haired, Louvaen was tall, towering over her sister. Ballard didn’t possess Gavin’s impressive height, but he was taller than many men, and she could look him in the eye without tilting her head up to do so. He’d caught a glimpse of her hair as she rode across the bridge. Dark, with a hint of a wave, it fell over one shoulder in a thick braid. Wispy strands framed a face too strong to ever be pretty. She had a prominent nose that arched a little too much and accentuated a thin upper lip and high, carved cheekbones. Sweeping black eyebrows arched above eyes the color of ash. A jaw line sharp enough to draw blood defined features stripped of any softness except for a full lower lip and a curved chin similar to Cinnia’s. She wasn’t beautiful, but she was memorable, and Ballard knew when he went to sleep that night, he’d see her proud face behind his eyelids.

She dipped into a hint of a curtsy. “Lord de Sauveterre.”

Ballard liked her voice with its deep, carefully modulated tones. “Mistress Duenda, welcome to Ketach Tor.”

Louvaen clasped her gloved hands in front of her. “My family offers our most profound gratitude for your generosity

in paying my father's markers. I owe your son an apology for doubting his word regarding your family's holdings."

Gavin had warned her she was straightforward and spoke her mind. Ballard welcomed the trait, having no patience for a glib tongue that flapped a great deal but said little. "Gavin is very fond of your sister, mistress. The payment was small. Consider it a gesture of appreciation for allowing her to guest with us for the winter."

She inclined her head and without looking away, spoke to Cinnia. "Cinnia, I'd like to speak with de Sauveterre alone please."

He watched with interest as the girl cast an uneasy glance at him and then another one at her sister. Ballard refrained from promising her he wouldn't give Louvaen a second opportunity to rearrange his face. She curtsied and squeezed Louvaen's arm, though he couldn't tell if the affectionate gesture was in warning or reassurance. "We'll meet you at supper then? The hall is drafty so we eat in the kitchen." She blew a kiss at her sister and left them alone.

Ballard gestured to a nearby chair. "Make yourself comfortable by the fire, mistress. There's warmed ale and a place for your cloak." He pointed first to the small table set between the chairs where two goblets rested and then to a large chest pushed against one wall. She glanced briefly at his hands but showed no reaction other than to remove her cloak gloves and drape them across the chest to dry. Her actions gave him a few seconds to admire her unobserved. Graceful as a willow with a slender back and arms, she wore a rust-colored gown that enhanced the russet highlights in her hair.

Ballard wondered if her legs were as long as her height suggested.

She turned to face him again, and those smoky eyes took his measure. “Will you not reveal yourself to me as I have to you, my lord?” A challenging question, as if she hoped to gauge his character from his need to remain hidden under the cloak.

Had she waited a little longer, he’d have saved her the trouble of asking. He wore his cloak and hood for the benefit of his guests. His household was used to his appearance, and he’d lived with his ever-warping visage for almost four centuries. Whatever vanity he might have possessed had long ago been crushed beneath the curse’s weight. Even before its advent, he’d been famed for his prowess in battle not his looks. These days he was just grateful for the times he still possessed a sound enough mind. His concern over Cinnia’s reaction to him had been driven by the wish not to create problems for Gavin. Whether or not the girl or her sister found him hideous meant nothing to him.

He scraped back the hood, shrugged off the cloak and tossed it across the solar to land atop Louvaen’s garment. “As you wish, mistress.”

Unlike Cinnia, she didn’t startle. Gavin had assured him his cell had been too dark and her candle too weak to illuminate him clearly during her first visit. Now he had no shadows in which to lurk. Several candles and the leaping flames from the hearth’s vigorous fire lit the chamber.

She cocked her head to the side and offered him a sheepish smile. “Those are impressive black eyes.”

He blinked, stunned by her teasing. No revulsion, no fear, only a curiosity laced with a touch of embarrassment at the injury she caused. He followed her lead and purposefully misunderstood her remark. “My father’s eyes were also black.”

Her full lower lip flattened, and her throat worked to hold back laughter. “Does the penchant for being hit in the face run in the family? What an odd trait to pass on to your descendents.”

Ballard chuckled, surprising himself. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d truly laughed without sarcasm or bitterness. Ill-tempered badger she might be, but Louvaen Duenda had accomplished something no one else had in years. “The males in my family have been known to do foolish things that earned them a bruise or two.” It was a round-about apology for yanking her off her feet and an acknowledgement he deserved what she’d dished out to him in response.

She harrumphed and raised a dark eyebrow. “Is that so? Then it’s just a matter of time before Gavin sports one or two.”

“Very likely.” He indicated the chairs once again. “Sit, mistress. You’ll want to thaw by the fire.”

He followed her and took the goblets off the table while she made herself comfortable. The ale had turned tepid, and he lifted the poker resting in the hearth’s coals. Red iron clanged on stone as he struck off the clinging ash and plunged the tip of the poker into his goblet. Ale spumed over the rim, and he blew the thick foam into the fire where it hissed and spat. Louvaen watched him from her place. “Same for yours?” he said. She nodded, and he repeated the process,

making sure no trace of ash floated in the ale. She murmured her thanks when he passed the goblet to her and took an experimental sip. She gave an appreciative sigh.

“Your Magda is the finest alewife I’ve ever met. She uses nutmeg in her brew.”

As he’d been drinking only Magda’s ale for so long, he had nothing to compare, but it pleased him that his guest enjoyed one of the offerings of his household. She sat in her chair as if seated on a throne, straight-backed and regal. Her gown fell in folds to the floor, the fabric molded to one leg from thigh to knee. Oh yes, she had long, long legs. Ballard dragged his gaze back to her face, annoyed by the realization he was as distracted by a skirt as any green lad sniffing after a milkmaid. “Tell me of your journey. I’m guessing this Don Jimenin accepted payment.”

Triumph lit her eyes. “He did, though I thought he might burst into flame. I had to duel a clerk at the Merchant House with a pair of candlesticks, but I made sure the lending masters and half the town council came to witness the exchange.” She smirked into her goblet. “Jimenin was one blink shy of an apoplexy. He doesn’t like being thwarted.”

“No man does. From what Gavin has told me, payment in coin wasn’t Jimenin’s goal. He’ll find another way to try for your sister.”

Her expression sobered. “It’s why I’ve agreed to let her stay for the winter. I need time to plan.”

Ballard wondered what she might devise to keep Cinnia out of Jimenin’s clutches if the girl refused Gavin’s suit. “And if she chooses to make Ketach Tor her home once winter ends?”

Louvaen abandoned her seat to pace in front of the hearth. “I love my sister, de Sauveterre, and I fear what Jimenin will do if he gets his hands on her.” She pinned him with a hard stare. “This is a questionable sanctuary at best. A broken fortress sitting in a pool of wild magic; a man so crazed by it his own family chains him in a dungeon, and a magician who’ll beguile an innocent young woman so she doesn’t see the lad she swoons over sometimes looks at her with the eyes of a beast. For now, I must entrust her safety to you. If she chooses to remain, then she’ll need to know exactly what she’ll live with before she makes that choice. Gavin has asked for the winter to court her. In exchange I want to stay here with her and act as companion and guardian.”

She’d thrown down the gauntlet first, and inadvertent or purposeful, she’d done so while he was paying more attention to the way the firelight danced across her figure than on her words. Magda would have said she was as flat as a washing bat, but Ballard admired the slight swell of her breasts, perfectly proportioned to her slender form. Her gown eddied around her legs and hips while shadows played in her hair and pooled in the hollow of her throat. His wife had once accused him of being a cold man, and years of the curse’s effects had dampened his vigor, but he still lived, still breathed and at this moment lusted mightily.

“De Sauveterre?”

She stopped her pacing, features pinched at his inattention. If she only knew just how focused he was on her. He took a swallow of his cooling ale before answering. “By most lights it’s a reasonable request.” She must have heard his unspoken “but” because her posture remained stiff. “Reasonable if that’s all you intend. Having you winter here

will give you plenty of time to poison Cinnia against my son if you choose. We aren't fools, Mistress Duenda. You hold great influence over your sister."

He liked that she didn't spout false denials regarding her power. "True, but like everyone else, you underestimate Cinnia's will. Were it as meager as some believe, you and I wouldn't be having this discussion, and Cinnia would be home in Monteblanco, as would I." She closed the distance between them and set her ale down. This near and Ballard caught the scent that had broken the flux's hold on him for a brief moment in his cell—cloves. "I'll not try and sway her one way or the other. If Gavin wins her, he'll do so with honesty as well as charm. If he doesn't win her, it won't be of my doing, and we're both free to leave with our debt to your family clear."

Ambrose had said she was a widow, and Ballard could only guess how her husband must have worked himself into an early grave trying to remain master of his household with such a wife. This woman was accustomed to issuing edicts and having them obeyed. "If I agree, what do you intend to do while you reside in my castle, eating my food and using my firewood to warm yourself? Ketach Tor requires a lot of upkeep and we're a reduced household. Everyone here attends to several tasks."

He thought her spine might snap if she stiffened any more. She crossed her arms and scowled. "Cinnia and I aren't leeches, my lord, nor are we unskilled. I brew a vile ale and can burn this place down around your ears trying to cook; however, I'm an accomplished spinner and silk thrower, an adequate seamstress and an exceptional scrivener. Cinnia apprenticed under Marguerite de Pizan as a scribe, illuminator

and bookbinder. Neither of us are noblewomen, nor do we fear hard work. I've scrubbed plenty of floors, laundered linens, cared for the sick, and helped bury the dead. What do you wish of me?"

Ballard listened to her passionate dissertation without interrupting. Louvaen Duenda had an answer for most things and an argument for everything else. She didn't debate; she went to war. His respect for Cinnia blossomed. The girl had a stronger backbone than he credited her for if she hadn't yet buckled under the weight of her sister's imposing personality. Fascinated, he succumbed to the temptation to tease Mistress Duenda and maybe render her tongue-tied.

"What do I wish of you?" He paused, his gaze sweeping over her from the top of her head to the tips of her toes peeking out from her hem. Her hands, long-fingered and pale, gripped her upper arms. "You, in my bed," he said.

He expected an indignant tirade or a hail of insults covering everything from his parentage to the horrors of his face and hands. The silence that met his softly spoken declaration swelled in the room, turning as hot as the embers glowing in the hearth and those pluming in Louvaen's eyes. Ballard was willing to wager she'd exhale smoke from her nostrils and fire out of her mouth at any moment. He watched her gaze flick to the poker, then back to him, and he almost laughed aloud. She was calculating her chances of success in skewering him to his chair.

The first words of an apology for his poor jest hovered on his lips and died when Louvaen's outraged demeanor cooled. The shrewd look she gave him transformed his amusement into amazement, and it was he who went tongue-

tied. He rose to stand in front of her, close enough that her breath caressed his cheeks, and he could count the number of dark lashes edging her eyelids. “My gods,” he murmured. “Your love for your sister is exceptional if you’re actually considering giving yourself to me.”

Her top lip curled into a faint sneer. “If I say yes, I give only my body, not myself.” She snapped a finger against one of the buckles on his tunic and stepped away. “I won’t be the one diminished by such a bargain, and you’ll be lucky if I don’t geld you before spring.”

Ballard congratulated himself on keeping his voice even and his expression neutral. “You may keep to your own bed, Mistress Duenda. I suspect I wouldn’t survive an encounter between us unscathed. I’d like to keep my bollocks attached.”

She blinked, confused and her brow knitted into a frown. “What do you want then?”

What did he want? Hers was a fair question with no easy answer. He wanted more of this—the exhilaration of truly living instead of only counting time. The sharp-tongued sister who’d invaded his home, made her demands and challenged his authority as *dominus* sent the blood singing through his veins. They were going to clash, no doubt about it. Ambrose hadn’t exaggerated when he said she had the disposition of a badger, but he hadn’t felt this alive since he raised the newborn Gavin in his arms and proclaimed him heir of Ketach Tor. There was still hope for Gavin. Cinnia’s affection for him might turn to love and break the curse that bound him. It was too late for Ballard. He existed on borrowed time, and his days as a man still in possession of his humanity were few. Isabeau had spoken true when she

proclaimed no woman born would love him, but he'd found one who'd spar with him. It would be enough to comfort him when the last of his sanity winked out in the darkness of his cell. Louvaen Duenda could stay.

“Your companionship,” he said simply. “Ketach Tor has been without the presence of a refined woman for many years. Gavin will command your sister’s attention; I will command yours. You’ll entertain me when I wish, give me your company—pleasant company.” He smirked. “Talk to Magda if it’s spinning you want. She’ll bless you until the end of her days. We had a good flax harvest this season and enough bundles to keep a horde of spinners busy until next summer.”

“Anything else?” She’d finally lost her composure and gawked at him in open-mouthed incredulity.

“You’ll never forget you are only a guest of this house, not its mistress. Your sister can show you which rooms are yours to explore. Stay out of the rest unless invited. If you break the rules, there will be consequences. You can spin just as easily while you spend the winter imprisoned in one of the cells below. If you explore the woods, don’t go alone. And stay away from the roses growing along the keep wall. They’re warped by the flux and vicious.”

Louvaen stopped gaping long enough to answer him. “Understood.”

“We have an accord?”

“We do.”

She’d been the one to parley for the right to stay, yet he was the one who wanted to gust a sigh of relief that she’d agreed to his terms. He resumed his seat and captured his

goblet just to give his hands something to do. “You’ll want to join your sister for supper then.” He inclined his head, signaling an end to their meeting. “Mistress.”

He received only a brief nod and a cool “de Sauveterre” before she retrieved her gloves and cloak from beneath his and left the room without closing the door.

Ballard grinned at the fire, downed his ale and the remainder of Louvaen’s for good measure. Winter promised to be interesting.

“Well?”

He glanced up to find Ambrose next to his chair, the lenses of his spectacles reflecting the firelight and hiding his expression. “I’ve agreed to let her stay.”

“I was afraid you’d say that,” Ambrose grumbled. “Best watch your back then. If you so much as sneeze wrong in her sister’s direction, she’ll try to take your head.”

“She-wolf with a pup.”

The sorcerer nodded. “Aye. I suspect she killed her husband.”

Ballard recalled her quick glance at the fireplace poker and then at him. He smiled. “I wouldn’t be surprised.”

CHAPTER SIX



Louvaen had so far spent nine days and as many hours of her winter stay within the stone walls of Ketach Tor fortress. Magda had fed her well, and the master of the house had yet to serve her the plate of crow she'd expected to eat when she crossed the drawbridge on her return trip. The chamber given to her was the same one she'd stayed in during her first visit. Small but easily warmed by its hearth, it offered a comfortable bed and privacy.

The spacious bedroom where Cinnia slept was three times the size of Louvaen's room. Its attached bower and lead pane windows caught the southern sun and overlooked the birch and oak woodland. Louvaen had initially wanted to

share the chamber with her sister, a safeguard against any midnight visits Gavin might be tempted to make. He'd sworn not to compromise Cinnia's honor, and while Louvaen trusted him to hold to his word to the best of his ability, she was reluctant to confine her role as chaperone to daytime. She changed her mind after two hours of spinning flax in the bower with Cinnia chattering nonstop about Gavin's numerous abilities, which bordered on godlike and miraculous. She'd abandoned her basket of bundles and fled to her room, pleading a headache.

Magda had given her a knowing smile when she caught Louvaen shoving her chest of clothing down the hall and into the smaller chamber. "What? Not interested in falling asleep to the many praises of the wondrous Gavin de Lovet?"

"Stop looking so smug and help me push this chest inside."

She'd since slept with one eye open and her door cracked. So far no footsteps had tiptoed the hall late at night, and Cinnia's door had remained shut.

True to his word, Ballard made certain she and Cinnia were kept busy. The first morning of her stay, Magda had given the two sisters enough time to consume the familiar breakfast of bread sopped in ale before leading them to a store room set off from the larder. Inside, twisted bundles of flax tare shared space with baskets overflowing with tow. Louvaen guessed they had stored enough flax to keep an army of spinners busy for months.

"Unless you're harvesting a small country's worth of flax, this is more than a single season."

Magda pushed baskets out of her way to lift a hanging strick of tare from a hook in the ceiling. “Three seasons and this summer saw a better harvest than most.” She pulled one of the braids from the main bundle and passed it to Louvaen. “We’ve enough to do in the winter with the mending, cooking, making rush lights and candles, along with the usual sennight of laundry. We haven’t the time to spin a decent portion of what we’ve harvested.”

Louvaen untwisted the braid of flax line and held it in the light streaming in from the kitchen. Her fingers sifted the butter-soft hank of flax. “Who hackled this?”

Magda gestured with her chin to the two serving girls hovering in the doorway. “Joan. She has a deft hand with the combing and carding.”

The girl flushed at the praise and turned a brighter red when Louvaen passed the line to Cinnia. “Feel. I’ve thrown silk less soft. It would be a privilege to spin this.”

Magda lifted a basket of tow and dropped it into Cinnia’s arms. “We can use aprons, rope and stockings more than a fine shirt or napkins at the moment, so I need the tow spun. As good as Joan is at the hackling, Clarimond is better on the loom. She can weave as fast as you can spin.” She tried to take the flax line from Louvaen who refused to relinquish it.

“Would you let me spin this as well? You’ll have yarn to use if his lordship or Gavin needs a fancier shirt to wear in the future.”

Magda nodded. “If you think you can give Clarimond the yarn she needs to weave, spin what you want.” She placed a second basket in Louvaen’s arms. “I prefer a good drop

spindle myself, but Gavin's brought home a couple of those spinning wheels. One of the girls will show you where they are."

Cinnia looped her arm through Louvaen's as they followed Clarimond up the stairs to the third floor and a door recessed into an alcove at the end of the corridor. The rush light in Clarimond's hand sent shadows scurrying to the corners as she entered the room and stepped aside to wait while the sisters explored. They gasped in unison at their first peek inside.

The chamber was no larger than a modest buttery and just as crowded as the storeroom they'd left, only this one housed things more interesting than flax. Cinnia made straight way to a harpsichord shrouded in dust. Beside it stood a pendulum clock and a table covered with a variety of storm glasses as well as a vase filled with lead pencils. One corner held two spinning wheels; a great wheel and another that had Louvaen striding across the room.

"A castle wheel," she whispered. Before his death, Thomas had promised her a castle wheel. He'd died before he could fulfill his promise, and the burden of her father's debt had prevented her from buying one. She ran her fingers over the frame, caressing the wheel and drive bands. The spinning wheel was as dusty as the harpsichord, but otherwise untouched, as if someone had bought and abandoned it. Magda had stated the wheels were free to use, and she couldn't wait to bring this one out into the light, clean and oil it and spin her first bit of drafted tare.

"I know what this is!"

She was interrupted in her mental planning by Cinnia's exclamation. The girl bent and pressed her eye against the narrow tip of a tubular contraption mounted on a tripod. Rush light revealed designs of vines and leaves carved into a brass casing made dull with dirt. Louvaen left the wheels and joined Cinnia. "What is it?"

She straightened and Louvaen grinned at the brown circle of grime decorating the girl's eye. "They call it a telescope. When you look through this glass, it's as if the stars hover on your doorstep." She clapped her hands, delighted by her discovery. "We have to get Gavin to bring this out. Who would leave such a marvelous machine in a dirty room?"

Louvaen wondered the same. Several of the items were commonplace in the households she knew—commonplace but also expensive. Some, like Cinnia's telescope, were very rare while the castle wheel was readily available if one had the funds to upgrade from the bigger wheels that spun bulkier yarns. The de Sauveterres had paid Jimenin and acted as if her father's exorbitant debt was nothing more than ribbon money. The things tucked away in this chamber, neglected and forgotten, were beyond the means of most but well within the purchasing power of this family, yet Magda and her women prepared meals and cleaned the rooms with basic tools. The conflicting realities made no sense, and so far no one in the de Sauveterre household offered an explanation.

"That's a question I'd like answered." She lifted a delicate bottle spun of fragile glass from the table. "These things are too costly, too useful, or both to be left here. No matter how fast Magda is with her beloved drop spindle, she can't equal the speed of a wheel in turning out yarn. It's a

shame having a storeroom stuffed with flax waiting to be spun when these two wheels would make short work of the excess.”

Cinnia shrugged. “Well, we’ll have something to do in the evenings or when the weather is bad. Besides, I’d rather spin than launder any day.”

Magda had shrugged when Louvaen asked her about the chamber with its many forlorn treasures. “Gavin’s always bringing baubles and oddities from his journeys. Didn’t have the time to play with some or learn how to use the others. If something catches your eye just say so. We’ll take it out, clean it up, and you can put it to use.”

Over the next few days, the spinning wheels found a place in the solar and the telescope in one of the towers. Louvaen offered to teach Clarimond and Joan how to spin on the wheels, and with Magda’s blessing, scheduled lessons before supper. While the housekeeper displayed an obvious deference to both Ballard and Gavin, she treated the sisters in the same manner she dealt with Ambrose, either chasing them out of her kitchen for being underfoot or putting them to work at one of the many endless tasks that made Ketach Tor a comfortable home. Evenings were spent in the solar, with Cinnia spinning alongside Louvaen or beating the lights out of Gavin in one of their numerous games of Nine Men’s Morris.

Sometimes Ballard joined them, sitting quietly near the fire, shrouded in hood and cloak so he wouldn’t disturb Cinnia. Despite their bargain, he had yet to request Louvaen’s company privately and had so far refused her offer to read to him. He seemed content to sit and listen to the quiet clack of the spinning wheel’s treadle and watch as she spun flax into linen yarn.

“Why spinning, Mistress Duenda?” He asked her one evening as she drafted flax tow through her fingers. “A lady usually engages in other pursuits.”

Louvaen smiled. Spinning was a lowly skill, despite the weavers clamoring for every scrap of yarn a spinner could twist and ply as fast as possible. “I’m not a lady, my lord, only a bankrupt merchant’s daughter.” She dipped thumb and forefinger in the cup of flax mucilage to coat the line. “I’ve no talent for the harpsichord or the psaltery, and I find needlework dull. Spinning though—spinning is listening to thread sing, and I’ve a good ear for it.”

“Give me your hands.”

His command surprised her, but she ceased spinning and stretched out her hands, palms up. He leaned forward and grasped them, the pointed tips of his nails scoring lightly down the lengths of her fingers. Her skin was golden next to his, her hands elegant. Louvaen glanced at her sister who’d paused in her game with Gavin to watch. Cinnia shuddered and turned back to the board. If Ballard saw her reaction, he ignored it, concentrating instead on sliding his thumbs across the pads of Louvaen’s fingers.

“Not a lady but with the hands of one. Soft.”

Where Cinnia shook in revulsion, Louvaen shivered at the pleasant tingle his touch elicited. She gently withdrew her hands from his grasp and took up her line once more. “When I spin wool, I spin in the grease. Good for the skin.”

Ballard sat back in his chair. “What a fine thing to know the caress of such hands,” he said in a low voice.

The heat in her face warned her she was probably a deeper shade of red than Cinnia's gown, but she refused to look away from Ballard's steady gaze, the eye shine yellow and glowing in the deep shadows of his hood. "I'm no longer considering your proposition, Lord de Sauveterre," she said in equally quiet tones.

"I proposed in jest, mistress, but the offer stands with all sincerity should you ever decide to accept."

He was an enigma, one which kept her awake at night trying to puzzle out. Their meeting had started well enough. Unlike Cinnia, Louvaen wasn't content to leave a mystery unsolved. Gavin and Ambrose had warned her of Ballard's disfigurement, and the bony hands with the black claw-like nails hinted at a man who no longer resembled one. His concealing garb, however, had only made her more curious, and she'd been both surprised and pleased at his willingness to put it aside and reveal himself to her.

If anyone were to ask her what she remembered most about him at first sight, she would have said his eyes. In the light, they were deep set and long lashed, so dark a brown, they appeared black and nearly obscured his pupils. They assessed her with a gaze that bespoke strength, patience and a certainty his appearance would send her fleeing from the solar. Louvaen didn't think he'd ever been a handsome man. Her nose was positively delicate compared to his. A thin, high bridge arched long into a pair of flared nostrils and pointed tip made even more hawkish by the slight crookedness of the nasal bones. He possessed a thin-lipped mouth, hard jaw and cheeks hollowed out by either suffering or age. A filigree of silver wove through black, shoulder length hair, giving the wavy locks the look of pewter stained with soot. As they

were, his features made him stern and forbidding. With the warping caused by the flux, he was frightful.

Small grooves in the shapes of arrow tips were carved into his cheeks, a matching set on both sides. Another grouping, these shaped like spirals, etched vertical paths on either side of his forehead. More scars, some raised, others sunken and shriveled, encircled his throat to disappear beneath the high collar of his cotehardie. Some of the scars were pale, others almost dark as his hair. The dark ones resembled runes or thorny vines and reminded her of the sinister roses growing in wild profusion across the garden wall and up the north side of the fortress's keep. His skin was unnaturally pale, the only real color the purplish bruises ringing his eyes from a healing broken nose. As Thomas Duenda's wife, Louvaen had prepared enough of the dead for burial to truthfully say Ballard de Sauveterre had the fish-belly pallor of a drowned man.

She understood why he went hooded and cloaked around strangers. People were fearful creatures and looked upon disfigurement with the same horror in which they viewed plague victims. Even the most stout-hearted person would weary of the pointing, screeching and cries of "Monster!" that would ensue were they to show their faces to the sun. Still, it was a shame he covered himself so completely. His face might inspire swoons of the wrong kind, but he was well made. Only a little taller than her, he boasted a slim, muscular physique and wide shoulders shown to best advantage in the form-fitting tunic.

She'd briefly entertained the idea of spearing him with the fireplace poker over his outlandish demand that she share his bed in exchange for the right to protect her sister but thought better of it. Ballard's eyes had flashed, the faint

upward tug of his lips telling her he'd read her intention. He'd reclined in his chair, legs stretched out toward the fire, one hand clasping his goblet while the other rested against his thigh. It was an indolent pose, but Louvaen sensed a coiled intensity about him and recalled the power in the unyielding grip he'd had on her leg. She suspected he was as fast as he was strong and would disarm her before she could lift the poker.

That she'd seriously considered becoming his temporary mistress had shocked her. Many a woman had traded her body for reasons as desperate as feeding a family or as calculating as finding an alternate path to power. Sometimes you gained on your back what you couldn't through birthright or circumstance. She'd never allow such a consideration for Cinnia. Innocent, unmarried and now destitute, she had only her beauty and her reputation with which to lure a proper suitor, and Louvaen refused to put all her hopes for her sister on Gavin de Lovet. She herself didn't possess great beauty and, as a widow, no longer had to worry about a reputation dependent on the foolish idea that her character was somehow compromised by a tumble in the hay. Still, she wasn't in the habit of welcoming men to her bed, especially strangers. De Sauveterre's proposition had first angered and then intrigued her. She had no good reason for why she found him fascinating. Something about the man, beyond the ruined face and twisted hands, strummed a chord inside her.

She looked forward to supper because he made an appearance each evening. Everyone gathered in the kitchen for the meal, even Magda, Clarimond and Joan. At first shy, the serving girls had said little but soon asked questions about Louvaen's and Cinnia's lives in Montebianco and offered

insights into life at Ketach Tor. Magda, never reserved, spouted opinions on everything from horse saddles to dress hems and caressed Ambrose's shins with her toes under the table. Louvaen had discovered their play once when she bent to retrieve a dropped napkin. She'd almost banged her head on the table's edge straightening up too quickly and spent the rest of supper trying not to giggle at the discovery that the housekeeper and the sorcerer were lovers.

For his part, Ambrose remained unfailingly kind to Cinnia, praising her company and requesting her help in illuminating a tome of herbals. He and Louvaen regularly volleyed insults and threats between them whenever they crossed paths, though they had reached a silent agreement not to try and kill each other while she remained at Ketach Tor. Upon her return from Montebianco, she'd thanked him for not bespelling her off the cliff.

"Keep your thanks," he told her. "And an eye on your ale. I'm brewing something that turns shrews into toads."

"While you're at it, brew something that bestows courtesy and swallow a cup or two yourself," she shot back.

Between their ongoing verbal battles, Magda's commentary and Gavin and Cinnia making cow eyes at each other over a platter of mutton or pork, supper was never dull. Ballard always presented himself in the kitchen as the rest of his household sat down to eat and took his place at the head of the table. He didn't eat, only drank the ale or wine Magda served and added his own comments to the various conversations or debates that erupted—usually between Ambrose and Magda or Ambrose and Louvaen. At first she thought he simply chose not to eat supper until she'd returned

to the kitchen one evening for an extra candle and saw him alone at the table, bareheaded and without his cloak.

Magda set a plate before him along with a dagger and napkin. While the rest of the household had used forks, Ballard ate only with the dagger and his claws. The claws worked well to stab, but she guessed they diminished his ability to wield a fork with any competency. Louvaen had left before either he or Magda noticed her presence. She lay awake that night thinking upon Ballard's solitary meal. His refusal to eat with them was not the act of a man who craved extreme privacy but one ashamed to reveal an effect of his disfigurement.

Tonight she skipped the after-supper gathering in the solar and returned to her room. She moved a chair near the fire and placed a low stool in front of it. The basket next to the stool held the items she had Gavin pilfer from the stables. He'd given her a strange look but thought better of asking any questions when she leveled a warning gaze on him. Ballard would likely raise an eyebrow when he saw what she'd taken. Louvaen hoped he didn't see insult where none existed. She left the bedroom and flew down the stairs as quick as she could without tripping on her hem.

Magda was just putting Ballard's plate in front of him when Louvaen strode into the kitchen. The housekeeper jumped, dropping the plate. It clattered on the table and bounced peas across its surface. Ballard half rose from his chair, eyes narrowed, lips almost disappeared in a grim line. "What are you doing here, Louvaen?"

The swirling black lines and symbols marring his skin had changed position, curling in different patterns around his

neck. They stretched across his jaw and over his chin with one reaching high along his cheekbone until its tip rested just below his right eye. It pulsed when he questioned her.

His familiar use of her name was telling, but she ignored him and addressed Magda. “Keep his plate by the fire for now.” She crooked a finger at Ballard. “Come with me, my lord.” She swept out of the kitchen, smiling at the tread of his boots on the stairs behind her. Neither of them said anything as he followed her down the corridor to her room. Only when they reached her door did he pause and tilt his head in puzzlement. “My proposition specified my bed, not yours, but one is as good as another.”

Louvaen laughed as she opened her door. “I’ll not starve a man just to lie with me. Had I changed my mind—which I haven’t—I’d let you eat first.”

“Generous of you.”

“Yes it is.” She led him to one of the chairs. “Sit.” He dropped into the chair, quirking an eyebrow when she told him “Hold out your hand. It doesn’t matter which one.”

She took her place on the stool and dragged the basket in front of her. As before, a fine tingling shot up the length of her fingers at the touch of his hand. It should have repulsed her. Wan and bony with the black markings etching patterns into the skin and curving claws, Ballard’s hands were those children imagined on the lurching monsters that clung to the shadows or hid under the bed. Even Cinnia, an adult of jovial temperament, couldn’t bear to look at them. Louvaen couldn’t stop. They were the only parts of himself he revealed most of the time—agile, expressing a grace and economy of motion.

His fingers jerked in her clasp when he saw what she kept in the basket. “What are you doing?”

She held on tight and lifted a set of hoof nippers from the basket. “Cutting your nails so you can use a fork and eat with the rest of us.”

He tried to pull away. “I prefer to eat alone.”

Louvaen tugged back. She’d suspected this might be a small battle, and in battle one used any means to win. “I think your son would prefer you eat with us. Plus, these need a trim so you don’t look like you can climb the tapestries, and you’ll no longer scare Cinnia.”

“Beautiful girl but twitchy.” He peered into the basket. “You brought nippers *and* a rasp?”

She spread his fingers with hers. “I need to file them once I cut them.” She held up his index finger for a better look at the claw. “Your nails are so hard I think you can slice through leather.”

“I can punch through armor.” He eyed the hand holding the nippers suspiciously. “Have you ever used hoof nippers before?”

“No, but I imagine the general idea is the same whether you’re clipping a person’s nails or a horse’s hooves. You’ll just take better direction than a horse. Then again you are a man, so we’ll see.” She noted his booted feet, puzzled. “I didn’t think about this until now, but I’m guessing you’re more familiar with the nippers than you let on, or you’d be lame trying to wear shoes. Why don’t you keep the claws on your hands shortened as well?”

He tapped his fingers together, and the claws made a clicking sound. “Those on my feet are nuisances. These are weapons.”

That gave her pause. He’d chosen to keep them long, despite their grotesque appearance. Swords on the walls, knives on his hands—what monsters lurked here besides him? “I don’t have to cut them.”

He shrugged. “They’ll grow back.”

She positioned his hand and lifted the nippers. “Stay still so I don’t accidentally nip off a finger.”

“Gods save me,” he muttered.

“Keep praying,” she said and clamped down on the first claw. A sliver came off with a loud crack and shot past her shoulder. This may not have been one of her better ideas. She might well lose an eye for her efforts.

Louvaen glanced up at Ballard who smirked. “You can’t stop now, mistress.”

He was right, and she set to work, dodging flying bits of claws and snapping at Ballard to hold still if he so much as twitched an eyelash. By the time she finished both hands, her back ached and her fingers were stiff. She dropped the nippers into the basket and surveyed her handiwork. The claws had been cut back to his fingertips. Still macabre and strange, his hands weren’t quite so bestial in appearance.

She lifted one of his hands. “They need a filing to smooth and even the edges, but at least they no longer resemble daggers.”

For the first time since she met him, he grinned. He had good teeth, straight and white. His canines, however, gave one pause. They were longer than the others, curved and pointed much as his claws were. He must have noticed her fixed stare because the grin fled as quickly as it appeared, and his features froze into drawn lines.

“I’m not nipping or filing teeth,” she said in an attempt to lighten the mood. She lifted the rasp out of the basket. “You might need them later. Magda’s a decent cook but I wasn’t sure if that last bit of meat she served was mutton or shoe.”

Ballard didn’t respond to her banter. He sat quietly as she smoothed his nails with short strokes of the rasp. Her rhythm remained unbroken when he asked “Why don’t you fear my appearance as others do?”

Louvaen halted, still holding his hand. “Why should I? You don’t spit sewing needles when you talk, don’t shoot flames out of your nose when you breathe, and you have a fine pair of eyes when I’m not blackening them for you. What’s there to fear?”

He looked nonplussed by her answer. “You can’t tell me this face of mine isn’t fearsome.”

She resumed her filing. “I’ve said no such thing, but that wasn’t your question. You asked why I didn’t fear it.” This was delicate territory and demanded a subtle answer. “My husband was an undertaker.” Ballard’s finger twitched, and she nearly scraped off his cuticle. She scowled at him. “Keep still!”

“My apologies.”

“As I was saying—” The rasp grated across the jagged nail. “Thomas was an undertaker. One of the duties was to prepare the dead for burial, wash and dress the body if the family wasn’t up to the task. As his wife I helped with his business, and such duty fell to me.”

Ballard shifted in his seat. “I may be disfigured, mistress, but I assure you I’m not dead.”

Louvaen pointed the rasp at him. “You will be if you don’t stop fidgeting. Where was I? Oh yes, nowhere yet.” She went back to filing. “The dead came to us in many states. Some as peaceful as if they simply slept, others curled in on themselves as if they denied death. A few, those who lived violent lives and met violent deaths, were delivered to us in pieces.” Nightmares about those burials still plagued her. “The ones who died of disease were the worst. Limbs or noses rotted away. Faces distorted from suffering and whatever poison literally ate them alive.”

She glanced up to measure his reaction. He watched her, his features expressionless. “Once, and I have no idea why they did so, a family waited days before summoning Thomas and me to the house. An uncle, sick for a long time with holy fire, had died. I was helping his niece bathe the body when it burst.”

“Good gods,” Ballard breathed.

She’d returned home in only her shift and a blanket to declare to Thomas she was done, and he was on his own with the corpses. She’d then marched out to the garden and promptly emptied her stomach into one of the flowerbeds. Later, she told the family in no uncertain terms that she didn’t want her ruined dress back. “So you see, I’ve gazed upon far

worse and survived just fine.” She adopted a mock look of pity. “And I’m sorry, Lord de Sauveterre. Flux or no flux, you’ll never be as pretty Cinnia. No one will.”

He offered her a close-lipped smile, but she was satisfied. Amusement and something else—something hot which brought an equal heat to her cheeks—flared in his eyes. “Regarding the last, mistress, we must disagree.” He gestured with his chin to the hand she held in her grasp. “Are you done?”

Louvaen mentally shook herself out of the stupor taking hold. Annoyed at getting caught up in de Sauveterre’s gaze, she filed the last nail with more enthusiasm than necessary and proclaimed the job finished. Ballard raised his hands to admire the results. “What do you think?” she asked.

He peered at her over his newly exposed fingertips. “You realize once the flux returns they’ll be long again.”

She stood and brushed black dust from her skirts. Magda wouldn’t begrudge her a broom later. “Then we’ll cut and file them again.”

Ballard stood as well. Trapped between him and the stool, Louvaen could count the stitching on his leather tunic and catch the scents of evergreen and smoke on his clothes. The brief smile hovered at his lips. “I’m pleased. You have my thanks, but next time we’ll wait until after I’ve eaten. I’m fond of a hot meal.”

Louvaen lifted her chin and scooted around the stool to put some distance between them before she succumbed to the temptation to reach out and touch his jaw, feel the moving marks on his skin for herself. “No one ever died from eating cold chicken.”

“I’ll let you tell Magda that after she’s worked this past hour trying to keep mine warm.”

She winced. Magda would probably kill her for keeping the master of the house away for so long and her trapped in the kitchen waiting for him. “Come on then. I’ll need my own fork to fend off an angry cook.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



They found Magda at the hearth, stirring the contents of a pot so vigorously Louvaen wondered if whatever stewed inside was actually dead. The housekeeper glanced over her shoulder. “If it took you that long to tup her, then you can take your food with you next time. I’ve better things to do than guard your chicken while you’re flipping a skirt.”

Louvaen gasped and Ballard choked back laughter. Thank the gods Cinnia wasn’t here. All her nagging about reputations and proper courtship would fall on deaf ears if the girl even suspected Louvaen was being less than circumspect and with the master of the house. She smacked Ballard on the arm. “Show her,” she hissed.

Ballard raised his hands to display his short nails. Magda scowled. "I could have done it for you. You only had to ask."

"Ah, such is the light of Mistress Duenda I think. She doesn't wait to be asked." He raised a mocking eyebrow at Louvaen who sniffed and requested a fork from Magda.

Ballard took his seat and eyed the cutlery with disdain. "Useless bit of metal."

Louvaen passed it to him. "Not so," she said. "You keep your hands clean and guard against slicing your fingers when cutting meat. And if I chose to ram it into your eye, the tines would do a fine job of blinding you."

Magda guffawed and slapped the plate of lukewarm food in front of him. Ballard wielded the fork against the roasted bird. "Did you kill your husband, Mistress Duenda?"

"You aren't the first to ask, and no I didn't." She wouldn't laugh though she was sorely tempted, delighted by his flash of dry wit.

She smoothed her skirts, thanked Magda for her patience and inclined her head toward Ballard. "My lord." He'd have his privacy tonight, but she hoped tomorrow he'd put aside his trepidation and join them. Gavin would be pleased, and with any luck, Cinnia might no longer flinch at the sight of Ballard's hands.

"Mistress." Louvaen paused. Rush light cast jaundiced illumination across Ballard's pale features, and the black vines seemed to writhe beneath his skin. "My thanks." She nodded, certain he offered gratitude for more than her care of his hands.

She left him to return to her room and sweep up the remnants of her grooming. Three pairs of curious eyes watched her when she stepped into the solar and took her customary place before the spinning wheel.

“Where have you been?” Cinnia eyed her from her seat at a corner table she shared with Ambrose. Sheaves of parchment shared space with several inkbottles and finely threaded brushes. The two had begun work on a grimoire of Ambrose’s potions. Louvaen hoped the sorcerer appreciated Cinnia’s creation when it was done. She’d been trained by the finest illuminator and binder. Louvaen had no doubt the final product would be a thing of art beyond its more prosaic purposes. Gavin sat on a short stool, almost hugging Cinnia’s knee, and stropped the edge of a knife across a strip of oiled leather with the hands of a lover.

“I was in the kitchen with Magda.” She didn’t lie if one didn’t peer too closely. Unfortunately, Ambrose always did.

“And before that?” he asked.

Louvaen gave him a look she hoped conveyed a very specific, if vulgar message and began dressing the distaff with a bundle of flax tow. “Not that it’s your concern, but I was in my chamber trimming nails.” Again, not so much a lie as a careful play on words that begged assumptions, hopefully wrong ones. Her luck held. The three lost interest. Time spent with Ballard was no secret; she’d done nothing illicit or scandalous. She just didn’t want to answer the many questions Cinnia would ask or confront Ambrose’s suspicious gaze any more than necessary.

She finished dressing the distaff and spun a leader cord of tow over her thigh before threading it through the wheel’s

bobbin. The tow was not as fine on the draw as Joan's marvelous flax tare, but Louvaen had promised yarn for dish towels, rope and aprons. The creak of her treadle harmonized with Gavin's back-and-forth sweep of his blade across the strop and lulled her into ruminations about Ketach Tor's scarred lord.

Ballard was nothing like her husband in either appearance or disposition. Thomas Duenda had been a giant of a man who'd earned the nickname Ursus with his unruly mane of long brown hair and an equally untamed beard. He loved to eat, drink, laugh and bed his prickly-tempered wife. He was a wild contrast to the melancholy solemnity of his chosen profession, and Louvaen had adored him. When he died, Louvaen thought someone had reached into her chest, bashed a few of her ribs along the way, and pulled her heart out of her body. Three years on, she still sometimes wept for him.

The lord of Ketach Tor seemed more suited for the role of undertaker. Somber and reflective, Ballard said little but those expressive dark eyes revealed many things. She pictured him at the kitchen table and again in the solar as flax drafted through her nimble fingers, spinning into linen thread with the turn of the wheel and flyer. He gave no indication that the torture he suffered during a flux bothered him once it subsided or that its warping effects were anything more than a mild annoyance. When he asked why she wasn't afraid of him, she'd sensed only puzzlement in the question. Louvaen knew Gavin far better than she knew his father; however, it was Ballard who drew her, beguiled her with a quiet power and the surety that while the flux might send him to his knees, he'd never break beneath its yoke. In this, he was very much like

Thomas. Strength without cruelty, pride without arrogance and an iron perseverance.

A chair leg scraping softly across the floor snagged her attention away from thoughts of de Sauveterre. She caught Cinnia trying her best to inch her chair closer to Gavin so he might rest his head more comfortably on her knee. The strop lay forgotten on the floor, and the knife rested across his thigh. “De Lovet,” Louvaen said softly so as not to startle him. “You cannot sleep with my sister. You can’t sleep on her either.”

For the first time since she’d taken up residence at Ketach Tor, she and Ambrose exchanged a smile that was more than a hostile baring of teeth as Cinnia jerked her knee from under Gavin’s head. He fell off the stool and almost stabbed himself in the foot.

“For gods’ sake, Lou, couldn’t you just ask him politely to move?” Cinnia glared daggers at her sister. “Thank you for embarrassing me!”

Louvaen never ceased her spinning. “Be more circumspect then.” She frowned at Gavin who’d found his feet and hovered protectively at Cinnia’s side. “I think it fair to say she’s the only innocent in this chamber, de Lovet. You know better than to try such foolishness, especially with me here.”

He might not resemble his father, but Gavin had inherited much of his demeanor and confident reserve. He bowed and met her gaze unflinchingly. “A lapse, Mistress Duenda. I meant no offense to you and especially none to Cinnia.” He moved his stool a good distance away from Cinnia and resumed his seat along with the stropping.

Louvaen ignored Cinnia's hot stare and her efforts to burn holes through her with it. The solar returned to its quiet if not its tranquility, and before long Cinnia excused herself for the evening, promising Ambrose she'd meet with him the next day to continue their work together on the grimoire. She offered her hand to Gavin who kissed it lightly and wished her goodnight. To Louvaen she snapped "Don't stop spinning. I can find my way to my room without you." She swept out of the solar on a tide of offended dignity.

Ambrose rolled the loose parchments, tucked them under his arm and rose. Louvaen stiffened at his mocking smile. "Best sleep with one eye open tonight, mistress. The knife in the back often comes from those we trust most." He bowed to her and Gavin and followed Cinnia into the corridor.

Except for the rhythmic clack of the treadle under Louvaen's foot and the slide-snick sound of Gavin's blade on the strop, the room was silent. She'd have to apologize to Cinnia and curb her scolding in the future. Gavin wasn't Jimenin who needed a club to the head to get the point. Cinnia's most ardent suitor had always been courteous and restrained, earning Louvaen's grudging respect. She'd grown to like him when he displayed an interest in her sister for more than her beauty. That liking had been severely tested when he made off with her to Ketach Tor. Even knowing his reasons were noble and the results beneficial to her entire family, Louvaen still found it difficult to warm to him.

Jealousy, a small voice whispered in her mind. *You're jealous. She's turned from you for guidance to someone else, and you can't let go.* The line of flax drew too long and broke. Louvaen cursed under her breath.

“Mistress?” Gavin halted in his task.

She waved a hand at him and drafted additional tow to twist with the line. “Tis nothing. A broken line and easy to fix.” The treadle took up its clacking tune once more.

“I gave my word, Mistress Duenda. What more can I do to convince you I hold Cinnia in the highest regard?” Gavin’s gaze, no longer yellow now the flux had ebbed, brimmed with frustration.

“Marry her.”

“I intend to,” he said. “If she’ll have me. I don’t think she’s ready yet.”

As much as she wanted to argue, Louvaen had to agree. Cinnia adored Gavin; that was obvious—but enough to marry him? His idea of courtship through the winter was a sound one. He had no competition from other suitors, no distractions from threats like Jimenin and plenty of time to show her his worth, not only in possessions but also in character. Another girl might not wait and leap at the chance to wed such a fine example of manhood as Gavin de Lovet. He was handsome—almost equal in male beauty to Cinnia’s feminine charms. Cinnia, however, had been raised with the guarded Louvaen, and despite a lapse or two, wasn’t hasty with her decisions. Gavin would have to work to win her.

Louvaen spun the new line, watching as it filled the spool. “I’m a merchant’s daughter, so let me put this in merchant’s terms. If I discover you’ve sampled the wares before you’ve bought, I will kill you with my bare hands.” She ceased spinning and turned her full focus on him. “And now you know where you stand.”

His expression solemn, Gavin nodded once. “I’ve always known, Mistress Duenda, and I believe you.” He stropped the knife a few more times before gathering it and the strop together. He stood and bowed. “Mistress, I bid you good night.” He passed Ballard on his way out. “Father,” he said, “I’ll meet you in the morning for sparring. He eyed Louvaen. “I need the practice.”

Ballard watched him leave before entering the room. “Did you two have a good conversation?”

Her foot never broke rhythm on the treadle. “We did. I threatened to kill him if he compromised Cinnia.” She tried not to smile as his eyebrows rose, and he dropped into the chair across from her.

“Ah, you’re getting to know each other better; excellent.”

She did laugh then. “You’ve no regard for your son’s continued health?”

Ballard stretched his legs out in his usual pose and folded his hands across his midriff. “His health is of great concern to me. I also have great faith in his ability to look out for himself.” His gaze sharpened. “Something I think you lack with your sister.”

Louvaen snapped a second line but this time gave up the spinning altogether. “What do you know of it?” she muttered, affronted by his observation.

“Enough to know Cinnia Hallis is as intelligent and sensible as she is beautiful. There’s not a person in this castle who doesn’t believe she can make sound decisions if given the chance—except you.”

“That is not true.” Louvaen stood and shoved the spinning wheel aside hard enough it almost toppled.

Ballard remained in his relaxed position, his expression calm. “Isn’t it? I’ve had bitch hounds guard pups with less ferocity than you do that girl.”

She almost trod on his toes, forcing him to straighten and draw in his legs until she stood at his knees, hands fisted on her hips. “When did protection become a bad thing, de Sauveterre?” Louvaen wanted to strike him, crack his nose a second time for his criticism. At the same time, she wanted to weep at the idea he was probably right.

“When it smothers the one you’re trying to protect.” A pale hand reached out and gently stroked one of the folds of her dress before drawing away. Ballard’s eyes had turned so dark, Louvaen could no longer discern his pupils from his irises. “I can tell you from bitter experience, mistress, if you don’t let her go you’ll lose her altogether.”

Louvaen swallowed hard and willed away the tears. “She terrifies me. All that could happen...”

“But hasn’t.”

“Because I protect her.”

He shook his head. “No, because you taught her well. She told us you raised her since she was five. Acknowledge her judgment and credit yourself for strengthening it so she can hold her own without you holding her hand.”

Louvaen bowed her head before meeting Ballard’s gaze. “I’m not saying you’re right, but I’ll take your words into consideration.”

The familiar tight smile curved his mouth. “Fair enough. Besides, I wouldn’t want to be responsible for you bursting into flame because you acknowledged I might be right.”

She harrumphed. “Very funny.” The offer to read to him hovered on the tip of her tongue and faded as she watched the black vine that had rested below his eye suddenly move. It climbed the outer curve of the eyelid, bisected his eyebrow and disappeared into his hairline. She inhaled a tight breath.

“What’s wrong?” The creases between Ballard’s brow were of his own making, etched from years of habitual frowning or concentration. Louvaen focused on them instead of the serpentine scar that moved of its own free will.

“One of those black marks just slid across your face and into your scalp. You didn’t feel it?”

A hand reached up and touched the spot where her gaze had rested. “No.” He shrugged and his grim expression told her this was nothing new.

The markings were grotesque, macabre and Louvaen wondered how Ballard kept from flaying himself in a bid to dig them out of his body. “They don’t cause you any pain?”

“Not now.” For the first time since she met him, he turned his face away from her. “Only during the flux’s high tide. Then each one makes its presence known.”

She shuddered and fought to suppress the urge to scratch at the crawling sensation that traveled down her arms and legs. No wonder the man howled in his cell like some poor beast being hacked to bits.

“Now you fear to look at me.”

She had a good view of his profile. A hard jaw and long nose, the compressed mouth and high curve of his cheekbone, marred by the deep broadhead scars and raised spirals at his temples. He reminded her of the hermetic monks who lived at Andagora Skete. Austere, reclusive, he would have made a fine monk. Louvaen discarded the notion. The walls of the great hall gleamed from the polished steel of numerous weapons. At one time this man had been a devotee of war, not prayer.

“I’m not the one who’s looking away.” She pressed her knees against his. “May I touch you?”

He visibly jerked in his chair. “What?”

“May I touch your face?” She didn’t think he’d be more surprised if she’d asked him permission to fire a barrage of cannon balls into the castle fortifications. “I promise not to hit you in the nose.”

Her quip didn’t gain her a smile, but Ballard nodded and parted his knees so that she might draw nearer to him. Louvaen leaned in and he closed his eyes. She envied his dark lashes, thick and straight. The black runes and vines twined around his neck and scripted along his hairline. Louvaen touched the one that slithered. The scar squirmed beneath her fingertips, icy to the touch. She crushed the instinct to snatch her hand back and followed the vine’s track across his eyelid and forehead. Her fingers slid into his hair, noting its suppleness as wavy strands caressed her knuckles. She mapped the scar where it crossed with another in his scalp and took its path. Soon both her hands stroked through his hair, over his face and along the rigid tendons in his neck. A pulse drummed a heavy beat under his jaw. Though the scars lay

like frozen threads under his flesh, the unmarred expanses of skin flared hot beneath her fingers. He burned as if with fever, and she burned for him.

The sweet tingling from touching his face spread across her body, strongest at her breasts and between her thighs. She traced one of the runic symbols near the hollow of his throat, her palm curved over his collarbone. So beguiled was she by her exploration, she hardly noticed the staccato hitch in his breathing.

“I am in hell,” he said in a cracked voice.

Louvaen recoiled, stumbled against her stool and almost fell on her backside before managing to right herself. The heat of a blush cascaded over her face and chest, washing her in a mortifying fire. “Forgive me.” Her voice sounded thin to her ears. “I didn’t mean to take such liberties.”

Ballard sat as still as if hewn from stone. His hands gripped the chair arms so tight that his black nails had grayed. He stared at his feet instead of her and spoke in the same strained tones. “Good night, Mistress Duenda.”

She bowed, dismissed. “De Sauveterre.” The urge to run nearly overwhelmed her, but she forced herself to walk at a sedate pace and shut the door behind her. The stone wall offered only chilly comfort as she leaned against it, gasping for air. Gods’ knickers, what was wrong with her? Obsessed with protecting Cinnia’s virtue from Gavin, she’d thrown caution out the window and found herself consumed by an attraction to his father. “You daft nitwit,” she muttered. “What were you thinking?”

“Who are you talking to?”

Louvaen nearly leapt out of her shoes. Cinnia stood before her, holding a candle and bundled in her night clothes and a robe. “Cinnia,” she hissed. “You scared me half to death. Quit sneaking up on me.”

The girl looked less than apologetic. “I wasn’t sneaking. You were so busy talking to yourself, you didn’t notice me. What has you so jumpy?” She glanced at the solar’s door. “Anyone still in there?”

Thankful the hall’s dimness hid her blush, Louvaen waved a hand in what she hoped Cinnia took as casual dismissal. “Only de Sauveterre. I offered to read to him, but he preferred his solitude. I was on my way to bed.”

“After you had a conversation with yourself?” Cinnia gazed at Louvaen as if she were moonstruck.

“I’m just thinking aloud.” She steered the topic back to Cinnia. “What are you doing out here in your night rail and robe?”

“Waiting for you. I have something to show you.” She practically danced in place. “I’ve been waiting all day. You were helping Magda make candles and then churning butter for Clarimond. You hate churning butter.”

“I’m only here by his lordship’s leave, my love. I’ll muck out the stables if they ask and not complain. Now what’s so important that it can’t wait until daylight?”

Cinnia reached for her hand. “Come see. I discovered them this morning while I was exploring the castle.”

Louvaen stepped back. “Them?”

Cinnia captured her anyway and tugged. “No more questions. Let’s go.”

“Are you certain we can’t do this in the morning?”

“No. I don’t think I was supposed to find these.”

Louvaen halted their steps. “You didn’t enter any rooms forbidden to us, did you?”

“No. I was walking the corridors waiting for you. I think this castle must have hundreds of them, and I swear they change directions sometimes.”

Louvaen scowled at the notion but didn’t counter it. The castle had a strangeness about it—places where torchlight flickered one way while the shadows it cast scampered another; stairs ended in opposite directions without ever turning. The walls echoed in tight places instead of cavernous ones, and she’d once clearly heard a tapestry in Cinnia’s bower whisper a poem she knew from childhood.

She’d said nothing, first blaming her suspicious nature for seeing treachery and trickery where there was none and then on her sensitivity to sorcery. Cinnia’s remark validated her impressions but didn’t relieve her mind. Ketach Tor, saturated in wild magic, twined and bent around them—a living entity itself.

She squeezed Cinnia’s hand. “Lead on, and let’s make it quick. It’s colder out here than a warty witch’s kiss in a snowstorm.”

Cinnia choked out a laugh. “Lou! Your mother would rise up from her grave and strap you for saying such a thing.”

“Who do you think taught our papa that little gem?”

They laughed together, and Louvaen promised herself she'd be less harsh with the person she loved best in the world.

She followed Cinnia down three corridors, a flight of stairs and a small mezzanine before reaching a short hallway so dark Louvaen couldn't see anything beyond the corona of Cinnia's candle. Cinnia raised the light. "Look."

The bottom edge of a framed picture hung just above Louvaen's eye level. She took the candle from Cinnia, raising it for a better view. The flame's light wavered across a portrait of a young Gavin, no more than nine or ten. The head-and-shoulder portrait depicted the boy in a white shirt and black doublet of embossed velvet. Even at that early age, Louvaen saw hints of the fine bone structure beneath the babyish feature. His hair was almost white, not yet darkened to its current golden color, but the green eyes were as calm and mysterious, looking back at the viewer as if he held all the secrets of the world in his gaze. She saw nothing of Ballard in him.

"He was a handsome boy then as well."

"Look at this next one." Cinnia pulled her a few steps further down the hall.

Louvaen raised the candle a second time. Another bust portrait. Even under a powdery film of dust, the woman portrayed was breathtaking. Gavin's resemblance to her was unquestionable, down to the wide cheekbones, straight nose and perfectly curved mouth. He had inherited his mother's hair as well but not the eyes. Her eyes were cerulean, and the artist had somehow managed not only to capture their deep color but also a certain brittleness. She wore a sumptuous, outdated gown of silk encrusted with jewels and decorated in

the finest lace. The design showed off a graceful neck and smoothly sloped shoulders. Her headdress, like her gown, reflected a style Louvaen had only seen in ancestral portraits, and she wondered why she'd chosen to pose in such antiquated garb. The clothes were beautiful, no doubt: a fitting match for the woman who wore them. She easily matched Cinnia in looks, but where Cinnia possessed a warm beauty, hers lacked any vitality. She reminded Louvaen of a diamond—cold, glittering, equally hard.

“De Lovet’s mother.”

“I’d bet my favorite ribbons on it. Gavin told me her name was Isabeau, and she carried the title of most beautiful woman in six kingdoms.” Cinnia paused. “I wonder if she was lonely having that kind of fame.”

Louvaen’s heart lurched in her chest at the melancholy notes in Cinnia’s question. Beauty was not always a blessing. The candlelight caught and illuminated the corner of another frame and the two moved on. Louvaen almost dropped their meager light when she saw what it revealed. “My gods,” she whispered.

“You recognize him? Who is it? A king? A famous knight?” Cinnia’s voice pitched higher with excitement at her sister’s exclamation.

“De Sauveterre,” she murmured.

Cinnia gasped. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” As dazzled as Cinnia had been by Isabeau’s portrait, so was Louvaen captivated by Ballard’s.

This was Ballard de Sauveterre—of that she had no doubt, but Ballard before the flux, before the strange markings,

sunken eyes and pallid skin. Before the suffering had sculpted the deep crevices and brackets into the corners of his eyes and mouth. His features were as unyielding then as they were now, but they were painted in the burnished tones of a man who lived in the sun. Even his hair, more soot than pewter in the painting, gleamed with ruddy highlights. Unlike the portraits of his wife and child, his was a full length work. The artist had portrayed him armored, standing in three-quarter view. He held a sword in one hand and the reins of a lightly barded roan courser in the other.

She'd seen family portraits painted in a similar style in the homes of lesser noblemen. Those men had experienced more action in a counting house or in the beds of their mistresses than on a battlefield, but it was a popular thing to have oneself painted as a warrior knight of old, dressed in armor with a prancing stallion to take one off to the glories of war. This portrait had the horse and the warrior, but the similarities ended there. Instead of a posed stance with green fields or drapes of tapestry spilling over side tables in the background, the artist had painted Ballard as if he were just leaving for battle. The armor was not the full harness of plate. Instead he wore a knee length mail hauberk over a padded gambeson with a black and gray parted surcoat over those. He held a sword in one hand, and Louvaen suspected the blade was no prop but a weapon that had drawn rivers of blood in its wielder's grip. Ballard gazed at the viewer as if impatient to be done with such nonsense, and those dark eyes burned with a ruthlessness that told a tale not of war's glory but of its savagery.

Cinnia shivered. "Has he changed much from that portrait?"

“The wild magic has altered him some. Scarred and washed him pale. He’s younger there, and his hair is darker. You’d still recognize him though.”

“And he has claws now.”

Louvaen chuckled. “He has claws, but I’ve done a fine job of trimming them. Maybe now you can look upon him.”

Cinnia crossed her arms. “I meant no insult.”

“I know. So does he.” Louvaen sensed an unspoken question and used the candle to illuminate her sister’s face. “What?”

The girl arched an eyebrow. “I think you’ve grown to like him, Lou.”

Louvaen’s eyes narrowed. Good gods, the last thing she needed was her sister trying to play matchmaker. “He’s been a good host to us.”

“That’s all? He’s simply a good host?” Cinnia eyed her suspiciously. “Nothing else?”

“No. Why?”

Cinnia shrugged. “I just wondered.” Louvaen exhaled a silent breath of relief when she turned her attention back to the portrait. “Not nearly as handsome as Gavin, but there’s a presence there. I wouldn’t want to cross such a man.”

Louvaen followed her gaze. “No wise person would.” She passed the candle back to Cinnia. “We better get to our rooms. It’s late, and I’m frozen to the bone.”

At Cinnia’s door, Louvaen embraced her sister and kissed her forehead. “You know I love you, yes?”

Cinnia hugged her hard in return. “Yes, and I love you too. I just wish you trusted me as much as you love me.”

Louvaen stroked a hand over the girl’s thick braid. “The flaw is mine,” she said. “I’ll bargain with you. Give me your patience, and I’ll give you my faith.”

Cinnia grinned. “Somehow I think my part of the bargain will be easier to uphold than yours, but I’m willing.”

In the spirit of their bargain , Louvaen didn’t wait in the hall until Cinnia entered her room but slipped into her own first. The fire in the hearth had burned low, and she stoked it with the poker. Her teeth chattered hard enough to make her head ache as she dressed for bed. The sheets were like ice, and she huddled beneath her mountain of blankets, shivering until her body heat managed to chase away the chill. She’d be lucky to find sleep before dawn. Each time she closed her eyes, she saw one man and two faces—the younger Ballard, not yet disfigured but with a demeanor so cold it made the gooseflesh rise on her skin and the Ballard of now. Not so cold yet so much more maimed and with that same powerful aura captured in the portrait.

She recalled the feel of him under her hands, the frigid lace of vines and symbols interspersed with tracts of hot skin, the sharp angles of his cheekbones and smoothness of his eyebrows. His hair had been thick; soft dark waves interwoven with coarser silver ones. Louvaen sighed and burrowed deeper beneath the blankets, wondering how it might feel to have him beside her. If his body were as hot as the skin of his face and neck, she’d be in a sweat in no time.

“Madness.” She slapped one of her pillows of her head, refusing to think more on the potential of such a scenario.

“I am in hell,” he’d said in a voice almost as tortured as the cries she once heard him bellow in a cell.

He wasn’t alone.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Ballard faced his king with Cederic of Granthing beside him. This day had been coming since the two men fostered with Isabeau's father years earlier. Decades of antipathy, childhood resentments and adult ambitions had culminated in this moment. Ballard was only surprised his ongoing war with Cederic would be fought in judicial combat instead of a battle between his forces and Granthing's on an open field. Neither man selected a lesser knight to represent him, and Ballard chose death over first blood to decide the winner.

King Waleran was not been pleased. Ballard of Ketach Tor was his most valuable margrave—loyal, efficient and formidable in both battle and court. Like his father and

grandfather before him, he protected the eastern borders of the kingdom against the enemy state of Barad with a capable hand. Granthing, of lesser political stature but equal prowess in war had proven himself the finest of warriors. Cederic had rebelled against his lesser status and sought to replace Ballard as margrave. Waleran needed both men, but the law held fast. As a nobleman, Granthing claimed the right of trial by battle. As the defendant, Ballard chose the punishment for the vanquished.

The morning sun had barely broken the horizon, but a small crowd of administrators and members of the royal family with their retainers were up and gathered beneath awnings to watch the proceedings. A dense fog lapped at Ballard's feet and dripped thin rivulets of condensation off his aketon and the steel plates sewn over his vambraces. The roped arena behind him wasn't big enough to hold four horses but large enough for him and Granthing as they fought for the one thing that had pitted them against each other since they were pages in the same household – the Ketach Tor demesne.

“Read the charge,” the king commanded his crier.

The crier unrolled a scroll and read the charges to the crowd. “Cederic, Baron of Granthing lays the charges of forgery and theft against Ballard, Margrave of Ketach Tor over the rights to the dower properties of Isabeau of Leath now Margravina of Ketach Tor. The plaintiff bears witness that the betrothal contract set out between Dwennon, sire of Ballard and Abelard, sire of Isabeau is false and therefore void. Cederic, Baron of Granthing claims possession of a true betrothal contract between Abelard and Mercutian, sire of Cederic which cedes these properties and the hand of Isabeau of Leath to Cederic at the time the contract was signed,

thereby making the marriage between Ballard and Isabeau null and void and the dower properties no longer under the demesne of Ketach Tor.”

The king looked to Ballard. “Margrave, how do you plead?”

“Innocent of the charges.” Even if he weren’t, Ballard had no intention of turning over Isabeau’s dower lands to Cederic. The properties were not only fertile and profitable but also strategic, offering his armies clear passage to the borders in times of defense of the kingdom. Had they been nothing more than rocky terrain of scattered scrub grass and no water, he’d still fight for them. To cede anything of the Ketach Tor demesne meant a constant battle against future claimants of all stripes. He’d be so busy engaging in judicial combat to hold on to his lands, he’d lose them to invaders. Granthing, with his short-sighted ambition and envy of the Margraves of Ketach Tor, had to die.

King Waleran accepted the charge and the defense and proclaimed the rules of engagement. “Battle will begin at full sunrise and end at sunset. As in melee, you have the right of recess and the safety it offers so you may repair weapons and armor and attend wounds. Judgment will favor the victor, and the vanquished shall be executed. Do you still agree to terms?”

Both men answered with firm “Ayes.”

The sun crested the horizon, and the king called out, “Begin.”

Ballard stared at his opponent before they entered the arena. “You’re a fool, Granthing. You’ve the favor of the king and a sizable demesne of your own. While Isabeau cannot be

your wife, I've no issue if she wishes to be your leman and bear you sons after mine is born."

Cederic chuckled, a low sound that slowly crescendoed into a hearty laugh. He wiped tears from his eyes and offered Ballard a wolfish grin full of contempt. "What uses have I for a pack of sniveling bastards and a tart whose only value is the land you now claim as yours?" He swung under the ropes cordoning off the arena. The grin was gone but not the contempt. "You're welcome to her and however many brats she whelps for you."

Ballard's annoyance over what had been a simple land dispute transformed into a gut-roiling rage. He clenched his sword pommel until his knuckles bled white. Isabeau loathed the very sight of him and never lost the opportunity to declare she couldn't wait to rid herself of his get and leave Ketach Tor. He accepted her enmity without retaliation. She'd kept her part of the bargain by marrying him without struggle and accepting him in her bed long enough to become pregnant. He had intended to honor his and let her go. The touch of guilt he felt at breaking that pledge fled at Granthing's words. For all that Isabeau would dance on his grave if Ballard fell in this match, she didn't deserve Granthing and his contempt. Ballard intended to take his head. She'd hate him until death and beyond for doing so. He only hoped she might realize in the future that her perfect lover had been a corrupt mongrel and learn to love someone else.

"She loves you, Granthing," he said in a low voice.

They faced each other. The clang of bucklers against the flats of blades rang in the morning stillness as the two men saluted.

Cederic laughed again and raised his sword. "They all do, Margrave. So what?"

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"I see the she-wolf hasn't torn you apart yet protecting her pup." Ambrose spoke from his place at the stall door. The tiny bits of straw stirred up from the draft swirling through the stable fluttered around him, a few pieces catching in his hair.

Ballard didn't look up from saddling the gray courser that would take him into the woods for a long overdue hunt. "It's Gavin who has to worry about an attack from her, not me." He adjusted the cinch strap under the horse's belly. "What are you doing here?"

"On my way to check the sheep. Who doesn't look forward to freezing their bollocks off shepherding animals dumber than a loaf of bread?"

"Wolves in the castle, sheep in the pastures. I think one easier to guard than the other."

Ambrose sniffed. "The shrew is all bluster and no bite."

As a recipient of Louvaen's particular brand of bluster, Ballard shook his head. "I wouldn't test it." He checked the cinch strap and adjusted a stirrup. "They've been here more than a month, and Gavin has been relentless in his courtship. If he and Cinnia marry, no one will say it's a union lacking warmth. A blind man would have a hard time overlooking Cinnia Hallis's love for him, yet I feel no different from when she first came to Ketach Tor. The curse still thrives despite her affection."

Ambrose rubbed a hand over his face. "If you don't count the horn he's wearing in the front of his breeches these

days, I don't think Gavin feels any different either.”

“So the ‘true love’s kiss’ myth is just that.”

“Aye. Nothing so ordered and easy could ever trump wild magic born of vengeance. Besides, with as often as the boy is sticking his tongue down the fair Cinnia’s throat, every curse within eight leagues would be banished if a simple kiss actually worked.”

Ballard peered past his sorcerer’s shoulder to the open door behind him. “Best keep your voice down. If Louvaen hears you, I’ll be picking forks out of Gavin for days.”

“Oh ho! Louvaen is it?” Ambrose waggled his eyebrows. “Your protector of virgins is fighting a losing war with those two.”

Ballard strapped his crossbow to the saddle and ignored Ambrose’s questioning expression. “That may not be a bad thing. Maybe instead of true love’s kiss, it’s true love’s swiving in the hayloft.”

This time Ambrose glanced behind him. “You might want to follow your own advice and lower your voice. I won’t much enjoy picking forks out of you.” He moved further into the stables. “No curse would be worth its salt if a swiving could break it. There’s a detail or a set process—something we’re missing.”

The courser snorted and stamped a hoof, impatient with his rider’s preparations. Ballard patted the animal’s neck. Magnus was one of only two horses he’d kept. An agile mount with the instincts of a predator more than prey, he’d carried his master into war, defended him better than most vassals and rode to the hunt as enthusiastically as the hunters.

He never developed an aversion to Ballard the way the other horses did as the curse changed him. Ballard wondered if the stallion was as weary of the long years as he was.

“You think as a magician of the right hand path, Ambrose. Wild magic is left hand power.”

The other shrugged. “Unpredictable, inconstant, but there’s a thread of reason in all things. I just need to find the thread.”

Ballard led Magnus out of his stall and swung into the saddle. “I’ve said it before; we don’t have much time left.” He snagged the lug spear from where it leaned against a nearby post.

Ambrose blew out a sigh, setting the splinters of straw trapped in his hair to quivering. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

Magnus’s hooves clopped a muted rhythm on the straw-covered floor as Ballard guided him toward the door. “Tell Magda to ready her knives and troughs for the morning. I’m after boar tonight.”

Gone were the days when the hunts drew spectacle as festive as any tournament. Then, Ketach Tor overflowed with people—servants and yeomen, huntsmen with the quiet, scent-tracking lymers and the big wolfhounds straining at their leashes. Magda and a small army of women and pages laid out a breakfast at assembly, with the knights hardly able to choke down their food from the excitement of the upcoming chase. Now it was just him and sometimes Gavin who hunted the hart and boar—a deadly endeavor when hunting the latter, but the animal yielded a lot of meat, and Ballard considered it worth the risk to hunt alone.

Snow cascaded in dancing whorls as he guided Magnus into the trees. The black hush didn't mask every sound, and Ballard listened to the occasional squeak of a dormouse or the skitter of claws as a marten climbed amongst the high branches of a birch. Unlike the great hunts of the past, he hunted in the small hours. The curse's progression had done much to maim him but also gave an unexpected boon or two. He could see as well in darkness as in daylight. The animal eye shine that startled Louvaen each time she caught his gaze in dim light was a small price to pay for the ability to hunt at any time.

He tracked a path through heavy underbrush, picking his way toward a mud wallow known to attract wild pigs. Trampled tracks of underbrush and bits of rotten tree trunks torn to shreds scattered the ground. Ballard noted teeth marks across the trunk of one tree and mud build-up on several others where a boar had rubbed to scratch off dried mud and parasites. A distinct and foul odor wafted to his nostrils. Magnus snorted at the scent. Ears pricked forward, he came to an abrupt halt. Ballard trusted his courser and waited, spear hefted.

The animal's instincts held true as a stout black shape burst out of a clot of undergrowth and shot across the path of horse and rider to crash into another patch of bush and bramble. Ballard didn't need to touch his heels to Magnus's sides before the horse leapt after the boar, and the chase was on. Magnus galloped through the narrow spaces between trees and cleared gullies without missing a step. Ballard crouched, bent and sometimes rode half off the saddle to avoid decapitation by a low hanging branch. He held the reins loosely and leaned into the horse's sharp turns as they chased

down their quarry. For now, his job was to simply stay in the saddle while Magnus did the work of running the boar to exhaustion.

They cornered the creature in a swale where the snow gathered deep and slowed the chase. It turned to face them, breath steaming from a twitching snout. A big male possessing a lethal pair of curved tusks guaranteed to slice or puncture, the boar lowered its head, swinging it from side to side. A line of bristles spiked down its back from shoulders to tail. Foam cascaded from its mouth, jaws popping as the sharp cutters met the duller whetters. Magnus's muscles bunched beneath the saddle. Ballard took his cue, bracing the spear under his arm and against his side for the inevitable confrontation. As before, the horse's instincts were on the mark. The boar charged, barreling toward them in a violent surge of speed.

Undaunted, Magnus met the charge. Ballard gripped the horse's sides with tense thighs, leaned down and aligned the spear, aiming low. The impact almost jolted him off the saddle's low cantle and numbed his arm from shoulder to fingertips as he rammed the spear into the boar's chest, lifting it off its feet. The spearhead sank through muscle and bone down to the lug bar. Magnus's forward momentum flung the skewered animal backward until it struck the trunk of a birch tree. Ballard let go of the spear as they thundered past, gradually slowing Magnus until they swung a wide arc and trotted back to the kill. They stopped alongside the squealing boar. Cloven hooves churned air as it struggled to rise. Ballard dismounted, patted the snorting Magnus, and unsheathed his sword.

Fatally wounded and unable to rise, the boar was still dangerous, those curving tusks as sharp as flaying knives. Ballard approached cautiously, placed the blade against the beast's neck and sliced through the jugular. The boar went still as blood spilled across the snow, black in the winter moonlight. The smell would draw wolves from every corner of the woods, and Ballard didn't relish fighting off a hungry pack lean from winter's bare larders. He put the sword aside, braced a foot against the animal's chest and yanked the spear free.

He field-dressed the carcass to the ululation of wolf song growing ever closer, then used a rope to winch the boar high enough to lower onto Magnus's back. The courser offered only a token grunt as Ballard lowered the boar and strapped it to the saddle. He stroked the horse's neck. "You're a fine lad." He retrieved the lug spear, grabbed the reins and led Magnus through the trees on foot. His courser was strong, but the boar was heavy, even gutted. They returned to the castle, accompanied by howls. The moon rode low amongst the trees though the sky still hung black and sparkled with stars.

He met Gavin in the bailey, a piebald jennet named Sparrow saddled and outfitted for hunting. His son eyed the dead boar. "Well mine was a wasted effort. I'll put Sparrow up." He subjected Ballard to a once-over. "How much of that blood is yours?"

"None. Your faith in me heartening." He returned Gavin's inspection, noting the hunting garb and the weaponry tied to Sparrow's saddle. "Thinking to rescue a gaffer in the forest?"

Gavin grinned. “Considering I beat you in sparring yesterday, I thought you could use the help, old man.”

Ballard tossed the spear to Gavin. “Keep warbling, boy. I’ll flatten your sorry arse in this bailey and feed you to the wolves lurking outside.”

He guided Magnus to a cleared area of the bailey where a gambrel and pulley hoist had been set in place alongside a table laid out with a variety of knives and hand axes. Troughs filled with salt and snow and two large barrels waited nearby. He and Gavin winched the carcass off the horse until it hung upside down preparation for skinning. He sent Magnus off with Gavin and Sparrow to the stables for unsaddling and a rubdown.

When Gavin returned, both men stripped to the waist. Butchering a hog was hot, dirty work, even in winter. The frigid air felt good on his bare skin, especially after the long walk from the forest.

“Did you bring back the liver?”

Magda marched toward him garbed in a dress that was nearly rags. She’d bundled her hair in an equally ratty kerchief. A retinue of women in similar dress followed, including Louvaen and Cinnia. The younger sister barely glanced at him before her eyes settled on Gavin. She stopped short, almost pitching into the snow when Louvaen stumbled into her. A wrestling match of flailing arms and elbows ensued until the two managed to right each other.

Louvaen brushed down her threadbare skirt and glared at Cinnia. “What are you doing?” Her scowl rested on Gavin. “Oh for gods’ sake, if you’re going to stare at him like a

lovesick cow, at least get out of the way so we don't trample you."

She went silent as her eyes met Ballard's. She didn't stop, but her long strides slowed as her gaze sharpened, sweeping over him from the top of his head to the tips of his boots, pausing to touch on his shoulders, chest and midriff. Ballard refused to shrug the shirt back over his head. In the weeks since she and her sister had taken up residence in his home, Louvaen had never averted her eyes from him. She didn't do so now. Still, some small part wished she didn't have to look upon him half dressed. The vines, runes and etchings marring his face and neck ran wild and numerous across his torso, front to back, and were joined by a map of scars and lacerations that revealed a life of hard fighting. He'd been stabbed, speared, slashed and gored on various occasions, most often by enemy knights; once by a boar and once by his wife. He didn't count the broken bones that had been set and healed. Ambrose had declared more than once he had the luck of a dozen men to still be alive.

Those gray eyes darkened for a moment, and her mouth, which he hungered to devour, curved into a small smile. She brushed past him, pausing long enough to whisper in his ear. "You can't fool us, my lord. You're colder than you let on." Her gaze dropped to his chest before she met his eyes again. The smile still hovered, accompanied now by a blush.

Puzzled, Ballard watched as she took a spot at the table and claimed a butchering knife. The cold didn't bother him, and he often slept in his chamber with the covers thrown to the foot of the bed, the fire out and the window open to the weather. He glanced down to where her gaze had rested. His nipples had tightened to pale, tiny nubs surrounded by

gooseflesh. A low chuckle rumbled in his throat. He was on the verge of following her to the table and whispering in her ear that if she was so concerned, she was more than welcome to warm him. However, another demanded his attention and he had learned long ago to ignore Magda at his peril.

“Did you bring back the liver?” she repeated.

He gestured to the leather bag holding the haslet. “Your delicacies await. The heart’s in the pouch as well.”

The housekeeper rubbed her hands together. “That’ll make a fine stew.” She joined the others, claiming a spot between Clarimond and Cinnia. “Let’s get on with it before I freeze my fingers off. At least we’ll have fresh meat tonight.”

“Roasted with honey and rosemary?” Gavin looked ready to drool.

Magda shrugged. “Depends on how fast you get that hide off and what mood I’m in when we’re done.”

Neither man needed any more encouragement. Ballard cut circles around the hind shins, working toward the inside of the legs as Gavin skinned around the tail and hams. Between the two of them, they had the hide peeled away in minutes. Ballard split the boar lengthwise and unhooked it from the gambrel pulley to help Gavin lay it across the table for additional cleaning and butchering. Everyone set to work then, carving chops, hams, loins and racks of ribs. Only once did he catch Cinnia turn pale during the process, and that was when he used an axe to cleave the head from the rest of the body. Louvaen worked steadily next to Clarimond, unfazed. A woman who once prepared the dead for burial and had a body burst on her would find this particular chore of no consequence.

They labored through the morning, packing portions of meat in ice to be stored in the buttery, setting other parts aside for packing in salt or pickled in vinegar. Nothing was wasted. They'd process the brains, stuff the intestines for sausages, render the fat for soap and candles and strip the bristles for brushes. The weak winter sun hung directly overhead by the time they finished, dismantled the pulleys and carted the full barrels of salted pork into the larder.

They gathered by the well near the herb garden with its hardy bushes of rosemary covered in snow. Clarimond drew the first bucket of water, and the women took turns bathing their faces, arms and hands with the kerchiefs they'd used to cover their hair. There was much gasping, yelping and complaining as they splashed the icy water on their skin. Cinnia, teeth chattering so hard she could barely talk, managed to say "I think the tip of my nose has frozen."

Magda scrubbed at her arms and doused her kerchief a second time in the bucket. Ballard fancied he heard broken ice crackle as she wrung out the excess water. "Less talking, more washing," she said.

Gavin rocked back on his heels. "I don't suppose now would be a good time to comment on how they remind me of a gaggle of complaining geese." His eyes brimmed with laughter.

Ballard kept his eyes on the women, particularly Louvaen and her smooth skin made rosy by her energetic scrubbing with icy water and rough cloth. "Not unless you want to be hung by your heels and split in half like that hog."

Father and son exchanged grins that soon turned to more stoic expressions when Cinnia approached them with another

dripping cloth. She eyed Gavin with the same look he wore when Magda announced she'd be roasting some of the boar meat that night. Ballard wondered if the boy would be in any worse danger of being consumed whole if he stood before her basted in honey and rosemary himself.

“Do you need help cleaning up, Gavin?” Cinnia’s breathy question and the feral gleam in her eyes had Ballard moving out of the way. He glanced at Louvaen who’d paused to watch with narrowed eyes.

As if pulled by the irresistible force of a powerful lodestone, Gavin reached for Cinnia, his voice guttural. “I’d never refuse the aid of so beautiful a woman.”

Ballard rolled his eyes at his son’s foolery.

“Cinnia!” Louvaen’s call cut sharp across the bailey.

“Hmmm? What?” Entranced by the sight of Gavin’s bare chest and shoulders, Cinnia barely registered her sister’s command. She reached out and Gavin leaned in.

This time Ballard took several steps back as Louvaen marched toward them with a full bucket of water. Someone was about to receive a good dousing. He wanted no part of it.

“Cinnia, don’t you dare!”

As if released from a spell, Cinnia jumped out of the way and gasped as Louvaen snatched the wet cloth out of her hand. Gavin straightened in time to catch the rag and bucket she smashed into his chest. Water sloshed out of the bucket, soaking one side of his breeches. “Cool your blood,” she snapped at him before leveling a glare on her sister. “You too.” She strode back to where Magda stood grinning and Clarimond and Joan hid their giggles behind their hands.

Cinnia offered Gavin an apologetic smile and a gaze so seductive, Ballard wondered if she was still an innocent. Gavin went stiff, in more ways than one if the front of his breeches were any indication. Ballard stepped forward and gave her a gentle push toward Louvaen. Once she was out of earshot, he turned to Gavin. “You poor sot. If you don’t have calluses on your tarse by now, I’ll be surprised. You better propose soon, or you’ll expire from the wanting.”

“Count me lucky if I’m not dead by morning.” Gavin scowled as he dipped the rag into the bucket and began scrubbing away the worst of the blood and dirt. He and Ballard shared the water and rag. Ballard still felt grimy afterwards and looked forward to when Magda would release Clarimond and Joan from kitchen duty long enough to haul a tub up the stairs into his chamber and fill it with hot water. His household usually made do with sponges, homemade soap and basins of cold water. However, when Ballard or Gavin hunted boar and came back unscathed and with a kill, Magda pampered them with a full immersive bath and a generous cake of imported soap brought home by Gavin.

The heat in the kitchen felt sweltering after hours spent in snowy weather. Magda shooed Louvaen and Cinnia to their rooms, instructing them to bathe, change and return their clothes for laundering. She turned to Ballard who hovered at the doorway between bailey and kitchen. “You’ll be wanting a bath?”

“Aye. Make the water boil.” He gestured with a nod to the stables. “I’ve a horse to tend to an a saddle to clean. I’ll be finished soon.” Four centuries earlier, a contingent of stable hands would have seen to brushing down his courser, feeding him and mucking out the stalls. The work fell to him

now, and he'd long ago given up any protest of such lowly chores for a man of his station.

Magda shooed him away with a flap of her apron. "Take your time. We'll have the tub filled and the water hot when you're ready."

She was good as her word. The bath waited for him by the time he returned to his bedchamber. Gossamer bands of steam drifted up from the water, scented by the sprigs of rosemary floating on the surface. Someone had built up the fire and nestled a scuttle filled with river rock into the coals. Ballard's stomach rumbled at the sight of dried fruit drizzled in honey, cheese and bread piled high on a plate and set out on a wooden plank placed across the tub. A goblet filled to the brim with wine joined the repast. He shed his blood-stained clothes and sighed as he slid into the water.

His gurgling stomach could wait. The tub, a barrel with the top third shaved off, was large and deep enough for him to rest on the low stool set into the vessel. He leaned his head on the cloth-cushioned rim, closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of herbs as the water lapped against his chest. His chamber door opened and shut. The gentle swish of skirts and light step told him Magda had arrived to attend him at his bath. Circumstance and time had turned his magician into a shepherd and him into a stable boy, but he was still *dominus* of Ketach Tor and claimed the privileges of not sharing bath water and having someone wash his back.

An image of Louvaen standing in the bailey, rubbing briskly at her slender arms with a wet rag bloomed behind his eyelids. Garbed in a stained and faded shirt and skirt that might have once belonged to Clarimond or Joan, she'd looked

as beautiful to him as any noblewoman dressed in silk brocade and jewels. A fine thing to have her share his bath—the best of these small indulgences.

He listened as the housekeeper scraped coals in the hearth and dragged the scuttle away from the fire. Water hissed as she slid several hot rocks into the tub. Ballard groaned his appreciation as an underwater wave of heat enveloped his legs and torso. “You should be worshipped as a goddess.”

His attempt at levity rebounded on him when the object of his wishful thoughts replied “I’m glad someone finally agrees with me regarding that notion.”

Ballard’s eyes snapped open. He straightened so fast, he nearly upended the board holding his food and drink. Louvaen faced him, a trowel in one hand, towel-wrapped scuttle in the other and a grin gracing her comely face. “Louvaen.”

Her gray eyes gleamed. “De Sauveterre.”

His gaze swept the room. “Where’s Magda? Or Clarimond? Or Joan?”

She returned the scuttle to the hearth to reheat the remaining rocks. “Magda is in the kitchen teaching Cinnia some kind of black magic she insists is actually cooking. Joan and Clarimond are elbow-deep in the laundry, bucking the clothes we wore this morning.” A stack of drying cloths landed on the stool next to the tub along with a cake of soap. Louvaen’s grin changed to a smirk that, if he saw it, Ambrose would describe as purely evil. “I’m your attendant this time, and since there’s no hope of rescue, you might as well relax, drink your wine and enjoy your bath.”

Ballard groaned again and tossed back the goblet of wine in two swallows. Women would be the death of him. Between Isabeau's curse battering him into a miasma of excruciating pain at each flux and his unwitting seduction by the fierce Louvaen Duenda, he was doomed. He'd called upon every drop of self-control he possessed not to jerk her onto his lap and grind himself between her thighs while she tortured him with her touch. He hadn't exaggerated when he told her he was in hell. He'd expected to go up in flames at any moment. He'd known the caress of many women before the curse turned him reclusive and cold. They'd warmed his bed, heated his blood and made him lust, yet none had scorched him inside and out as this sharp-tongued shrew had, and she'd done so with nothing more than her exploring touch. Now she proposed to run those lovely hands over his body as well. He peered into his goblet, despairing at its emptiness.

Louvaen tutted and refilled the goblet from a pitcher left earlier on the table by his bed. She arched both eyebrows when he quaffed that portion as quickly as the first. She poured another round. "You're perfectly safe with me," she mocked. "Far too strong and quick for me to drown. And if it's any consolation, I've done this before for my husband and several of our guests."

He was tempted to tell her she should be more concerned about whether or not she was safe with him but instead sipped his third cup of wine. "Did your husband drown?"

She gave an indignant huff, but Ballard caught the way her lips twitched. "No, he didn't."

She then proceeded to slam the air out of his lungs by disrobing until she wore nothing more than a short-sleeved linen shift. The simple garment concealed most of her shape, but he still made out the swell of her hips, the line of a long thigh and the gentle curve of her waist. Despite the fire, a chill lingered in his room, and her shift did nothing to conceal the delicate points of her nipples pushing against the fabric. He ran his tongue across his lip, grateful she was too preoccupied with stoking the flames in the hearth to notice him stripping her naked with his gaze.

He emptied the cup. “More wine,” he ordered in a hoarse voice.

“At the speed you’re emptying your cup, I’ll need to refill the pitcher before I can soap this cloth.” She refilled the goblet a third time. “I’ll bathe you; then you can eat. I’ll wash your face and hair as well.” She returned the pitcher to the table, took up a cloth and soap and swept behind him. Her warm breath tickled his shoulders. “Lean forward.”

Ballard did as instructed, and his lower belly cramped. His cock was stiffer than one of his sword blades. He doubted an ice water bath would be enough to lower the fever rising in his blood. He shivered as Louvaen pressed the soapy cloth against his back and bathed him with slow, circular strokes. The warm water and his fourth goblet of wine made him lightheaded. He could simply order her out of the room and send for Magda in her stead. Long years of the curse must have warped him more than he knew because he enjoyed this particular agony despite an aching cock and a heart that threatened to beat out of his chest. He swallowed a groan when Louvaen’s fingertips traced the curve of his shoulder blade.

“How did you get this scar?”

Entranced by her touch, he struggled to remember how he came by that particular memento. His life had been defined by combat, and he'd lost count of the number of scars he carried that had nothing to do with the curse. “A melee. I caught another knight's spur in the back.”

She hissed in sympathy. Her fingers skated lower, toward a half moon laceration carved deep into the flesh near his spine. “This one?”

Ballard wondered how exactly he was supposed to think while she did this. “Axe. Baradium mercenaries favored them over swords. A good hauberk can save your life.”

A soft moan managed to escape between his clenched teeth when her palm came to rest against a gnarled patch of scarring just below his lowest rib. “And this lovely?”

That wound he remembered as clearly now as the day he received it centuries earlier. “Lance during tournament. I was bedridden for weeks.” He'd almost died, saved only by Ambrose's potions and Magda's tireless nursing.

“You've not led a life of peace.” He heard no judgment in her voice, only sympathy.

Her wet hand pressed against him, and he imagined its heat laid across every part of his body. “I was once a Marcher lord. Peace is an unknown word when you're defending kingdom borders.”

The cloth slid along his shoulders. Her fingers carded through his hair, pushing the locks over one shoulder to reach his nape. “Do these kingdoms still war with one another?”

Ballard shrugged. "I don't know." At the moment, he didn't care. He lowered his head and smiled when she took the hint and lingered at his nape. "Gavin brings us news of the world from his travels, but we're isolated by the flux and Ambrose's barrier spells."

She moved to the side of the tub, and he could look upon her lovely face. "Raise your arm." He obeyed, water sluicing off his forearm and bicep. Louvaen notched her fingers lightly through his to hold his arm steady and ran the cloth from wrist to shoulder. Water droplets spattered her shift, turning the cloth delectably transparent in spots. If she noticed the way his gaze froze on her, she didn't remark on it but continued her line of questioning. "Do you miss the fighting?"

He frowned. He'd never considered the idea before now. He didn't miss the carnage of battle or the constant struggle to hold his land against invaders, but there were times he longed for the challenge of pitting his skills against another warrior. Gavin was a capable fighter, but Ballard had been the one who trained him. With that training came predictability. Hunting boar was a poor substitute for the rigors of tournament or battle and facing the lethal prowess of a well-trained knight, but it was the closest he had now. "Fighting is what I've known, what I trained for since I was a child, what I'm adept at." His fingers tightened on hers for a moment before he released her so she could move to the other side of the tub.

She rinsed the cloth and added more soap. "Other arm." She clasped his hand and kept her gaze trained on his arm and the tight muscles flexing beneath the cloth. "I've watched you spar with Gavin. You've taught him well. He could defend himself and Cinnia if necessary."

Ballard smoothed his thumb over her wet knuckles. “You’d have a hard time killing him with your bare hands.”

Her eyes glittered with the same sly amusement he’d noticed earlier. “I would, but this castle has stairs. People, even the most nimble, get clumsy and fall sometimes.”

Beautiful and bloodthirsty. Like Isabeau yet so different. He laughed. “As his father, I should warn him...”

She flapped the sodden rag with an airy hand. “No need. I do so at least once every day.” Any hint of merriment fled when she told him “Kneel, please. I need to reach your chest.”

He almost refused. Her elegant hands on his back and arms were a sweet torment guaranteed to leave him hard and aching for hours after he finished his bath. The anticipation of those same hands painting swathes of soap across his chest made his nostrils flare and his jaw ache from clenching his teeth. Nevertheless, he slid off the stool and knelt, staring straight ahead. Maybe if he kept her in his peripheral vision, he wouldn’t succumb to the urge to yank her in the tub, rip her shift off her body and take her in the water. Unfortunately for him, Louvaen Duenda had a bad habit of courting danger.

She perched a hip on the tub’s rim, dipped the cloth in the water and proceeded to shatter his lucidity into splinters. The fragrance of rosemary mingled in his nostrils with her own particular scent—cloves and the costly cinnamon mixed in the finely milled soap Gavin brought home from world beyond Ketach Tor. She must have used it to bathe away the filth of the morning’s butchering. The softest whine whispered past his lips when she drew pathways on his chest,

connecting the many mutilations and curse marks that disfigured him.

“Your body tells many tales.”

Dip your hand a little lower, he thought, and you'll feel the tale it wants to tell right now.

Sweat beaded his brow by the time she rinsed off the soap and draped the cloth over the tub's edge. His penance, however, wasn't over. Louvaen levered a thumb beneath his jaw. “Chin up.” He raised his head. “You've grown scruffy. Shall I shave you?”

The offer cooled him down. He eyed her askance. “And risk you cutting my throat?”

Her fingers scraped the coarse bristles darkening his cheeks. “I've a steady hand with a knife.”

“That's what I'm afraid of.” He'd fallen deep under her spell, eager to feel her caresses on his face. It was well worth the risk of bloodletting. “Give me your word you won't slice me from ear to ear, and you can make me handsome again.”

“You have my word.” She retreated back to the hearth for more of the hot rocks but not before telling him he was capable of washing the rest of himself without her help.

“You've done a worthy job so far. Why stop now?”

Louvaen sniffed and turned her back on him.

“Well?” he insisted.

“You can sit in that tub until the water freezes before I answer that question.” Her scowl warned of murder as she lugged the scuttle back to the tub and dropped another scoop

of rocks into the cooling water. “You better eat or there’ll be water all over your food when I douse your head.”

Ballard grinned, no longer caring if the expression flashed his sharp incisors. Louvaen Duenda was a delight to tease, giving as good as she got. “And here I thought you’d bash my skull in with one of those rocks.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

He finished the bath, sat back on the stool to savor the new heat and ate his meal while watching Louvaen add hot rocks to a copper basin. She dipped her finger in the water several times to test the temperature before carrying the basin to the tub and setting it on the plank next to his now empty dishes. Ballard offered a halfhearted protest—which she ignored—when she cleared his half full goblet and plates off the plank.

His breath caught as she paused, a pensive expression that darkened her eyes the gray of rain clouds. In the time she’d lived in his household he’d discovered she was intense, forthright, and fiercely protective. He didn’t know her to be mercurial. This sudden change in mood surprised him. “What’s wrong?”

She leaned into him, her breath tickling his cheek. “You’ve smeared honey on your face.” Her lips pressed softly against the corner of his mouth. Every muscle in Ballard’s body seized when the tip of her tongue swept across the spot, licking away the sticky honey. It was over before he could suck air into his starved lungs. Louvaen pulled away, features still grave, and ran her tongue over her lips.

Ballard growled low in his throat and snagged her wrist when she straightened. “Louvaen, I’m changed by the flux—

hardly a man anymore but still with a man's wants, a man's hunger." His fingers tightened on that slender wrist, drawing her back to him. "If you don't wish to end up on your back, in my bed with me between your legs, you'll take your clothes and leave."

He didn't want to give her the choice, the chance to escape from his chamber and into the corridor where the icy air would clear her head enough that she'd thank the gods she worshipped for a reprieve from submitting to a monster who'd once been a man. He wanted her beneath him—craved it—those long legs wrapped tight around his waist as he took her. He was faster than she knew. Shackled to an encroaching inhumanity, he'd been given inhuman speed and strength. She wouldn't take three steps before he'd be out of the tub with the door locked, imprisoning her inside the chamber with him. His legs tensed in animal anticipation of the chase. His heartbeat thudded hard against his ribs.

He desired her, was nearly consumed by it. She'd been the catalyst of his every fantasy and masturbatory gratification since she'd mapped the ruined terrain of his face with her hands. Still, what he wanted most was a reciprocal yearning, the knowledge that she burned for him as much as he did for her. A futile hope, but he'd lived lifetimes holding on to hope with desperate hands.

Louvaen's wrist jerked in his grip. Ballard let her go, fully expecting her to draw back her fist and punch him in the mouth before striding out of his chamber in a furious huff. Instead her eyes softened, glanced at the bed and again at him. A dozen emotions played across her winsome features—uncertainty, an odd grief and strongest of all, the same longing that set his blood boiling and robbed him of reason.

He was half out of the water when a pounding at his door broke the spell that held them both captive. Louvaen leapt away from the tub, her face shuttered. Ballard collapsed back onto the stool, sloshing a wave of water over the tub's edge. He shoved the plank off the rim, sending it skidding across the floor. More water splashed the floors as the basin rolled away, scattering rocks in its wake. Covering his eyes with one hand, he tried not to shout his frustration.

The door opened, and the rapid steps crossing the room this time belonged to Magda. Ballard didn't uncover his eyes even when he felt her gaze burning holes into him.

"I've come for the dishes. What happened here?"

Louvaen's calm voice gave no hint to the turmoil she'd revealed to him only moments earlier. "I stumbled and knocked the board off the tub."

"Well, it happens to the best of us. I'll help you clean up."

Ballard lowered his hand but kept his eyes closed and leaned his head back against the tub's rim. The erection that nearly bent him double was softening. Magda's untimely interruption had seen to that. At least she wouldn't flay him with some unwanted commentary on the state of his arousal. Gavin's unrelieved lusts had been a constant source of amusement for her. All he needed to end a quickly deteriorating day was her taking shots at him as well.

She gave a disapproving cluck. "Are you planning to stew in there until supper?"

"Yes," he snapped.

Louvaen's response softened his. "He needs a barbering. If you can get a knife and strop, I'll reheat the water in the basin. You can wash his hair while I strop the blade. We'll be finished quicker that way."

They dried the floors with extra drying cloths. Only when the door closed behind Magda did he open his eyes and search out Louvaen. She stood by the fire, scooping more rocks into the refilled basin. They'd refitted the board across the tub, and she made a second trip, setting the bowl on the plank along with the cake of soap. Her shift hung wet from knee to hem.

"Hold your temper," she warned. "I don't relish getting any wetter cleaning up your messes, and you've only one cloth left to dry off."

"I saw your face," he said. "You wanted to stay. Don't deny it, Louvaen."

She hovered just out of reach. The space between her eyebrows creased in a frown and she shook her head. "I deny nothing." She held his gaze. "I'm not in the habit of bedding men on a whim, de Sauveterre. Were I to lay with you now, I won't do so to bargain an accord. You'd have more of me than my body. I don't know if I'm ready to give that to another man."

Her revelation rocked him. She hadn't said it outright, but he'd be a brainless idiot not to understand what she implied. Robbed of words, he could only gape at her. She offered an apologetic shrug. "I didn't mean to tease. The moment took me, made me foolish. I beg your forgiveness."

Somehow she'd knocked him off his mooring and sent him flying off a precipice. Her apology only made him tumble

faster. “That’s twice you’ve apologized for touching me. Why?”

Her cheeks went scarlet. “I don’t know. There’s something about you.” She spread her hands in a puzzled gesture. “Captivating yet forbidden. I feel as if I’m corrupting an anchorite but can’t help myself.”

His jaw dropped. An anchorite? Before his enforced ascetic existence, he’d lived the life of a typical warlord. Fighting, whoring and scheming for more land, more wealth, more power. The idea that she perceived him as some hermetic pilgrim in search of greater faith through deprivation was almost insulting. He scowled at her. “Woman, I’ve waded through blood up to my ankles on battlefields and tugged whores at the king’s court, including the king’s sister. Whatever purity you think I possess doesn’t exist.”

She laughed, a full throaty sound that made Ballard forget his indignation. “And did you find the king’s sister a satisfying bedmate?”

He shrugged. “Her royal blood was her greatest attraction.”

“There’s no hope for me then. I haven’t a drop of royal blood.”

“I could spend days listing those things most attractive about you, Mistress Duenda.”

Louvaen’s grin faded a little. She blinked at him, clearly baffled by his praise. “I’m not Cinnia.”

“No, you’re not.” She was as different from her dazzling sister as night was to day. Ballard found it difficult to look at the younger girl for more than a moment at a time.

Beauty such as hers blinded him, like looking directly at the sun. Louvaen though—he could happily drown in the dark Louvaen.

Magda barged in a second time with strop and knife clutched in her hands. She glanced first at Ballard, then at Louvaen. “If you don’t want interruptions, lock the damn door.”

Louvaen took the strop and knife and set to work sharpening the edge. “We were discussing his lordship’s many frolics at court, including a royal sibling.”

“Oh, her.” The housekeeper rolled her eyes as she plucked the rocks out of the basin and dumped the warm water over Ballard’s head. “That woman would frig a stallion if left alone with it too long.” She soaped his hair, tugging through the tangles and scrubbing so hard he thought she might wrench his head from his shoulders.

He flattened one of her hands against his hair. “You evil bat. Quit trying to rip the hair out of my head.”

She thumped him on the top of his head with two fingers and continued with her scrubbing and diatribe. “There wasn’t a squire, stable lad or half-washed peasant safe from her.” She favored Ballard with a cunning look. His narrowed eyes warned her to watch her tongue. “Speaking of stallions, she was much impressed with the size of the *dominus*’s—”

“Magda.”

“Quiet.” She thumped him again and rinsed his hair with more water. “There aren’t any innocent virgins here to faint over such talk. And I doubt Louvaen ever fainted, even when she was a maiden.”

“Not a habit of mine.” Louvaen laughed as she approached him, light from the hearth making the wide, curved blade she held twinkle. “Of course this is the first time I’ve been privy to gossip about royal bed-hopping and the extra privileges accorded not only to the king but his family as well. My delicate sensibilities might be overwhelmed.”

Ballard eyed the knife, then her. “As long as your delicate hands remain unshaken, I’ll worry about your sensibilities later.”

“I promised I wouldn’t cut your throat.”

“Don’t geld me either.”

Magda lathered his face and neck before abandoning him to Louvaen’s care. She stood behind him and lifted his chin until his throat lay exposed to her mercy. “I wouldn’t want to disappoint the horse-loving princess.” Her hand glided under his soapy jaw while the other balanced the knife between her fingers. Her upper thigh pillowed his head, and he stared into her eyes, the color of ash. “Now hold still and pray.”

He hardly dared breathe for fear she’d slip and bleed him out in the bath. She had steady hands that were deft with the blade, and she held to her promise, shaving over his numerous scars as if his face was unblemished as a young boy’s. Such acknowledgement didn’t comfort him. Then again, there were worse things than dying with your head resting between a beautiful woman’s thighs. She finished sooner than he liked and wiped away the stray ribbons of lather on his cheeks and neck.

“I’ve made you handsome once more.”

Ballard swiped a hand across one cheek, feeling its smoothness. She'd done a fine job, not even the sting of a nick to mar her work. He cocked an eyebrow. "You'd need more than a sharp blade and a good grip for that, mistress. A generous helping of the magic you so despise might help."

Louvaen frowned. "Methinks it was magic that got you a few of those interesting scars in the first place, yes?" She handed the knife to Magda. "Besides, it sounds like your lusty princess had no complaints."

"She wasn't looking at my face."

Magda snorted. Louvaen wagged a finger at Ballard. "I was wrong. You would have made a terrible anchorite."

He watched as she shrugged her frock over the damp shift and laced her bodice, wishing she'd do the reverse and allow him to help. She bowed to him. "Unless Magda needs me..." The other woman shook her head. "I'll see you at supper." She was gone before he could protest.

Magda stood next to the tub, gaze flitting from the door to him and back to the door. She finally snapped loose a drying towel and gestured for him to stand. "It's a sad world when the only man doing the swiving in this castle is rickety Ambrose. You and your boy are lucky you can get your breeches on these days much less walk straight.

"Be quiet, old woman. I've had enough torment today, and the flux isn't even upon us."

CHAPTER NINE



He spent the hour before supper alone in the solar. The chamber was a bare place before the sisters' arrival, furnished with two chairs, a table and a storage chest. The tapestries covering the walls had hung gray with dust and pockmarked with holes left by moths. Now, with the addition of two spinning wheels, a larger table and several stools, it felt almost crowded. The tapestries had been taken down, beaten free of dust and repaired. They hung in their customary places, as colorful as when his mother and her women first stitched them.

In one of their conversations Louvaen admitted she had little patience for needlework. "I sew because I must." She'd

gazed at the tapestries and winced. “Such intricate embroidery is for those with a love of needle and thread.” Ballard smiled and picked up one of the twisted hanks of linen yarn from her basket. The spun thread was softer than silk under his thumb. She might not be much of a seamstress, but she spun magic on her wheel. Even her sister had said as much at supper one evening when Magda harangued Ambrose for stealing Cinnia from her to help him bind a grimoire.

The girl shrugged. “Not my best talent. Louvaen is better and faster than most. Our papa used to say if we gave her straw, she’d spin it into gold.”

Louvaen had given a disbelieving snort. “If only that were true. I’d rule an empire with such a talent.”

“Empress Louvaen,” Ballard murmured and dropped the hank into the basket. “Fitting.”

Everyone was seated at the table in the kitchen when he arrived. Since Louvaen had shortened his claws, he ate when they did, wielding his fork with practiced ease. Cinnia no longer gawked at him before looking away. She’d grown used to his appearance, not that it mattered. She rarely had eyes for anyone except Gavin who studiously ignored Louvaen’s glare when his own admiration of Cinnia grew too heated.

Magda had kept her word to Gavin and served a roasted cut of the boar basted in honey and herbs. There was silence at the table as everyone dug into their food until Cinnia leaned past her sister to catch Ballard’s attention.

“*Dominus*, we’d like permission to decorate your hall for Mother’s Evening.”

“We?” Louvaen paused with her fork halfway to her mouth.

Cinnia tilted her nose up. “Yes, we. Gavin and I discussed it.” She smiled at Ballard.

Her sister missed it, but Ballard caught the flash of hurt that flitted through Louvaen’s eyes. He could offer no comfort in this matter. Cinnia was slowly cutting the knots in the lead strings that had tied her to Louvaen for so long. Louvaen would bleed a little and then she’d heal. He’d felt something similar the first time Gavin left Ketach Tor and ventured into the world beyond his protection. “We haven’t celebrated Modrnicht at Ketach Tor in a long time. I don’t see why not.”

Cinnia clapped her hands. “Can we go into the forest tomorrow for evergreen?”

Ballard glanced at Ambrose. “Care to wager on a refusal?”

Ambrose shook his head. “I only wager on successful outcomes. I’m sure to lose this one.” He smirked at Gavin’s spellbound expression. “Boy, pay attention. You’re about to drool on yourself.”

Gavin started, almost overturning his goblet. “Sorry.” He took a swallow of wine before answering Cinnia. “I’ll have to pull the sled out and check if it needs repairs.” He addressed Ballard. “If you don’t have something for me to help with, I’ll take the women to gather branches.”

Ballard shook his head. “You’re free. I’m forging tomorrow.”

“Ooh, are you making a sword?” Cinnia couldn’t have sounded more excited at the prospect than if he announced he

was melting down gold for jewelry.

“Nothing so interesting. Gavin is the swordsmith, not I. It’s just a bucket of nails for Magda.”

“Oh.”

Magda pointed her fork at a disappointed Cinnia. “Don’t sound so glum, girl. A bucket of nails is far more useful than a blade. I can’t hammer a sword into a combing board.”

After supper, they met for their usual evening gathering in the solar. Louvaen sat before her wheel to spin the hoard of flax they’d accumulated the past three years. She planned with Cinnia and Gavin for their outing the next day and what they should do for celebrating Modrnicht. Magda made one of her rare appearances in the solar and offered suggestions for what to serve for the meal and give to the goddesses venerated. Ballard sat before the fire, nursing a goblet of wine, content to simply listen to conversation and watch Louvaen at her spinning.

A few times she caught his glance and held it, and he wondered if she thought of that ephemeral moment when she’d kissed the honey from his mouth. He certainly did—in vivid detail—and it was enough to make him shift restlessly in his chair. As the evening waned, his family and guests each said goodnight and departed for their rooms. Louvaen was the last to leave. She paused at the side of his chair, staring at a point behind him.

“I’ve only been a wife, never a leman.”

Ballard reeled at her words. His heart missed several beats before he could inhale enough air to speak. “I’ve only

had a wife, never a leman.” He’d considered it. Every lord he knew had kept a mistress somewhere on his demesne, sometimes even within his castle. His father Dwennon had one, a gentle creature named Adela . Ballard’s mother had been fond of her and grieved more than Dwennon did when she died.

Louvaen was not Adela. Neither passive nor sweet-natured, she would clash with any wife until the lord put her aside, or she cowed the poor wife enough to supplant her authority and become lady of the keep in all but name. Ballard hid a smile. Were he still married and suggested she be his concubine, she’d knock his teeth down his throat.

“Are you sincere in your proposition?” She kept her gaze on the far wall.

“Aye.” He captured her hand and kissed the pale skin of her wrist, relishing its suppleness against his mouth. “A poor jest at first, but only a jest for the moment after I uttered it.” His lips fluttered across her palm. “I’ve wanted you since I first saw you.”

Her hand curved over his cheek, fingertips drifting softly through his hair. “I’m still undecided.”

“I await your answer.” He prayed with everything inside him she’d say yes and soon.

“If I say yes, it will only be until winter’s end. I won’t stay even if Cinnia does.”

Ballard refused to dwell on such a thing. He’d allowed this woman into his home for the sole purpose of enjoying her company, prickly as it often was. He’d never expected or even dared hope of having her share his bed. He’d take what she

might offer and thank the gods for giving him such a fine a gift before the curse overwhelmed him, and he was irrevocably changed.

He pressed his face into her palm. “I don’t make prisoners of my lovers, Louvaen. I’d have you stay, but you are free to leave when you wish.”

He’d be tempted—oh, dear gods he’d be tempted—to force her to stay, anything to keep her by his side. He’d done it once, using extortion and bribery. It had earned him the everlasting enmity of his wife and a curse that would destroy him and probably his son. He’d learned a hard lesson, one he wouldn’t repeat, especially with Louvaen whom he wanted more fiercely than anything he’d known in centuries.

She stepped away from his chair, hand caressing his chin then clasping his fingers before she gently freed herself from his grasp. “Good night, Ballard. Sleep well.”

He didn’t reply, only stared into the fire until she left. He scrubbed his hands over his face and slumped in his seat. “Good gods, woman. I don’t know what will take me first: the curse or you saying no.”

Despite her farewell words, he spent the rest of the night tossing and turning in his lonely bed, gut churning with both anticipation and dread of her answer. He skipped breakfast the next morning and went straight to the forge in the hopes that hammering away at hot metal would sweat out the lust coursing through him. Magda wanted nails? He’d give her a wagonload of nails by the end of the day.

He was breaking off a nail in the nail header when the creak of the smithy door made him pause. Gavin slipped

inside. Ballard raised an eyebrow. “What are you doing here? Finished gathering branches already?”

Gavin shook his head. “Plowfoot came up lame. Stone lodged near his frog. I got it out, but he’s bruised.”

“He’ll need to rest a few days.”

“Aye. He’s in his stall now. I’ll use Sparrow to pull the sled back.”

Ballard looked past Gavin’s shoulder. “Where are the women?”

“By the pond. Cinnia found a clutch of holly she wanted to gather.”

Foreboding tickled the base of Ballard’s spine. “You left them there?”

Gavin shrugged. “They’re safe. We’re still within Ambrose’s barrier. They know not to venture beyond it.”

Ballard abandoned the nail header. “Get Magnus and Sparrow. I’ll meet you in the bailey.”

Gavin sighed. “Father, they’re fine...”

“Just do it, boy.” He turned to bank the coals in the firepot and stripped off his apron and gloves. That tickle of unease was turning into an outright itch. He met Gavin coming out of the stables, leading the two horses. Both had been bridled but not saddled.

“I guessed you wouldn’t want to wait.”

Ballard swung onto Magnus’s bare back and turned him toward the back gate. “Lead on.”

They kept their mounts to a brisk walk, picking their way through leafless brush powdered in snow. Sunlight filtered through bare tree limbs in watery gray bands. The forest hush seemed a living thing, muffling the horses' gait. Ballard wondered if he'd worried for nothing. Gavin was neither careless nor irresponsible. If he'd left the women by the pond, he'd made certain they were safe. Still...

A high, trilling sound drifted on the cold air. Both horses halted, ears swiveling forward. They heard nothing more for a moment before it came again, and this time the sound was unmistakable—Cinnia screaming Gavin's name.

They tore through the forest, weaving amongst stands of white birch and green firs until they reached a large pond. Cinnia stood on the shore next to the sled, crying out Gavin's and Louvaen's name.

"Cinnia, are you hurt?" Gavin raced to her where she fell in his arms sobbing.

Ballard scanned the pond, terror exploding inside him at the sight of a dark head just above a hole in the ice an eternity from the shore. "Gavin, I need rope and Sparrow's bridle." He unbridled Magnus, knotting the reins to Sparrow's. The rope Gavin brought to tie branches to the sled wasn't long enough to reach Louvaen, and the sled was too heavy to risk falling through the ice. Knotted with the reins, the rope might reach if he crawled to her. Gavin secured the rope's other end around Magnus's neck and urged the horse into the shallow edge of the pond. Ice cracked under his hooves, sinking him into the frigid water to his fetlocks. He pranced but stayed in place.

Cinnia's hiccupping explanation buzzed in Ballard's ears. "We thought it solid enough and skated across. Louvaen heard the crack first and shoved me toward shore. She sobbed. "Oh dear gods, Gavin. She went under! I thought she'd drowned!"

Gavin patted her back and pushed her gently toward the sled. "We'll get her, Cinnia. Just stay here for now." He motioned to Ballard. "Give me the line. I'll crawl out to her."

Ballard shook his head. "I'll do it. I'm lighter than you. When I say so, back Magnus up to pull us across the ice."

He stepped gingerly atop the pond's unbroken surface. "Louvaen." She floated, unresponsive. "Look at me, Louvaen." He was close enough to see the sleeves of her dress had frozen to the ice, helping her stay afloat.

She raised her head at his command. Newly formed ice frosted her wet hair, and her lips were blue with cold. "Cinnia. Where's Cinnia?" She stuttered the words through chattering teeth.

"Safe on the shore with Gavin." Ballard dropped to his belly and crawled to the broken ice. He clenched his teeth against the burn on his torso as the wet ice soaked through his shirt. "Louvaen, give me your arm. I'm going to knot the rope around your wrist and pull you free. Do you understand?" She lowered her head, taking shallow breaths and didn't answer. "Louvaen, do you understand?"

She nodded. Her gloved hand stretched out to him as far as the frozen sleeve allowed.

It was enough for Ballard to tie a bowline around her wrist. A thin film of water spread under him, soaking him from chest to ankles. He could only imagine the cold shock she suffered, submerged to her shoulders and weighed down by her clothes. He pulled gently, enough to dislodge her sleeve and give him the leverage he needed to grasp her forearm. Exhausted, Louvaen sank below the water.

Ballard lunged forward. “No you don’t, you bloodthirsty scold!” He grabbed the back of her cloak and heaved so hard she cleared the water and slid across the ice, jerking him with her by the bowline attached to her wrist. He wrapped an arm around her waist as the ice cracked beneath them.

“Pull!” he shouted.

Gavin and Magnus wrenched hard on the rope, and they slid across the pond, racing the fractures that split the ice toward the shore until they plowed into the shallows. Ballard, as thoroughly drenched as Louvaen, surged out of the water with her in his arms and slogged toward land. She hung in his embrace limp and pale.

“Lou! Oh gods, Lou!” Cinnia slammed into him, nearly knocking him back into the pond in her bid to reach her sister.

Ballard shrugged her off. “Calm your woman,” he ordered Gavin. “I need to get Louvaen back to the castle.”

Gavin pulled the hysterical Cinnia away and urged her to be quiet. He grabbed Ballard’s arm. “Wait.” Ballard scowled at him until Gavin untied the bowline encircling Louvaen’s wrist. “I was afraid you’d both be lost for a moment there.”

Ballard nodded. “You saved us, son.”

Gavin shrugged. "You're my father. What else would I do?" He bridled Magnus then held Louvaen until Ballard could mount and take her in his arms once more. He swatted the horse's flank. "Ride hard."

Ballard kneed Magnus into motion, and they took off through the labyrinth of trees at a gallop, slowing to a canter once they reached the open back gate that led to the bailey. Magnus had barely slid to a stop in the mud before Ballard dismounted with Louvaen in his arms. He slammed into the kitchen, startling Magda who was scrubbing a pot at the sink. "Blankets and a hot drink!"

She jumped to do his bidding, calling for Clarimond and Joan. In moments she had Clarimond running for Louvaen's chamber to start the fire in the hearth and Joan at the kitchen fire heating a goblet of ale with the poker. "What happened?"

Ballard sat Louvaen on the bench so that she leaned against the table. He kept an arm on her shoulder to steady her and reached for his knife. His fingers were too stiff with cold to manage the knotted ribbons on her sodden bodice. Wet as they were, they might as well be forged shut. He sliced through lacings, dress and shift. She was welcome to kill him later for destroying her clothing. He gestured to Magda. "Strip her while I hold her up."

Between them they quickly had Louvaen out of her frozen clothes, wrapped in a blanket and seated by the fire. Magda had covered her with a speed and efficiency that defied Ballard to catch more than a glimpse of white skin and the gentle curve of a breast. Joan handed him the goblet of warm ale. Louvaen huddled in the blanket, shivering so violently she almost bounced off the stool. "Louvaen, I need you to

drink this. It'll chase some of the cold away." She turned her face away and hid deeper in the blanket. "Louvaen," he repeated. "Louvaen!"

A shaking hand emerged from the covering to swat at him. "Frozen," she stammered. "Not deaf."

Magda grunted. "She'll live."

For the first time since he'd seen her clutching the ice to keep from drowning, the terror threatening to eclipse his reason subsided. He cupped a hand against the side of Louvaen's head and held the drink to her mouth so she could sip without spilling. "If you don't drink this, I will cast your sister out in the snow with just the clothes on her back and best wishes in finding her way home." She capitulated then but glared at him over the rim of the cup the entire time she drank.

Her voice was steadier when she asked "Where's Cinnia?"

"On her way back with Gavin. I'll have Magda let her know you're fine." He turned to the housekeeper. "Keep her occupied when she gets here. Even half dead, Louvaen will try to comfort her."

"Will not," Louvaen protested from the blanket's folds. She continued to shiver, drawing in on herself until she was nothing more than a quaking ball of wool blanket.

Magda patted her on the shoulder. "Let's get you upstairs girl and under the covers." She gave Ballard a quick once-over. "You best get out of those dripping clothes yourself."

He kicked off his boots and peeled off his sodden breeches and shirt. "Send Joan or Clarimond to see to

Magnus. I left him wet and bridled in the ward.” Magda shouted for Joan and tossed him another blanket which he threw over his shoulders. He shooed her away from Louvaen’s chair. “Come, mistress. I’ll carry you.”

He thought she might protest, but Louvaen only burrowed into him. Her eyes were closed, fatigue painting shadows under her lashes. Magda followed him as he climbed the stairs to Louvaen’s room. A fire roared in the hearth, and Clarimond had piled the bed with extra blankets. He stopped Magda at the door. “See we’re not disturbed.”

Her small framed stiffened, and she frowned at him. “*Dominus*, you can’t be thinking to—”

Ballard scowled. “After these many years, you think so poorly of me?”

She flushed but held her ground. “You’re practically slavering over her, my lord. What am I to think?”

He shook his head. “If I take her, Magda, she’ll be awake and willing. Now go.” He shut the door on her. Let her wring her hands and wonder. His heart still banged against his ribs, and he refused to give Louvaen up to anyone else’s care. He’d let her go when he could finally assure himself they’d both recover from the scare she’d given him.

The fire sent shadows capering across the walls and slowly chased the chill from the air. The gray afternoon light filtering through the shutters sank in the gloom. Ballard lowered Louvaen onto the bed and tucked her, still wrapped in her blanket, under the covers. He tossed his own blanket aside and slid in beside her. Before he could curve around her and share body heat, she’d rolled against him, squirming and pushing until she was practically beneath him. Her calves

entwined with his, and if not for the blanket wrapped around her body, they'd be skin to skin from shoulder to ankle.

“So cold,” she murmured before falling asleep in his arms.

Ballard breathed an agonized groan against the top of her head. He'd brought this on himself and would willingly suffer for it. It wasn't how he'd hoped things might unfurl between them, but she lay with him. Far more literally than figuratively, but for now it would more than suffice. She was alive and well and in his arms. He kissed her damp hair and gathered her close. “Damn shrew, you'll be the end of me.”

CHAPTER TEN



Louvaen woke with the conviction the dead slept warm in their graves. How else could she explain the darkness and heat surrounding her when her last clear memory had been of water so cold it froze her bones and sucked the breath out of her? She blinked several times, her sleep-muddled mind noting the snap of wood burning in a fire and the fact all the heady warmth keeping her snug in her coffin concentrated against her left side. Someone was either cremating her remains or roasting her for supper. Her eyes rounded at the second possibility, and she jerked stiff. By gods, she'd tear her way out of this damn box and bash the first sick bastard who tried to gnaw on her. Dead she might be, but she refused to

suffer the indignity of being someone's meal after drowning in a frozen pond!

She thrashed against the weight pressing her down, kicking and clawing until a powerful pair of legs clamped hers in a vise, and an equally strong set of hands held her wrists. "Louvaen! Hold still!"

She froze. "Ballard?" Dear gods! He'd died saving her, and they'd buried them together!

"Aye. You were having a nightmare."

She exhaled hard, wide awake now that the terror of her dream had incinerated the last vestiges of sleep. She fell back against her pillows. "Oh, thank the gods. We're not dead."

A muffled snort tickled the side of her face. "No, we're not, but I'll wish I were if you're not careful with your knee."

They were on their sides, pressed together without a stitch of clothing between them. All the lovely warmth Louvaen had first savored and then feared when she woke came from Ballard. He held her against him with his thighs trapping hers and his hands clasping her wrists. She wriggled her fingers, and he released her. He placed one hand on her hip, the other on her pillow, sheltering her in a loose embrace. He was hard muscle and heat, his scent of smoke and rosemary filling her nose. Her knee rested against his groin, threatening his bollocks. She eased her leg straight, enjoying the flex of his thigh muscles as he loosened his grip just enough to allow her movement. Her freed hands splayed across his shoulders, tracing the cool patches of runes and vines engraved into his skin.

"We're naked."

“Very,” he agreed. “You needed more warmth than the blankets could give. You can defend your modesty later.”

Modesty be damned, she thought. It had been a long time since she’d shared a bed with a man, and she’d forgotten how much she liked the sharing. Thomas was very different from Ballard—easily a head taller and likely outweighed him by nearly a quintel. Louvaen had loved to snuggle against her husband at night and savor the touch of his large hands as he caressed her in his sleep and snored in her hair. Ballard, by contrast, fit neatly in this bed with her. Slighter, tougher and far more lethal, he held her as gently as Thomas. His slow breaths heated her neck and shoulder, quickening to harsh pants when she nuzzled his cheek and slid her hands into his hair.

Light from the fire cast faint shadows within the enclosed sanctuary of her bed. Now that her eyes had adjusted, the darkness that first greeted her had paled a little, revealing the sharp angles of Ballard’s jaw and nose along with the muscled slope of a shoulder. “How long have I been sleeping?” she asked.

“A few hours.” His fingertips followed the curve of her hip and settled on her waist. “How do you feel?”

“Tired—as if I’ve run from here to Monteblanco and back again.” She didn’t exaggerate. Fatigue had worked into her bones as deeply as the pond’s chill and stayed far longer. If not for the distraction of Ballard’s naked body fitted against hers so tightly a thread wouldn’t pass between them, she’d fall back asleep.

“You might as well have. Staying afloat in cold water, especially wearing so much garb, takes work. What do you

remember?”

Images passed in Louvaen’s mind’s eye—she and Cinnia laughing as they skated clumsily across the pond’s glassy surface hand in hand. Delight had changed to horror the instant she heard the first ominous crack. Cinnia’s eyes had gone wide when Louvaen shoved her hard across the ice toward the shore. She had only glimpsed her sister’s stricken expression before the ice gave beneath her feet, and she plunged into the water, sinking like a stone.

“The cold. I remember the cold; light above me; the heaviness of my skirts.” She’d kicked her way toward the surface and the shimmering halo of sunlight on the water, her dress and cloak an anchor dragging her down to the pond’s dark heart. The jagged edges of ice surrounding the hole she’d fallen through shredded her sleeves, but they had given her something to hold onto as her head broke the surface, and she struggled to stay afloat. She’d breathed so hard and fast from the shock of the cold her lungs threatened to burst. Black spots crowded her vision, and she might have fainted if not for the terrifying sight of a shrieking Cinnia crawling toward her on her hands and knees. The rest was a blur—vague memories of yelling at Cinnia to get away from her, of the creeping numbness swallowing her body and the relief of seeing Ballard’s grim, broken features as he commanded her to look at him.

The sense of well-being surrounding her in her warm bed fled with the realization she’d dived with Death and almost lost. Shivers started at her toes, spreading up her legs and over her torso until she shook so hard in Ballard’s arms, the bed rocked beneath them. “You saved me.” She clutched

at him as if he still worked to free her from the pond's icy embrace. "Thank you, Ballard. Thank you."

He hugged her hard enough to crack her ribs as she tried to choke back sobs. He held her for long moments until the shudders faded, leaving her with sniffles and him with hair and neck soaked by her tears. He kissed her forehead. "Shhh, Louvaen," he whispered. "No thanks necessary. I've my own hide to protect. There's a storeroom still half full of unspun flax. Magda would have drawn and quartered me if I'd let you drown before you finished your spinning."

Louvaen gulped. Her tears turned to laughter, which turned to hiccups. Ballard low chuckle soothed her as much as the gentle pats he tapped down her back. She hiccupped a few more times before attempting to speak. "I'm not usually a weepy woman." She tried to wipe away the puddle of tears gathered in the hollow between his neck and collarbone.

"I believe you."

"Nor am I a careless one." She threaded wavy strands of his hair through her fingers.

"I believe that as well." Ballard's comforting pats became slow caresses that traveled the length of her spine.

Louvaen sighed her pleasure at his touch. "I'm also more pleasant-natured than most people think."

The hand stroking her back paused, and he snorted. "Now that just makes you a teller of tall tales, Mistress Duenda." He swatted her lightly on one bare buttock. "I suspect you strop your tongue every morning before you get dressed."

Delighted by his amusement, Louvaen thwacked him on the shoulder in retaliation. “Don’t make me break your nose again, de Sauveterre.” She pulled away from him enough to see his face. The bed’s semi-darkness cast his features in shadow, revealing only hints of his nose and the ridges of his cheekbones. The lambent shine she’d noted in his eyes when she first encountered him chained in his cell shimmered in the gloom. His smile faded beneath the pressure of her thumb as she traced the outline of his lips. “I’ve never kissed you,” she murmured, beguiled by the softness of his lower lip under her touch. There’d been an almost-kiss when she’d flicked the honey from the corner of his mouth with her tongue. Since then she’d dreamed of fully kissing that tempting mouth.

“I understand why,” he said against her fingers. A flicker of something dark danced in his gaze and vanished.

Louvaen moved her hand from his mouth and tilted her head. “Why do you say that?”

He shrugged, flashing a parody of a grin. His teeth gleamed white in his dark face—good teeth, straight and very human except for the curved incisors.

Something inside Louvaen twisted. He always seemed so unconcerned with his appearance that she had grown accustomed to it as well. His short reply revealed a bleak acceptance that if one of his disfigurements didn’t repel a person, another would. Inwardly, she wept for him. Outwardly, she frowned and tapped the bridge of his nose. “You are a vain creature, my lord.”

He jerked in her arms. “What?”

“I didn’t say I never *wanted* to kiss you, only that I hadn’t.” She nestled against him, echoing his gasp when his

arousal pushed between her thighs. Louvaen had spent sleepless hours wracked with indecision and guilt. She desired Ballard de Sauveterre, desperately wanted to invite him to fulfill his threat of taking her to his bed. Only the lingering sense of fealty to Thomas had stopped her. Thomas was dead, had been so for three years. If his spirit watched over her, it likely scoffed at her for being a “daft lass longer in legs than sense.”

Louvaen smiled at the thought and cradled Ballard’s face in her hands. “I’m going to learn this proud face again, my lord. And if you are in hell once more, you’ll just have to bear this trial for a little while.”

She started with his forehead, her lips brushing the creases and marks made by time and the flux. He rested pliant in her embrace, hot hands idly stroking her back and bottom as she trailed meandering kisses across his cheeks and nose, the arches of his eyebrows and the delicate skin at his temples. His thick lashes tickled her mouth where she kissed his eyelids. “You feel good in my arms,” she said. The groan vibrating up from his chest thrummed across her breasts. His jaw flexed under her caress, his body quivering when she dipped her tongue into the hollow of his throat.

He kneaded her bottom before sliding down to grip her thighs and lift one of her legs over his hip. The position opened her to him, to the soft give of his bollocks and his hard shaft made slippery by her body’s response to him. “Witch who would bed a beast,” he whispered. He clutched her and rolled, and suddenly she was on her back looking into his shadowed face. Firelight outlined his hair and the breadth of his shoulders, sheened in sweat. His hands traveled up her sides, one stopping to cup her breast while the other burrowed

into her hair. His promise mimicked hers. “I’m going to learn this lovely body and beautiful face, Louvaen Duenda.” The rough pads of his fingers rubbed her nipple. Louvaen clutched his shoulders and bucked against him. “And if I’m in hell, it’s a torture I’ll gladly suffer.”

He did to her as she did to him, learning the curves and angles of her face with his lips, the taste of her skin with his tongue, the scent of her hair with his nose. His fingers counted each rib, glided over the expanse of her belly and stroked the heart of her until she twisted so hard on the bed, she nearly unseated him. She bit his neck in retaliation, savoring the tremors of his body and the low growls escaping his mouth.

Her revenge didn’t slow him down. Blankets were kicked to the foot of the bed as Ballard used his tongue to paint designs on her skin. He paused at her breasts, taking his time to suck one pink tip into his mouth while his fingers danced across the other. Louvaen banged her knee on the bed screen hard enough to bruise. The pain was nothing more than a distant twinge as she squirmed in her lover’s arms and whispered encouragements to him. His lips followed where his hands had traveled until he crouched at the end of the bed, his face between her thighs. Her knees splayed wide under the coaxing pressure of his thumbs. She almost knocked them both to the floor when he put his mouth on her, her heels digging into his back as he held her down with a heavy arm. She listened to her own cries—deep, bestial sounds—while Ballard tortured her with slow, sucking kisses and the slide of his tongue inside her. A last flick of his tongue had her keening her climax, and she squeezed his head so hard with her knees she was sure she crushed his ears.

The fall back to earth left her limp, gasping for breath and with legs as wobbly as an old table. Ballard slid up her body enough to rest his head on her chest. Louvaen wondered if he could hear the gallop of her heartbeat as she strove to fill her lungs with air. She massaged his scalp, his hair damp with perspiration. “Who exactly is the beast in the bed, de Sauveterre?” she teased.

A rumble against her sensitive nipple made her jump. He kissed the tip in apology and inched further up until they were face to face. A thin line of sweat trickled from his temple and down the side of his face as he gave her a smug grin. “Speak louder, woman. My ears are still ringing from that bludgeoning you just gave me.” His grin softened. He caressed her nose with a fingertip. “I’d be disappointed to hear only delicate sighs from so bold a woman.”

Louvaen looped her arms around his neck and tugged him down until her lips ghosted his. Every muscle in her body thrummed from the aftermath of her orgasm, yet she wanted more, needed more of this man—so grim in his manner, so generous in his passion. She trailed a path with one hand from his shoulder, across his chest and the rigid muscles of his abdomen to the stiff cock pulsing gently against her slippery thighs. He gasped into her half opened mouth when her hand curled around him and stroked from base to tip. Her fingers came away sticky. She tucked them into her mouth, savored the faint flavor of salt as she licked them clean.

“Gods, Louvaen, I’ll come before I’m inside you if you continue.”

She reached for him a second time, holding his hips with her trembling legs. “That’s not a bad thing, Ballard, but I’d

rather you came inside me.” She guided him to her, her tongue sliding between his lips as he slid deep with a single thrust. Louvaen groaned at the fullness, spread her legs wider to take him. She had not made love to a man since Thomas, and her body was no longer accustomed to the feel of a cock inside her. Ballard might not be quite the horse the lusty princess once compared him to, but he was endowed well enough to make her gasp in his mouth with every slow pump of his hips.

He paused and broke the kiss. “Am I hurting you?” He waited, strung tight as a bowstring.

She caressed his cheek. “No. We’re just a snug fit.” She smiled and tugged on his hair to bring him back to her. “Kiss me again.”

Ballard obeyed her command, his tongue entwining with hers as he rocked back and forth, quickening from deep plunges to short, shallow strokes and back again. Louvaen locked her ankles behind his back, angled her hips and gripped his buttocks to bring him harder against her. He ended their kiss a second time only to bury his face in her neck and suck the soft skin between his teeth. She grunted at the pleasure-pain and clutched his arms as he went rigid, his breath gusting hot along her neck. He groaned into her hair. A swell of heat filled her belly, followed by a slow throb as Ballard settled heavy in her arms, spent.

They lay together amidst a heap of tossed pillows. Content to lie beneath him and let him catch his breath, Louvaen idly traced the markings on Ballard’s body, fingers sliding down his back to rest at the base of his spine. She savored his weight on her, inside her. They were a sweaty,

sticky mess, and she loved all of it. Each breath he exhaled pushed her deeper into the mattress; every twitch of his muscles caressed her skin. He finally lifted his head to look at her.

“This is a small bed,” Ballard observed wryly. Louvaen laughed, cutting it short as her muscles tensed. He wrapped an arm around her hip to anchor her to him and rolled them to their sides. “Careful. I’m not ready to leave this sweet place just yet.” He kissed her softly, tracing the outline of her lips with his tongue.

Louvaen returned the kiss, indulging herself by sucking his lower lip between her teeth to nibble at him. She released him at his faint moan and grinned. “It is a small bed. Is that why you offered yours first?”

The crows’ feet at the corners of his eyes deepened. “Mine is much bigger. I’d not be dodging your knees and mine while I nibbled your thighs.”

In their current position, the light from the hearth illuminated his features, casting the scars in high relief. She recalled the portrait in the corridor, the dour ruthlessness stamped on his unscarred face. He told her he’d been born and raised a warrior, a Marcher lord skilled in the arts of combat and bloodshed. She’d seen him spar with Gavin, taking the bigger, younger man down several times before Gavin got the best of him a time or two. He hunted boar alone, a dangerous endeavor even amongst a group of armed hunters. She didn’t doubt he’d make a deadly opponent in any fight. That he once relished warfare had been evident in the painting. Not so much now. He was neither gentled nor softened, but something had tempered him, blunted the thirst for battle

simply for battle's sake. Despite the many scars and twisted magic marking him now, Ballard de Sauveterre was far handsomer and more intriguing than the man who'd stood impatiently for the portrait.

Louvaen twined a tendril of his hair around her finger. "Your bed next time."

His arms tightened on her. "Next time?"

He tried to hide it, but she heard the wary hope in his question. She kissed the lock of hair. "Many next times. Besides, I'm not in the habit of doing things I might later regret."

Ballard's eyebrows shot up. "I'll remember that the next time you shoot at my castle, break my nose and threaten to kill my son." He winked.

She sniffed and tugged hard enough on the wrapped lock of hair to make him wince. "You forgot eviscerating your magician." She paused. "Then again I'm not sure I'd regret that."

As if her words summoned him, Ambrose's voice sounded beyond her door. "Mistress Duenda, it's Ambrose. Open the door." A series of hard raps against the wood emphasized his demand.

Louvaen's eyes widened. What did the magician want with her, and now of all times?

Ballard's expression reflected the same surprise before it darkened into a thunderous scowl. "I'm going to kill him." He slipped out of her, kissing her in apology when she squeaked a protest. He rolled out of bed in one smooth motion and padded toward to the door.

Louvaen scrambled after him, pausing to yank one of the blankets off the bed and wrap it around herself. “Wait. Wait! I want to see this.”

She made it to his side just as he yanked the door open. Ambrose stood before them, dressed in one of his many robes with its embroidered symbols and potions stains. He held a goblet in one hand and eyed the pair of them as if he’d stumbled upon some newly discovered and possibly dangerous animal. One eyebrow arched at Ballard’s nudity before his gaze paused on Louvaen, touching on her hair, her makeshift blanket robe and her bare feet. She resisted the urge to pat her hair. “I’ve seen haints livelier looking than you,” he said. He barely dodged the punch she threw at him.

Ballard grabbed her by the waist to hold her back. “Your timing could get you murdered, Ambrose. State your business and make it quick.”

Despite almost having his eye blackened, Ambrose smiled and offered Louvaen the goblet he held. “An ice water bath isn’t always invigorating, nor is a tugging. This is a restorative to chase away the fatigue. You look like you need it.”

Startled by the unexpected kindness, even if it was offered on the back of an insult, Louvaen took the goblet. “Thank you.” She peered at the ruby tinted liquid in the cup and sniffed. Her head snapped back at the fumes, and her eyes teared. She thrust the goblet at Ambrose. “No thank you. I think I prefer drowning over poisoning.”

He pushed it back to her. “My poisons are sweet.”

Ballard plucked the goblet out of her hand and sniffed the contents. Like Louvaen, he reared back and turned his

head to cough. “What kind of piss is this?” he said when he caught a breath.

Louvaen frowned. “Probably something he made with the venom and scales of the world’s most evil viper.”

“Oh, you have a twin?” This time Ambrose took a long step out of striking range.

Ballard uttered a strangled sound, quickly masked by a fake cough. Louvaen smacked him on the arm. Her appreciation of Ambrose’s sharp quip, along with the lingering gratitude that he’d taken the time to brew something to help her feel better, softened her annoyance. Ballard’s lovemaking had left her sated, content and so tired she was sure she’d sleep for months. She could use a restorative even if it did reek like the dead. She took the goblet from Ballard. “Does it taste as bad it smells?” she asked.

Ambrose’s eyes glittered ten shades of malice. “Worse.”

“Of course it does. How soon until I drop dead once I drink it?” She ignored Ballard’s sudden frown and kept her gaze on the sorcerer.

“If I’m lucky, I’ll witness that pleasurable event before the *dominus* sends me on my way.”

“I should have done so the moment I opened the door,” Ballard muttered.

Louvaen pinched her nostrils shut and brought the cup to her lips. Her throat muscles flexed, and her stomach flipped in warning. She glowered at Ambrose over the goblet’s rim.

Ballard stroked her arm. “You don’t have to drink it, my beauty.”

Ambrose's amused gaze sobered and sharpened for a moment before he shrugged. "It's entirely up to you, mistress. If it encourages you, your sister is beside herself wondering how you are. You'd do well to put in an appearance downstairs very soon."

She downed the restorative in one gulp. "Gods' knickers," she wheezed out and immediately clamped her lips shut as her stomach roiled, and her mouth flooded with saliva.

Ballard caught the cup as it fell from her nerveless fingers. "Louvaen?"

She didn't dare open her mouth to answer him. If she did, the swill in her belly would come right back up. Ambrose looked positively gleeful at her distress. If her mind didn't reel at the idea his vile brew would be worse coming up than it was going down, she'd vomit on his shoes.

The nausea faded, leaving her with a growing sense of vigor and lightness. The drowsiness threatening to nail her eyelids shut disappeared, along with the lethargy weighting her muscles. She eyed Ambrose with renewed admiration. "It's working."

He snorted, affronted by her surprise. "Of course it's working. 'Tis a simple decoction. Any hedgewitch with a toe on the left hand path knows how to brew it. Your mother likely made it when she first embarked on her studies. The difficulty isn't in the making, but in keeping it in your belly."

"Thank you—I think." Anxious to scrub the foul flavor out of her mouth, she left both men in the corridor. The small cupboard near her hearth held personal items—a brush and comb, a hand mirror and hair ribbons she'd brought on her

second trip to Ketach Tor, as well as a small box containing coarse salt and crushed rosemary.

Ballard returned to find her vigorously scrubbing her teeth with the last two. He waited until she spat the last remnants of rinse water into the fire before speaking. “Ambrose warned me if I kissed you I’d be sorry.”

Louvaen popped a dried rosemary leaf into her mouth and chewed until the astringent herb made her tongue tingle. “Is that a general statement or just a reference to his revolting concoction?”

Ballard chuckled and came to stand behind her. “Hard to say with him. He’d be wrong if it were the first. I’m not at all sorry for kissing every part of you. I intend to do it as often as possible.” He caressed the length of her arm, leaving a trail of gooseflesh in its wake. “If the second, well, I’m willing to take the risk.”

Louvaen’s eyes drifted to half mast. She craved his touch; far more seductive than anything she imagined or dreamed. “As much as I hate to admit he’s right, you’d do well to heed his warning.” She spat the chewed herb into the fire, thankful to only taste its cool, sharp flavor. “Drink that disgusting stuff and you can slay a dragon just by breathing on it.” She smiled when she caught sight of his attire from the corner of her eye. Like her, he had retrieved one of the blankets and wrapped it around his middle. It rode low on his hips, emphasizing his lean waist and wide shoulders. “Catch a touch of the chill in the hall, did you?”

He slid an arm around her waist and urged her against him until she stood within his embrace, her back to his chest. He buried his nose in her hair. “More like a touch of

prudence. I have to return to my room and dress. Ambrose doesn't much care if I'm flashing my bits, but if I encounter your fair sister during an attempted rescue, things could get... awkward."

The image of such a scenario made her laugh. The laughter turned to sighs as Ballard pushed aside locks of her hair to place a line of kisses that started at her nape and danced across the slope of her shoulder. Louvaen laid her hands over his, tracing the bony knuckles and dark nails. "I wish we could stay here all night." Longer even, but she kept the thought to herself, fearful of the emotions welling inside her. How tempting it was to succumb to the fantasy of remaining at Ketach Tor, looking forward to long nights in this man's arms and countless days spent in his company.

His arms tightened around her, hard enough to make her squeak. He loosened his grasp and nuzzled the underside of her jaw. "Your wishes are far more modest than mine, Louvaen," he whispered in her ear. "Come to my chamber this evening." The knot she'd tied in her blanket came undone under his hand and fell to the floor. She shivered at the contrast of cold air washing over her body and the heat of his palm where it rested on her belly. "You'll not sleep much," he warned, "but you'll be warm beneath me."

She sagged in his embrace, moaning softly as his fingers slid lower and slipped between her thighs to stroke and tease. Ballard scooped her up, intent on her carrying her to the bed when another knock resounded on her door. Louvaen choked back a snarled "go away!" when she heard Cinnia's muted voice.

"Lou? Lou, it's me. Are you awake?"

Ballard halted and set Louvaen down. She put a finger to her lips. They were acting like lady and stablehand creeping about her bedchamber, but she didn't feel up to explaining to an outraged Cinnia why having Ballard in her room was quite different from letting Gavin's into Cinnia's. Ballard rolled his eyes but did her bidding when she motioned for him to hide out of sight.

“Louvaen, wake up! I'm worried.”

Louvaen found her night rail and shrugged it on, uncaring that it was inside out. “Coming, my love,” she called. “Give me a moment.” Unlike Ballard, who had thrown the door wide to greet Ambrose, she eased it open barely enough for Cinnia to catch a glimpse of her.

The girl's shoulders sagged. “Thank the gods, you're all right.” She frowned as her gaze took in Louvaen's appearance. “You aren't sick are you? Because you look like the dead.”

Louvaen scowled at her. “I'm fine, love. I just needed some rest.” She offered a weak smile. “Why don't you tell Magda I'll be down for supper after I change my clothes and tame my hair?”

She tried to close the door, but Cinnia pressed her hands against the wood, resisting. Her eyes darkened with worry and lingering fear. “I can help you. Fix your hair or do up your lacings.” She wedged a foot in the doorway. “Let me in, Lou.”

This wasn't going to be easy. Louvaen had no intention of letting her sister into her room while Ballard lurked in the shadows. Even if he wasn't, Cinnia would question why the bed linens had been thrashed in a whirlwind. She didn't have

the heart to order her to leave. Ambrose's words echoed in her mind. Cinnia wanted reassurance her sister had come away from her near drowning unscathed. Louvaen reached out and clasp her sister's wrist. "Give me the privacy to use the chamber pot, Cinnia."

Cinnia looked chastened. "Sorry. I'll wait out here until you're done."

Louvaen wanted to bash her head against the door. The soft laughter rumbling from the shadows behind her didn't help her frustration. She thought fast. "Do me a favor instead. Let me borrow your brush. It works better than mine on the bad tangles." A trip to Cinnia's room for a hairbrush would buy Ballard enough time to slip out of her room and out of sight before her sister returned.

Cinnia backed away. "I'll be right back. Do you need anything else? You're terribly pale. I have a balm with angelica. It might give your lips some color."

"That's fine." Louvaen shooed her off with a wave of her hand. "Bring whatever you think best." She closed the door and whirled around, only to find Ballard right behind her.

He caught her to him. "You lie so well," he taunted.

Louvaen struggled free and took his hand to lead him to the door. "I didn't lie. Her brush is better than mine." She cracked door open once more to peek into the hallway. It was deserted, but Cinnia would make quick work of gathering her things. She pulled on Ballard's arm. "Hurry. She'll be back in no time." She gasped when he yanked her into a hard embrace.

“A kiss before I go, dragonslayer.” He leaned in to capture her lips with his.

She clapped a hand over his mouth. “Ballard,” she whispered furiously, “we don’t have time for this.”

He pushed her hand away. “We’ll make time, Louvaen.”

His kiss stole her breath. Her fingers dug into his arms as his tongue thrust into her mouth, gliding over her teeth to entwine with her tongue. Louvaen buried her hands in his hair and promptly forgot her sister, her surroundings and even her own name. He bunched her night rail in his hands, raising it until he could reach under the hem and cup her bottom. She wrapped a leg around the back of his thighs, tangling her foot in the blanket he still wore. She loved his taste in her mouth, his scent in her nostrils. The kiss, at first harsh and aggressive, turned languorous, ending abruptly when the sharp slam of a door cut through Louvaen’s muddled thoughts.

She flinched out of Ballard’s arms, eyes wide. “Cinnia,” she whispered.

“Rosemary,” he replied just as softly.

Louvaen gawked at him. “What?”

Ballard touched his lip. “Rosemary. Hardly something to slay the pretty dragon headed for your door right now.”

She growled and pointed an accusing finger at him. “This is your fault! You’ve made me an addle-pated wanton.” She slapped his hand away when he reached for her. “No you don’t.” Her chance to sneak him out of her chamber before Cinnia arrived had come and gone. Her sister was beautiful, not stupid. She’d grow suspicious at Louvaen’s uncharacteristic nervousness and refusal to let her in her room.

She flung the door open and marched into the hall. Cinnia held up her hands filled with ribbons, a small pot of lip balm and a brush. “I have everything. I’ll even braid your hair for you.”

Louvaen looped her arm through Cinnia’s and offered what she hoped was an easy smile. “You’ll likely kill me for this, but can I have what’s in your ewer? I used mine to rinse my mouth out. Hideous potion the sorcerer gave me. And Clarimond piled the bed with so many blankets to keep me warm, I baked under them. I need a wash—and more water.”

She didn’t give Cinnia time to answer, pushing her back toward her room. The urge to glance over her shoulder and see if Ballard managed to sneak away almost overwhelmed her, but she resisted. If she looked, so would Cinnia.

They made it to Cinnia’s room without mishap. Louvaen delayed them with small talk and repeated assurances that she was thawed out and perfectly fine after her plunge into the icy pond. Ballard was gone by the time they returned. He’d made the bed and left the blankets they’d worn as coverings folded neatly in one of the chairs. Louvaen sighed. She saw no trace of him, yet she fancied his presence lingered. The blood in her veins still ran hot from the memory of his caresses, the feel of his body against hers, inside her.

“Lou, are you sure you’re recovered?” Cinnia eyed her, gripping the hair brush like a cudgel.

Lou hugged her. “Stop worrying, and help me. I need to bathe and dress before Magda marches up here threatening murder if we’re late for supper.”

They made it to the kitchens as Magda was setting out the various platters of food. Gavin and Ambrose were already

seated, as was Ballard. He watched Louvaen with an intensity that should have set fire to her frock as she took her customary place at the table. Ambrose smiled into his goblet, his gaze flicking back and forth between her and Ballard. Supper was an easy, chatty affair, despite the scare Louvaen had given them earlier in the day. They discussed final plans for Modrnicht, and Louvaen did her best not to gaze moon-eyed at Ballard as he made no effort to disguise the fact he undressed her with his eyes.

She hoped they wouldn't spend much time in the solar. Between the long hours of sleep and Ambrose's restorative, she was wide awake, restless and eager to accept Ballard's offer to share his bed. He'd warned her she'd get no sleep. She made note to ask him later if that was a threat or a promise. But all her daydreaming and machinations were soon dashed. Cinnia held her hand between both of hers. Her brown eyes carried the same haunted expression Louvaen had seen earlier, and her lower lip quivered.

"Lou, would you sleep in my room tonight?"

Louvaen stared at her sister as if she'd sprouted two more heads. "Your room?"

A low choking noise drifted from the head of the table. Ballard had his goblet to his mouth. The dark eyes watching her over the cup's brim blazed.

Cinnia gripped her hands harder. "Yes. My bed is big and has plenty of room for the both of us. I'd sleep better if you..." She paused and gnawed at her lip, her eyes filling with tears.

Gut twisting at the idea she'd frightened Cinnia so badly, Louvaen brushed the girl's cheek. "Of course, love. I'll stay

with you tonight.” She glanced a second time at Ballard. He’d returned his goblet to the table and stared at his charger with such a black scowl, the food on it should have shriveled into lumps of charcoal.

Cinnia beamed and hugged her. “I promise not to kick too much.”

Louvaen pulled away from her with a scowl. “If you plant your foot in my back as you tend to do, I will shove you straight out of the bed, and you can sleep on the floor.”

The girl held up her hands. “No kicking or stealing covers. Promise.”

Their evening gathering in the solar was abbreviated. Ballard sat in his chair, thin-lipped and grim as Louvaen read aloud from a book of poetry and avoided his gaze. She knew her face reflected the same disappointment she saw in his eyes, the same need, the same want. Ambrose had excused himself from the gathering, citing a wish to spend the evening with Magda. That only made Ballard’s visage darken even more. Gavin watched his father with a contemplative stare. Cinnia spun wool rovings on the great wheel until a series of yawns made her give up.

The girl stood and stretched her back. “I can’t stay awake.” She bowed to Ballard. “We ask your pardon to retire, *dominus*.”

“Granted,” he said abruptly and frowned at the fire in the hearth.

Louvaen abandoned her book on the nearby table. Gavin had taken Cinnia’s hand to wish her good night by kissing her fingers. Louvaen cleared her throat. “De Lovet,

why don't you escort my sister to her room." Two sets of eyebrows shot up. "Just to the threshold, mind. I'll be there in a moment. I have something to discuss with his lordship." The words had barely left her mouth before the two bolted.

"If anyone was standing in the way outside, they're trampled now." Ballard's dour expression had lightened, a hint of amusement playing about his lips.

Louvaen came to stand in front of him, pushing with her knees until he opened his, and she stood between his legs. "One day fortune shall favor me, and it will be your sorcerer in the path." She took one of his hands. "I couldn't refuse her, Ballard. Were our places reversed, and she'd been the one you rescued, Gavin would have to chain me to the wall to keep me from her, and I'd practically be laced into her bodice for days to make sure she was recovered. What she asks of me is far less than what I'd demand of her."

He sighed and brought her hand to his mouth. His lips drifted gently over her wrist. "Your devotion to your sister is an admirable thing. And a torment for me."

She smiled. "You'll not be alone in your suffering, nor are you released from your offer. I intend to make myself comfortable in your big bed and expect you to keep me warm as promised."

Ballard's eyes gleamed obsidian in the firelight. He tugged until she hovered over him, close enough that he burrowed his nose into her shallow cleavage. Louvaen teased the waves in his hair, sighing as his tongue flickered over the swell of one breast. "How long?" he murmured. "How long do I wait?"

She ran a finger over one of the raised scars that rutted his cheek. “Just tonight I think. We shared a bed as children. It was a constant battle over the blankets, the pillows and space on the mattress.” She smiled at his hopeful expression. “She’ll be as weary of me as I will be of her by morning.”

“Then I look forward to morning.”

Louvaen chuckled and eased out of his embrace. “I must go. I suspect Gavin’s interpretation of the threshold is much further into her chamber than mine is. And Cinnia will only encourage him.”

Ballard captured a fold of her skirt. “Kiss me before you go.”

She twitched the skirt out of his grasp and shook her head. “No.”

His face hardened into the severe lines she was used to seeing. “Why not?” They softened when she kissed one of her fingertips and touched it to his lip.

“If I do, I won’t stop at one, and the next thing you know, it will be Gavin and Cinnia come to find me and discovering me naked in your lap.”

Ballard groaned and tilted his head back against the chair. He stared at the ceiling for a moment. “What man wouldn’t tent his breeches on hearing a woman say she’d happily strip naked for him after a few kisses?”

Louvaen shrugged. “I only speak the truth.”

“And that forthright manner is its own great allure.” He arched an eyebrow. “You’ll dream of me as you sleep in your sister’s virginal bed?”

“No,” she teased. “Dreaming of you will give me no peace; I need my rest in preparation for tomorrow night. I’ve been promised I won’t sleep then, so I best do it now.” She offered him a short bow. “I’m holding you to that promise, de Sauveterre.” She winked and strode out of the room, his low laughter following her as she closed the door behind her.

She stopped at her chamber to gather her night rail and shooed Gavin away from Cinnia’s door. He’d been as good as his word and not crossed the threshold. By the time she crawled into Cinnia’s bed and wished her sister goodnight, the effects of Ambrose’s potion had worn off, and she yawned as hard as Cinnia had earlier. Outside, snow flurries beat against the paned windows like butterfly wings. Louvaen watched their chaotic dances, Cinnia already asleep and curled warm against her back. A whisper of sound drifted in from the other side of the door. A heavy step, a pause, and then the steps moved on. She recognized the tread and sighed. Morning couldn’t come soon enough.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



“So you live another day.” Isabeau’s gaze remained on her needle as she embroidered by the window. Sunlight spilled through the glass, outlining her elegant profile and the swell of her belly in a golden corona. Two of her women sat nearby, bent to their needlework as if the discourse between their lord and lady didn’t interest them.

Ballard knew better. Expecting a raging diatribe, death threats and copious tears, he stood just inside the solar, wary of his wife’s unnerving calm. “Are you well, my lady?”

A smile, sharp as a knife’s edge, curved her mouth. “Well as can be with this parasite tumbling about inside me.”

He flinched and her smile widened. She might not be looking at him directly, but she watched him. “You have foresworn our bargain, Margrave.”

He came to stand near her chair, admiring the way the sun gilded her hair. Her beauty didn't move him—had never moved him—though he understood why others had been beguiled by it. He did pity her. Bound to one man, pursued by and lied to by another, she'd been exploited, manipulated and extorted for the one thing of value greater than any single person: land. She hated him, and with reason, but she'd kept to their bargain, believing she'd have her freedom and her lover. He'd robbed her of the second.

“I'm sorry, Isabeau. He left me no choice.”

The needle paused in its breaching. Isabeau turned on her stool and met his gaze. He almost recoiled. Even in battle, when his enemies fought him across fields made muddy with blood, he'd never beheld such rancor. “Don't say my name. My mother gave me my name, and you foul it by speaking it.” She resumed her stitching; only now her hand shook, belying her flat tone. “I prayed Cederic would be the one to cross the bridge at Ketach Tor.”

“I know you did.”

She continued as if he hadn't spoken. “I prayed he would split you open and spill your innards out for the king to see; that he'd feed them to the pigs afterwards. I prayed he would take your head for good measure and present it to me as a wedding gift.” Her women hunched on their stools and turned their faces away. Isabeau paused in her needlework once more, and this time when she stared at him, her blue eyes had emptied of all emotion. That emptiness spun a cold spot

inside him that settled at the base of his spine. "I think I would have kissed you then."

Ballard looked past his wife to the green pastures beyond her window. Had Cederic been a better fighter, the gods might have answered her prayers. Instead, they'd favored him over his challenger that day, and Ballard had walked away from the field of combat doused in the blood that had fountained from the fatal wound he'd hacked into Cederic's neck. He'd been more relieved than triumphant. As Isabeau said, he lived another day, and the contested properties which had brought so much strife to his household remained his.

"What now?" She sounded tired, defeated.

He sighed. "Granthing died without an heir. His demesne borders mine. The king has granted all Granthing lands to me in the interest of securing kingdom borders. As Margrave, I'm responsible for defending them anyway."

Her sharp bark of laughter made her grasp her belly and bend over the embroidery frame. She held up a hand to hold him off when he stepped closer. Perspiration beaded her brow and upper lip as she straightened. Her mouth turned up in a sneer. "Always the land for you. You imprisoned me for it, killed my lover for it. Is there anything you won't do for a parcel of dirt?"

If he were to answer honestly, he'd say no. Land was power. Possessing it raised soldiers to knights, knights to noblemen, and in some cases noblemen to kings. Isabeau had no interest in the ambitions of the family into which she'd married, no love for her husband or the heir she carried. Their future meant nothing to her. As such, Ballard didn't

answer her question directly. "I won't keep you at Ketach Tor beyond the birth of the child if that's your wish. I've not foresworn all of our bargain, my lady. You are still free to live elsewhere. Any place you choose, and I'll support you. Neither of us can remarry, but should you find another to love, I won't begrudge him your favors."

Isabeau rose slowly from her seat and closed the distance between them. Even heavily pregnant, with the babe almost resting on her knees, she moved with a grace to be envied. "But you'd begrudge this future paramour my lands."

"My lands," he corrected. "They ceased to be yours when you married me. And I will deny any child you may bear of a later union." He motioned to her gravid shape. "Ketach Tor belongs to this child and only this child."

Sunlight winked off metal as Isabeau's hand shot up before arcing toward Ballard's face. Already leery of her willingness to come so close, he dodged the sharp scissors she held, almost losing an eye to her aim. Isabeau missed his face but found her mark in his shoulder. Steel points sank deep into muscle, and Ballard hissed as hot pain bolted down his arm to his fingers. He pushed her away from him. Her handmaidens screamed, echoing Isabeau's shrieks as the unnatural calm fractured beneath her rage.

"I wish you were dead!" she shouted and bodily launched herself at him.

Scissors still buried in his shoulder, Ballard caught her with his uninjured arm and clenched his jaw when she sank her teeth into his bicep. He was hamstrung, unable to defend himself for fear of hurting the baby. She bit him hard enough

to draw blood, letting go only when her women pulled her off him.

Isabeau sank to her knees, panting, face flushed red, mouth smeared with Ballard's blood. "Gods, I hate you." She gasped, clutched her belly and clawed at one of her women. The rosy color drained from her skin, leaving her ashen.

Alarmed, Ballard crouched in front of her. "Isabeau?"

"Get away from me," she whispered. She wrapped her arms around her middle. "Baby. Hurts."

Ballard lurched to his feet. "Get Magda and find the midwife," he ordered the handmaidens. They stared at him, openmouthed and unmoving. "Now!" he bellowed.

One fled the room while the other stroked Isabeau's hair back from her sweating face. Ballard wrapped a hand around the scissors, took a breath and yanked. The pain cascading down his arm spread to his back and down his side, trailed by a crimson stream. He tossed the scissors aside. Isabeau slapped at him as he lifted her in his arms and carried her to her bed. He laid her down gently and stepped back so the remaining servant could make her comfortable.

Pale as bleached linen, Isabeau glared at him from the bed. "I hope it dies," she said. "And that I die too. Then I'll be free, and you will have nothing." She turned her face to the wall, fingers clenched in the sheets.

The handmaiden spoke gently. "Her labor is upon her, dominus. You have no place here now."

He nodded and left the chamber. The corridor was dark and cool and served to clear his mind. The scent of copper curled in his nostrils as blood from his wound struck the floor

in a patter of steady drips. He prayed as Isabeau once prayed, not for death but for life.

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Ambrose eyed Ballard and Gavin, disapproval etched in every line of his weathered face. He balanced a shimmering orb of violet light on the tips of his fingers. It twirled and bounced, shooting blue sparks from its center. “The last time you two fought for one of these, Magda had to stitch Gavin’s arm and you broke your wrist.” He surveyed the great hall, noting the table and benches had been moved against the walls and the rushes swept aside to reveal the stone floor. “Don’t forget the furniture you had to repair afterward. Are you certain you want to do this?”

Ballard shrugged. “Gavin broke my wrist, not me.”

Gavin batted at the orb. It whipped around Ambrose’s back before darting in front of Gavin to float just out of reach. “We’re sure. Unlike Father here, I haven’t enjoyed a good brawl or tussle in a long time.”

“When did you last see me brawling with anyone but you?” Ballard’s eyes narrowed at his son’s sly grin.

“You bedded the Widow Duenda. Tell me that wasn’t a brawl. Half drowned and half dead, that’s a woman who’d run you ‘til you dropped.”

Ballard stretched his muscles in preparation for the upcoming match and ignored Gavin’s commentary. The boy had no business knowing the goings-on in his bedchamber, and Ballard had no intention of enlightening him. “Don’t count on that to win this game, son.” He signaled to Ambrose who slung the sparking orb across the great hall. He leapt

nimbly aside as Ketach Tor's master and heir practically threw themselves after it.

The game had been Ballard's idea, a way to teach Gavin martial skills beyond sword and horsemanship. It required speed, agility and endurance. The rules were simple. Chase after the fast-flying ball until you caught it, all the while preventing your opponent from doing the same and stop him from taking it from you by force. Gavin had embraced the exercise with enthusiasm, thrilled with the opportunity to pit his skills against his war-trained father. As he reached manhood, the game grew progressively harder, more brutal until it resembled no genteel entertainment but a street battle where the only true rule was to win.

The orb itself was a nasty piece of work, darting about with hummingbird speed. A fiendish creation spawned in Ambrose's potions room late one night, it eluded capture, spitting blue sparks as if laughing at its pursuers' efforts. Both men had soon learned that nabbing the orb was only half the challenge. Holding onto it was just as difficult. The dancing sparks sent sharp pangs through the hand and up the arm, causing muscles to twitch and convulse, and sometimes the prey turned on the hunters. Ballard had sprained two fingers in one game when the orb whipped around and smashed him in the hand. Gavin had lost a back tooth when it shot across the room straight at him. He didn't duck fast enough and counted himself lucky to have only suffered a lost tooth instead of a broken jaw.

Gavin's fingers just scraped the orb's surface before Ballard tackled him from behind, taking him down at the knees. Both men crashed to the floor only to spring up and race after their prize. Ballard caught it for a brief moment and

was slammed against one wall so hard, his teeth rattled. The orb popped out of his grip, and Gavin sprinted after it, crowing triumphantly. “Getting slow in your dotage, gaffer.”

The two fought from one end of the hall to the other, grappling, punching and cursing as the orb flashed between them, tantalizingly close but always just out of reach. In the end, Gavin won through sheer endurance. Gasping, dripping sweat and suffering a pounding headache after Gavin head butted him, Ballard sat on the floor facing his son and began to laugh. The other man had tucked the orb into the front of his trousers. A radiant glow illuminated his crotch. Gavin gritted his teeth, red face leaching of all color until he'd paled a ghastly shade of gray. “Done?” He gasped out the word.

Ballard waved a hand, wincing at the thought of what those needle-like sparks were doing to Gavin's manhood. “Aye. You win. I can't stand to watch you geld yourself over a game.” He stretched out on the stone pavers, grateful for their icy comfort against his back, and listened as Gavin recited the charm that disintegrated the orb.

He dropped to his haunches next to his father. “I bi my ton,” he garbled and spat a gobbet of blood on the floor in front of him.

Ballard eyed the arched ceiling joists high above him. “I'm getting too old for this.” A tickling sensation at his temple had him wiping at the sweat droplets gathered there. His hand came away smeared red. Gavin wasn't the only one to walk away from this melee bloodied.

Gavin pressed a hand gingerly to his side. “You've an elbow like a hammer. I think you cracked a rib.”

He offered neither apology nor sympathy. Playing the game had been Gavin's idea. The side of his face still ached from the last punch Gavin landed on him. "Was it worth it to cool your blood?"

"For now. Ask me again in couple of hours after I've sat by Cinnia at table, with her scent in my nose and her sister threatening to rip my heart out if I dare lay a finger on her."

The clearing of a throat made both men look toward the screen separating the hall from the kitchen. Louvaen stood watching them, arms akimbo. Ballard clambered to his feet and swayed, dizzy. Gavin must have hit him harder than he thought. Large snowflakes veiled Louvaen's braided hair, floating lazily from the crown of her head to catch in the loose strands and flutter over her face. She grimaced and swatted at a few that danced over her nose and tipped her eyelashes. It took him a moment to realize the snowflakes were down feathers. Magda had put her to work plucking their supper. Her gaze raked them, noting their disheveled state, the scrapes and bruises, blood and cuts.

"Magda sent me to tell you that once you're through beating each other senseless to please leave the hall so the rest of us with something important to do can decorate for Modrnicht."

Gavin flinched at her waspish tone. Ballard nodded and offered a bow. "It's yours to do with as you wish, mistress. We're finished here." He bowed a second time when she spun on her heel without replying and disappeared behind the screen.

Gavin made to follow. "Better hide the weaponry. She's in a foul mood."

Ballard gazed at the spot where she'd stood. Unlike Gavin, he'd known to expect such behavior. Louvaen herself had warned him three days earlier.

"You'll not want me for company this week, my lord," she said. "I change from shrew to viper when my menses are upon me."

She'd startled him with the straightforward intimacy of her declaration. Ballard had lived with three women in the same household for almost four centuries, had an idea of when each suffered through their monthly and wisely made himself scarce when they occurred. Louvaen was the first to outright admit it and warn him off. And she'd lived up to the warning. Peevish and tired, she'd avoided everyone, ate her meals alone in the kitchen or only with Magda for company and refused to spend her evenings in the solar before bed.

Ballard missed her presence and sat in sullen silence before the fire, drinking too much ale and recalling every erotic moment of the one night he'd spent in her bed. He wanted her, craved her, and would have her beneath him again in a second—bad moods and menses be damned—if she even hinted at her willingness. She hadn't, and he respected her wish for solitude. He'd have to wait a little longer before she came to his bed a second time. The memory of that first time was its own comfort—her unexpected and stunning gift of affection. For a brief, nauseous moment he'd wondered if she'd regretted bedding him. Her admission of physical discomfort had banished that worry.

Or so he continued telling himself now, three days later. He'd needed the outlet of the game as much as Gavin, his desire for Louvaen raised to a fever pitch now that he knew the

feel and taste of her. The temptation to cajole her into his room, even if only to sleep beside him, lay heavily on his mind. He'd slept in a lonely bed a long time—was used to it—but the thought of her curled against him in slumber, warm and soft, refused to fade. He'd offer the suggestion tonight. She might bite his head off for his trouble, but he considered the possible outcome worth the risk.

He trailed behind Gavin and entered the kitchen. Joan and Clarimond shared a worktable, one rolling out dough, the other peeling potatoes. Two freshly plucked geese rested on another table by the hearth where Magda stood watch over a steaming cauldron. She glanced at him and gestured with her chin to where Gavin sat on a bench, eyes closed in bliss as Cinnia tended his wounds. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll let the beauty there patch you up. Right now, the other one would just as soon stick a knife in you and call it mercy.”

Ballard’s lips twitched. He could physic his own pains and accepted a bowl of water, stack of cloths and a jar of ointment from a flour-dusted Joan. He bent to the task of scrubbing the blood off his face and floor grime from his arms. “Where is she?”

Magda stirred the cauldron’s contents. “In the buttery. I sent her down there for a crock of ale and one of wine.” She shrugged. “If you’re willing to be flayed, you can offer to help.”

He found Louvaen tucked between two large casks of wine, on her hands and knees mopping up a spill. Still decorated in goose down, she glanced over her shoulder at the sound of his footsteps, arched an eyebrow and returned to her work. Ballard admired her narrow waist and the way it curved

into the flare of her hips. They swayed with the motion of her scrubbing, and his breeches grew uncomfortably tight at the fantasy of kneeling behind her and lifting her skirts.

“Do you need help?”

She paused and turned to him a second time, her eyes the color of hot ash. “No, and you’ll not be doing what you’re thinking in this crypt of a room, my lord.”

Ballard smiled and seated himself beside a crock of ale on one of the benches lining the chamber’s walls. “So you’re a seer now, mistress? What am I thinking?”

Louvaen straightened to her feet and tossed the wine-stained rag to one side. She wiped her hands on her skirt and strode toward him until she stood at his knees. He opened them to allow her closer. For the first time in nearly a week, her pinched features softened into a smile. “You’re thinking you’d like a good look at my smallclothes while I mop the floors.”

He passed a hand over her apron. “I’m not interested in your knickers, only what they cover.” His nostrils twitched at the scents of wine and lavender soap. “You smell of summer.”

“You smell of witch hazel.” She touched a fingertip to the split skin on his forehead. “That’ll be a quite a lump.”

Ballard flinched away, though hers had been a butterfly’s caress. “Gavin has an iron skull. Knocked my brains hard enough to make my ears ring.”

“He looked equally worse for wear.”

He smirked. “I might have laid a bruise or two on him, though I think he did more damage to himself. Bit his tongue

and nearly gelded himself trying to win the game.”

Louvaen tilted her head, her expression puzzled. “You two do this for fun?”

He captured one of her hands and tugged until she settled into his lap, her long legs taking up the rest of the bench. She felt good in his arms, right, as if she belonged no place else. “No. We do it because we can’t have what we want.” A downy feather wrapped around his finger as he traced the line of her collar bones.

She slipped her arms around his neck, her stern expression at odds with the light caresses she bestowed along his nape. “Gavin can have Cinnia all he wants when he marries her. Not a moment sooner.”

Ballard shivered beneath her touch. All that knocking about in the great hall had done plenty to jar his bones but little to cool his desires for this woman. His cock was stiff, aching, and he thrust against her backside where she sat cradled across his thighs. “And me, Louvaen?” he asked softly. “When do I get what I want?”

“What do you want?” she countered with a teasing lilt.

He nuzzled the soft hairs at her temple and rubbed harder against her buttocks. “You. Beneath me.”

Graceful fingers combed through his hair. “What about on top of you?”

Ballard reared back and gaped at her for a moment before he broke into a grin. “On top, on your back...” He kissed her smiling mouth. “On your belly,” he whispered. “Your hands and knees.”

“Oh, I’m very fond of that one, just not on the cold floor of a buttery.”

They both laughed, and Ballard tightened his hold on her, relishing the easy way she rested in his arms and returned his embrace. No blushing maiden here; no worldly harlot either, just a woman comfortable with intimacy and willing to express her wants and preferences to him. He, not Gavin, held the most beautiful creature in the world.

“Come to my chamber tonight,” he pleaded.

She sighed. “Ballard...”

“Just to sleep if that’s your wish. I’ve a comfortable bed.”

She wiggled her hips. “And a tent pole in your breeches.”

He pinched her earlobe between his teeth, making her squeal. “You’re bouncing that sweet arse on me, and you act surprised? I think you’re more seductress than shrew.”

Louvaen snorted, both eyebrows arched in disbelief. “You can spout honeyed lies better than any court minstrel.”

Her small smile faded when he lifted a hand to cup her cheek. “No false words, Louvaen. All you have to do is breathe, and you seduce me.” He watched, entranced, as a blush purred up her neck to her face and into her hairline.

“You’re generous with your compliments, my lord.”

A scatter of down floated from her shoulders and hair as he stroked her. “And you’re beautiful in your scowls and feathers, mistress.”

They stared at each other for several moments before Louvaen dropped her arms and heaved herself out of his embrace. Ballard's heart sank into his stomach, only to slam into his throat when she slid onto his lap once more, this time astride, her knees and thighs gripping his hips in a tight clench. His arms automatically rose to wrap around her back and help her balance.

“Louvaen?”

Graceful hands, with their calloused fingertips, cradled his face. Her thumbs slid across his high cheekbones, avoiding the bruises and smoothing the pale skin and dark scars etched down to the bone. Her eyes dwelt on every line and angle. He almost turned away, wishing for one moment he possessed his son's handsomeness instead of the ruined visage he wore. Yet Louvaen looked upon him with those smoky eyes that grew dark with desire. It defied reason, but she wanted him in all his broken glory.

One thumb slid lower, pressing into the soft flesh of his lower lip. Louvaen leaned into him, face so close to his, she almost spoke into his mouth. “I'm glad it was Gavin who bit his tongue and not you.”

Ballard's eyes lowered to half mast. He held her hips, massaging her upper thighs through her heavy skirts. “Why is that?” he murmured.

“Because then I couldn't do this.” She caught his lip between hers and suckled.

Ballard moaned and almost heaved them both off the bench. Louvaen's low, seductive laugh fluttered along his teeth. He opened his mouth; her tongue swept in and filled him. She kissed him deeply, exploring every curve and

hollow, the edges of his teeth and smooth sides of his cheeks. Ballard's lungs burned with the need for air, but he refused to pull away, content to suffocate as long as Louvaen worked her magic and fucked his mouth for all she was worth.

She halted, small breasts swelling above her bodice with her shallow pants. Her pupils had dilated until her eyes looked black in the rush light. High color painted her cheeks and reddened her swollen lips to the shade of a summer plum. Ballard's cock swelled harder against his breeches. She was so beautiful he could come just from looking at her. She leaned forward, and his fingers dug into her legs, anticipation of her plundering his mouth again making him shiver beneath her.

Louvaen surprised him with the gentlest kiss. She smiled and stared into his eyes, her hands still holding his face. "Do you know when I'm alone in my bed, I pleasure myself by imagining your mouth, the touch of it on mine. Your taste. The slide of your tongue against mine."

"Ods' teeth, Louvaen!" Ballard swore. He bucked, grinding his erection into her skirts in a futile bid to reach the sweet spot between her legs. Instead, he shoved against yards of bunched wool and the barrier of his own breeches. He was a blink away from ripping the dress off her and taking her until she screamed his name. "Witch, you would torture me."

She silenced him with another kiss, this one like the first—deep, thrusting, reducing him to a mindless creature begging for mercy. He literally mewled when she broke the kiss once more. "No." She breathed almost as hard as he did. "I would please you." One hand left his face to glide down his neck and

pluck the lacings at his throat. She scooted back until she perched precariously on his knees. “Take off your blicaud.”

She didn’t need to ask twice. Ballard whipped the shirt over his head and tossed it to the side. The buttry’s chilly air drafted across his overheated skin, and his nipples tightened—tightened even more at Louvaen’s avid gaze. His hands settling back on her hips to anchor her more securely into his lap. “I don’t suppose you’ll be doing the same?” The delicate skin below her collarbones beckoned. He bent to swipe his tongue across the pale expanse of flesh, pausing to nuzzle the rounded curve of one breast above the edge of her bodice.

Louvaen’s chest rose and fell with her quick breaths. She curved out of reach of his mouth, and he growled in protest, trying to draw her back. She tugged his hair. “Stop,” she scolded in a thin voice. “I can’t think when you’re doing that.”

He smirked. Good. The gods knew whatever coherency remained in his thoughts had been boiled away by the hot blood coursing through his veins. “What are you thinking?” he asked. The trailing tail of one of her bodice laces dangled in front of him. He caught it in his teeth and jerked in the hopes of unraveling the knot. He bit through the lace when she dragged both of her thumbs across his nipples.

Her tongue sliding between his lips cut off his guttural cries. He groaned into her mouth, his tongue battling hers as her fingers joined her thumbs, rubbing and lightly pinching until his nipples throbbed and his cock pulsed in time to the hard pounding of his heart. Some distant part of his mind thanked Louvaen’s foresight in clipping his claws short,

otherwise he would have shredded her skirts and raked bloody furrows into her thighs by now.

His gasps bounced off the stone walls as she abandoned his mouth for his cheek, lips lingering on each scar and runemark until she reached the edge of his jaw and the soft skin beneath. At her wordless coaxing Ballard tilted his head. Louvaen nuzzled him, the sound of her slow inhalation tickling his ear. “Mmm, I like the scent of witch hazel,” she whispered. She rubbed her nose into his hair before slipping lower. Ballard’s eyes slid shut, and he sucked in a breath as she licked and nipped her way down his neck, pausing to swirl her tongue in the hollow of his throat.

Louvaen wiggled back, resting her weight across his upper thighs instead of his groin. He gripped her hips to steady her. Her busy hands drifted over his ribs and down his abdomen, played with the narrow trail of hair bisecting his torso, and finally halted at the ties holding his breeches closed. Ballard’s breathing quickened to shallow pants. Nimble fingers made short work of the ties. Both sighed—one in relief, the other in approval—when Louvaen slipped her hand inside and freed him from the garment’s confines.

Ballard opened his eyes and caught her staring at him as if he were a dessert she’d devour in one gulp. The salacious smile curving her lips promised he’d enjoy being consumed. He grumbled a weak protest when she slid off his lap to kneel between his legs. His back arched as her fingers curved around him, stroking lightly over the taut skin of his shaft. The hot cravings pooling low in his belly rippled throughout the rest of his body. He tried to talk, to ask her what further torment she planned for him, but he’d lost the ability to do more than gasp her name in staccato breaths. He forgot how

to breathe and speak when her head lowered. He watched her open her lips and take him inside her mouth: first the swollen head of his cock, then the upper part of his shaft. Her cheeks hollowed, and she sucked, hard.

The buttery's stone walls were thick enough to withstand lengthy sieges and rough storms, its door a slab of wood so dense it had taken six men to hoist it into position for attaching to the walls. Sound didn't escape such formidable buffers, and a good thing too as Ballard's hoarse cries resounded in the chamber itself. He buried his hands in Louvaen's silky hair, loosening strands from her braid so they drifted over his knuckles. Her head slipped back and forth against his palms as she took up a rhythm that had him struggling not to buck himself off the bench. He wanted to gaze at this erotic tableau, of her pleasuring him with lips and tongue, one hand curled firmly around the base of his cock to control his involuntary thrusts, but his eyelids refused to cooperate. He closed his eyes, lost to the sensations that sent fire coursing through his limbs.

Louvaen's hand resumed its play across his chest, teasing his tight nipples between her fingertips. Ballard whimpered and massaged her scalp with restless fingers in wordless approval. He'd not indulged in this particular delight in centuries. Isabeau would have bitten clean through if he'd tried such a thing with her—not that he'd ever been tempted by the idea, even without the imminent threat of dismemberment. There had been the court prostitutes, women of impressive stamina and talent who offered any service for the right price. A few had done this for him in the shadowed corners of a castle corridor and once in the king's armory. Efficient and skilled, they'd brought him to orgasm in a matter

of moments, his cock barely out of their mouths before they were gone, hands stretched out to take coin from another knight for the same service.

This was different, so very different. The same act, similar position, less skill, and Louvaen was no prostitute with the goal of turning profit. What she did to him pleased her as well. He heard it in her soft murmurs, felt it in the way her hand slid over his ribs to rub and press as if she enjoyed the texture of his scarred flesh beneath her caress. She made love to him with her mouth, leisurely savoring him. All the sensation washing through his muscles swelled in his groin until he tugged on her braid to make her stop. He slipped out of her mouth with a soft pop.

Her gray eyes glittered black, her breath warm as it gusted over his glistening cock. She stared at him, flushed and puzzled. “Am I doing something wrong?” Her question held more challenge than concern, as if she dared him to answer in the affirmative.

Ballard managed a thin laugh. “No, my beauty. What you’re doing goes beyond right. Too right.” He ran trembling fingers over her hot cheek. “If you don’t stop soon, you’ll be catching the mettle in your mouth.”

The wry look she leveled on him suggested he was a trifle lack-witted. “Foolish creature,” she admonished and lowered her head to nip at the inside of his thigh. He jumped. “That’s the best part.”

She took a breath and sheathed him in her mouth again, taking him deep until his tip touched the back of her throat. Ballard fully surrendered to her, groaning her name, his hips twitching with the need to thrust as she drew down and then

up along his shaft. His eyes rolled back and his knees lifted as he held her head. “Can’t hold,” he said through teeth clenched tight together. “Gods, Louvaen. Now!”

He came hard, his back arching away from the wall until his spine audibly cracked and his seed pumped out of him in quick spurts to fill her mouth. Her cheeks and tongue flexed as she swallowed. His fingers twisted elfknots into the loose strands of her hair and held on until she’d emptied him.

Louvaen slowly pulled away, pausing to kiss the flushed head of his softening cock. Her lips, swollen with her efforts, curved up into a small, satisfied smile. Reduced to a wreck of leaden muscle and melted bones, Ballard fought to catch his breath. “You’ve finished me.” He slurred the words.

She rose to her feet, her grin as unapologetic as her smile had been lascivious. “I believe that was the idea, my lord.” She leaned closer to kiss him, sucking on his bottom lip.

He mimicked her actions, running his tongue along the underside of her upper lip. “You taste like me.”

She rubbed her nose against his. “I’ve a belly full of you too.” She followed her kiss with another on his bruised forehead. “We’ve been down here too long. They’ll be thinking all kinds of improper thoughts up there in the kitchen if I don’t get back with these spirits.”

Ballard managed to tuck himself into his breeches and lace them closed without stringing too many knots. Standing up and not having his knees buckle presented more of a challenge. He’d like nothing more than to crawl into bed, spoon around Louvaen, and fall into a heavy sleep. “Oh aye,” he said and hauled her up against him. He liked that she was

nearly as tall as he was. Every curve notched perfectly into every angle. She looped her arms over his shoulders, wiggling when he cupped her buttocks. “Very improper, especially if you show up with *that* look on your face,” he teased. The corner of her mouth tempted him. He touched his tongue there and smiled against her cheek when she sighed her pleasure.

Louvaen pulled away just enough for him to catch her smug expression. “And what look is that? The cat who’s stolen the cream?”

“Nothing so tame. More like the wolf after a successful kill.”

She threaded his hair through her fingers. “You may be called many things, Ballard. ‘Prey’ will never be one of them.” She gestured to his shirt, a crumpled heap forgotten under the bench. “One of us will have some explaining to do if you went down to the buttery wearing all your clothes and came back up wearing only half.”

“A benefit of being *dominus*—I don’t have to explain a damn thing I do.” Ballard reluctantly let her go to retrieve the shirt and slipped it over his head. “And I’d wager you’ve told more than a few people to mind their own affairs.”

She swiped at the bits of wandering goose down that had managed to embed themselves into the weave of his shirt. “Many people and often.” Her smirk revealed she relished each opportunity.

They shared a cup of wine and several kisses before he handed her one crock and lifted the other. He held her hand as they took the stairs, pausing before the door to plant a kiss in her palm. She returned the gesture by kissing his knuckles before easing her fingers out of his grasp.

The kitchen stood deserted except for Magda who sat in a chair sewing by the hearth, a basket of mending at her feet. Whatever thoughts she had regarding Ballard's time in the buttery with Louvaen, she kept them to herself. She pointed to the clean table where the plucked geese had rested earlier. "Leave the wine there, and put the ale by the fire."

They did as she instructed. Louvaen's gaze swept the kitchen before she peered around the screen, listening. "Where's Cinnia?"

The cook's mouth quirked as she stitched a tear in a linen shift. "In the stables with Gavin. He wanted to show her your horse's hoof is healing nicely."

Louvaen's nostrils flared. "Is that so?"

Ballard growled. He didn't think anything could ruin her brief good mood faster than a possible threat to her sister's precious chastity. The seductress was gone; the shrew reigned in her place. She strode past him, snapped up one of Magda's skinning knives from the table closest to her, and made for the door to the bailey.

Ballard snatched the knife out of her hand as she passed. "I think not."

She didn't waste time fighting him for the weapon, only laid a glare on him hot enough to singe his eyebrows and stalked out in a flurry of skirts.

"You realize there are at least two pitchforks and three shovels out there?" Magda set aside her sewing to claim a spot by the window.

Ballard poured himself a cup of ale from the crock he'd brought up from the buttery. "As long as Gavin doesn't turn

his back, he'll be fine." He took a swallow of the brew. "Lad better quit dawdling and marry the girl, or I'll kill him before Louvaen does. This is getting bloody tiresome; guarding an uncracked pitcher like it's the crown jewels."

Magda chortled. "Best entertainment we've had in years, I'm thinking. Those two slinking off for privacy, and your lover flying after them like a hobby on the hunt."

Ballard shook his head. "Come get me if Gavin returns full of holes."

CHAPTER TWELVE



He entered his chamber, pleased to note someone had built up the fire in the hearth. He appraised his bed with a critical eye. A sumptuous monstrosity generously draped in heavy cloth woven of embossed silk, it took up one corner of the room. He had been its solitary occupant for many years. If his luck held, he'd have a chance to share its generous space tonight.

The chest at the end of the bed contained his clothes, along with a few keepsakes from a life that seemed a distant memory now: the regalia he wore during his investiture as a knight, the spurs bestowed upon him by his sponsor and finally, a gift bequeathed by a proud, foreign queen now long-

dead. This last, wrapped in bronze velvet, he removed from the bottom of the chest and carried to the hearth for a better look in the firelight. Modrnight's rituals included giving tribute to the women of the household as well as the goddesses worshipped. He'd already spoken with Ambrose about creating a gift he could give both sisters to share, but he had something special in mind for Louvaen, something he intended to offer in private.

Were she like Cinnia or any of the women he'd known in his long life, Ballard would lavish her with jewelry or several ells of silk. But Mistress Duenda was singular, and he couldn't think of anything more appropriate than to pass the queen's gift on to her. He unwrapped the velvet, revealing a dagger and wooden sheath inlaid with enamel and precious stones. The weapon itself was the work of a master, its design different from the straight, double-edged knives he usually carried but just as lethal. A tempered, single-edge blade with a gentle recurve, full tang and a thick spine cross-sectioned into a T for strength, the dagger could cut or thrust through a chain mail hauberk, no matter how well woven or riveted. His fingers curved around a pommel of milky green jade fashioned into a hawk's head. It sat easy in his palm—light, balanced, deadly.

Some might say he'd become clodpated—as beguiled as any callow boy sniffing after the skirts of his first woman. They'd be wrong in most of that accusation. He was no longer a boy, and Louvaen was not his first woman. Even before the advent of the curse, he'd never been moved by a woman, never loved one—certainly not his wife whose lip curled in disgust every time he drew near and never the noblewomen or

prostitutes who populated the king's court and shared their favors. Louvaen though...she consumed his thoughts.

Do you love her?

He stared blindly at the dagger while the question resonated in his head. His mind rejected the idea. He admired her, had been captivated by her fierce character and resolute demeanor the moment Cinnia introduced them, and she complimented him on the blackened eyes she'd given him. She'd break a weak-spirited man or tempt him to murder her at the first opportunity.

Ballard didn't consider himself a weak man: a cold one sometimes—wearied and twisted by Isabeau's bane—but unbroken. Louvaen brought him to life, snapped him from a twilight of interminable waiting interrupted only by the curse's tortures when the flux ran at high tide. He hadn't known it was possible to embrace lightning until he'd held her, and the experience had left him exhilarated.

Do you love her?

“Does it matter?” he said aloud. Isabeau had cursed him as thoroughly as she'd cursed Gavin. He had no future and nothing to offer Louvaen. Even if Gavin broke the curse by marrying Cinnia, Ballard was too physically warped to live outside Ketach Tor. Louvaen and Cinnia accepted his appearance; he didn't fool himself that others would do so as easily, if at all. They'd view him as a monster—hunt him down like a beast. His accumulated wealth insured his son and his son's future bride a life of comfort wherever they chose to abide. They weren't confined to Ketach Tor as he was or as any wife or leman would be if she bound herself to him. This fortress was his home, his sanctuary, and his

prison. He shuddered at the idea of caging Louvaen here with him, even if she were willing.

He wrapped the dagger and sheath in the velvet and returned it to the chest. When winter warmed to spring, he'd send her home weighted down with gold; enough that she could buy her own personal cannon, but he hoped she would treasure this token of his respect and remember him.

For the first time in nearly a week, she rejoined the rest of his household in the solar that evening and took a place among the women to create charms for weaving through the greenery hanging in the great hall. The table Cinnia usually shared with Ambrose as they worked to bind his spells and potions recipes into books was littered with heaps of what looked like refuse raked from the forest floor—dried rue, artemisia and rowan berries, birch bark carved with runes and ribbons strung with oak galls. The women laughed and chatted as they worked, their soft voices accompanying the comforting snap of the fire in the hearth.

Ballard observed them for a while, his gaze resting on Louvaen longest as he admired the way her dark hair shimmered in the firelight. Gavin sat next to him and Ambrose near the fire. All three nursed goblets of ale and discussed what tasks they had before them the next day. For an hour or two, he could fool himself into thinking this was how it had always been, how it would be for years to come—his small household sharing camaraderie. Here he spent time with his son, his trusted friends and a generous, if prickly-tempered lover. As a young man, he would have rebelled against such peaceful domesticity, eager to wage war and prove his prowess to his peers. Time and malediction had

mellowed him; he appreciated the quieter moments, especially transitory ones like these.

When the hour grew late and the fire burned low, their little gathering broke up. Ambrose escorted Magda, Joan and Clarimond out of the solar. Ballard suffered a sinking disappointment in his gut as Gavin offered an arm to each sister and was taken by both. Louvaen had not accepted his invitation to spend the night in his bed. She hadn't declined either, and after their time in the buttery earlier in the day, he'd been almost sure she'd agree. He was wrong.

Both women curtsied and bid him goodnight. Ballard searched Louvaen's face but saw nothing in her expression that hinted at her thoughts. He nodded, offered an abrupt "goodnight" of his own and turned his attention back to the fire. He was still brooding in his chair a half hour later when a soft knock interrupted his meditations. The door opened, and Louvaen stepped inside wrapped in a heavy robe with her hair loose and brushed into sleek waves. Her bare toes curled against the cold floor, and she gave him a knowing grin.

"Still wish to share that comfortable bed you keep boasting about?"

He was out of the chair and across the room before she could take another breath. She squeaked in protest when he crushed her in his embrace. "You will grant me mercy, mistress?"

She pushed against his chest until he loosened his hold on her. "More than you're showing me." She dragged in a deep breath. "If you hold me like that in your sleep, I'll not last until morning."

He kissed her; a slow, deep welcoming punctuated by soft growls that made her sag in his arms and moan in his mouth. His hands journeyed across her back and thighs, rising to grip her buttock as his hips thrust against her

When they broke apart, she stared at him with hooded eyes. “Bed? Or are you going to let my feet freeze to the floor?”

He swung her into his arms and pushed open the door connecting his bedchamber to the solar. The fire in the hearth had almost guttered, smothering the chamber in shadows. At Louvaen’s impatient squirming, he reluctantly set her down to tour his retreat. She halted before the bed and glanced over her shoulder at him. “Not a mere boast when you said your bed was big. I think you’d need a map to find a person in this thing.”

He came up behind her and slid his arms around her waist. She leaned back and tilted her head so he could nuzzle her neck. “I’ll not let you far enough from me to need a map,” he whispered in her ear.

He turned her to face him and removed her robe. She wore a linen shift that highlighted the shadows of her tightened nipples beneath the cloth. Ballard paused in undressing her to admire her body’s outline; the slender waist and long legs, the fragile ridge of her collarbones and elegant slope of her shoulders. Light from the hearth fluttered over her skin, burnishing it a pale golden color. Statuesque, with the bearing of a queen and the grace of a sylph, she made him burn.

Her shudder snapped him out of his reverie. He divested her of the shift and paused at the linen loincloth banded around

her hips and between her legs. Louvaen swatted his hand when his fingers slipped beneath the waist edge. He grinned, kissed her and palmed one of her small breasts. “I can be a patient man.”

With no such obstacles stopping him, he stripped bare, carried Louvaen to the bed and dove under the mountain of covers and furs with her. He almost shot right back out to grab the closest weapon when Louvaen screeched and leapt on top of him.

“Sweet goddess,” she exclaimed. “The sheets are like ice.”

Ballard knocked his head against the bolster and exhaled hard enough to lift strands of her hair. His arms closed over her back to hold her still while his heart did its best to slam through his rib cage.

For one horrifying moment he thought Isabeau’s roses had slithered through the window and coiled under his bedclothes, waiting for his return and the chance to trench his flesh bloody with their barbs. The image of them ripping away at Louvaen sent the bile surging up his throat. He glared at her and beat his terror into submission with a lie. “Are you trying to kill me? With all that carrying-on, I thought someone had stuffed a hungry dragon under the blankets.”

“I might ask you the same thing.” She gave an affronted huff of her own. “At least a dragon would have kept the blankets warm. I didn’t expect a dip in your bed would feel the same as the dip I took in your frozen pond.” She settled her weight harder on him, melding her body to his from shoulder to knee. Her fingers followed the angle of his jaw

and curve of his nose. “Do you have a hatred for warming pans or a nice toasty brick?”

Ballard trailed his hands down her spine to her buttocks, sketching lazy circles over her smooth skin. “I do now if this is what happens when I don’t have the sheets warmed.” He kissed the fingertip wandering across his lower lip. “Forgive me. I didn’t think of that small comfort. I’m not bothered by the cold.”

“Obviously not.” She flashed him a grin and shifted until his erection nestled between her cloth-wrapped thighs.

The curse offered one or two unexpected boons, and his altered eyesight had its benefits. Even in the bed’s curtained darkness, he saw every detail of her features—long eyes with heavy eyelids, the prominent nose and angular cheekbones, full mouth and sharp jaw. She was beautiful in a way Isabeau had never been—that regal inner strength carved into the very bones of her face. Ballard thought her breathtaking. “Kiss me,” he ordered.

She complied instantly, still smiling as her lips met his. They spent several moments like that, buried under the covers and exchanging kisses that were, by turns, languid and passionate. When they paused to breathe, Louvaen did an odd thing. She covered his eyes with one hand, took it away and repeated the action.

Ballard frowned. “What are you doing?”

She shrugged. “Black as a demon’s heart in this bed. I can’t see my hand in front of my face, but I can see your eyes; like an owl’s, all glowing and round and lit from inside.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “I never thought I’d bed a giant bird. What do you see with those eyes?”

He flipped her on her back so quickly, she gasped. Ballard rested his weight on his elbows so as not to crush her. “You mock me,” he said in his most threatening voice: a difficult task when her thighs parted and she raised her long legs to grip his hips.

Her fingers kneaded the muscles in his neck. “Only in the kindest way,” she teased. “And I very much like your gold-coin eyes.”

“Owls eat mice.”

She snorted. “Didn’t you call me a wolf earlier? I’ve yet to witness an owl eat a wolf.”

“This owl does.” He lunged at her and buried his face in her neck. She shrieked with laughter as he growled and snuffled at her throat, trailing soft nips from her jaw to the top of her shoulder. She twisted in his arms when his fingers scuttled up and down her ribs, jabbing a knee into his side as she tried to avoid his tickling. Their play turned serious when Ballard nipped a line down her chest. He paused and blew a stream of warm air over one nipple. Louvaen moaned and grew still except for her hands. They gripped his shoulders, nails digging hard into his flesh. He took her breast into his mouth and suckled, his weight holding her down as she arched and whispered encouragements.

His senses reeled. She smelled of flowers and tasted sweet. Her slim body entwined with his, soft and eager. The only other woman he’d taken in this bed had been Isabeau, and those encounters had nothing to do with lovemaking and everything to do with war. This contradictory creature, both waspish and loving, bewitched him. He’d cheerfully spend the rest of his days tangled in the covers with her.

He switched to her other breast, lavishing it with the same attentions, while his hands slid down her sides to the linen loincloth and stopped. He abandoned her breast to nuzzle the hollow of her throat. “The red sovereign is truly a tyrant,” he grumbled.

She shook in his arms with silent laughter. “Don’t complain so. You’re not the throne upon which she sits once a month.”

“No, only the miserable supplicant who kneels before her.” He stroked her legs down to her calves and trailed his tongue over her collarbones. “I want to please you.”

Louvaen pushed against him, shoving until he rolled to his back and she lay atop him once more. Her loose hair fell forward, surrounding him in a sweetly scented curtain. “You are pleasing me,” she assured him. “I’ve not shared a bed with a man in a long time, not since I lost Thomas, and you are as fine a man as he was.”

Ballard’s breath locked in his chest as he met her steady gaze. She scolded with the sharpness of a well-honed axe blade, but her unexpected, forthright compliments shocked him speechless. She kissed the tip of his nose before shimmying down his length to disappear beneath the blankets. He lifted the covers to peer at her. “Louvaen, what are you doing?”

He fell back against the pillows on a gasp as her tongue laved a meandering path up the inside of his thigh. His nails raked the sheets when her lips closed over his bollocks and sucked them gently into her mouth. The sounds erupting from his throat rang bestial in the darkness; thin whines and low growls interspersed with ragged breaths. He hadn’t expected

or even hoped for this when she reappeared in the solar. He was still stunned by their interlude in the buttery. The gods who'd turned their backs on him centuries earlier now chose to grant him the boon of Louvaen's affections. He wasn't a man to turn away so gracious a gift.

As she'd done in the buttery, she milked him until he flooded her mouth with hot seed and reduced him to a quivering mass of muscle and blood that tumbled through his veins like rapids. Perspiration trickled down his temples and dewed his belly even after he kicked the blankets off to cool down. He licked dry lips and worked to slow the pants that heaved in and out of his lungs. Louvaen crawled from the foot of the bed, confiscated his share of the covers and nestled down into his side.

"That was lovely," she purred in a smug voice. "We should do it again very soon."

Ballard wondered how soon was soon and if he'd survive a third encounter. He spooned around her wrapped form, unwilling to crawl under the sweltering blankets just yet. He tucked her head against his shoulder and encircled her waist with one arm. "This is how your husband died." He nuzzled her hair. "Satisfying the desires of his lusty, demanding wife."

Her soft chuckle tickled his shoulder. "No, though he swore more than once I was trying to kill him with my enthusiasm."

Ballard thanked those newly generous gods for having him meet Louvaen after she was widowed, otherwise he would have challenged Thomas for her. "He was a fortunate man."

She tangled her fingers with his. “I was a fortunate wife. Thomas was exceptional. A man who dealt with the dead but embraced life with great joy. He taught me to laugh.”

“You still grieve him?” How could she not? Every word she spoke about her husband resonated with admiration.

“I do, though the pain lessens with each year.” She turned in Ballard’s arms, and in her features lingered an old sorrow. “He died of the plague.”

Ballard winced, recalling the mockery Ambrose, Gavin, and he had made about the nature of her husband’s demise, some directly to her. She’d either responded with a sharp insult or a smiling negation. Death came to everyone. Even he and Gavin, with their lifespans stretched unnaturally long by the curse, would die—either by each other’s hand or Ambrose’s mercy. Sometimes joking about it kept the fear of death at bay. No one joked about plague. “I’m sorry, Louvaen. Had we known—”

She pressed a finger against his lips to halt his apology. “I bear no ill will and neither would Thomas. To be honest, he’d laugh at your conjectures and offer a few of his own.” She grinned. “Several townsmen swore when we married that he’d be dead in a week; scolded to death or knifed in his sleep.”

He captured her hand and kissed her palm. “Ah, more fortitude than sense.”

She arched an eyebrow. “You’re just as guilty of that charge. You bedded me.”

“Considering that I’ve had you once days ago and been at your mercy twice today, I think it’s safe to say you bedded

me, Mistress Duenda.”

They exchanged grins and slipped into a contented silence. He nearly groaned when Louvaen ruined the moment by asking “Do you miss your wife?”

Did he miss her? Only during those times when he retreated to his cell in the storerooms and rode out the flux in a fit of convulsions and agony that made his eyes bug out and his voice go hoarse from screaming. Oh, he missed fair Isabeau then, prayed for the ability to roll back time. He’d negate contracts, turn her over to Cederic with a smile, and declare no two people deserved each other more; that or kill them both and bury their bodies far from his demesne.

“No, ours was an arranged marriage over lands. There was no affection between us.” An understatement of colossal proportions, especially in light of the time he shared with Louvaen. Isabeau had lain in his bed colder than one of Duenda’s corpses and oozing revulsion for him thick as melted tallow. It had taken all of Ballard’s effort to work up an erection and bed his wife. He could give lessons to Louvaen’s husband on fortitude. “I didn’t wish for her death, but I didn’t sorrow when she died.”

“I think that is something to sorrow in itself.”

If she only knew. He shook his head to rid himself of darker thoughts. Louvaen’s lips were soft under his as he kissed her. “This isn’t how I want to spend tonight with you—talking of dead husbands and dead wives.” He wanted many nights with her like this. “And considering you literally just sucked the life out of me, I’m about to either die or fall asleep on top of you.”

Louvaen countered his statement with a wide yawn. She turned her back to him once more and settled into the curve of his body, lifting the covers for him to join her. “You promised you’d warm me if I slept in your bed, and these blasted cold sheets aren’t going to warm themselves.”

He did as she ordered, uttering a contented sigh when she pressed against him skin to skin. His flesh burned hot, and he longed for the caress of the frigid air on his limbs, but it was a small price to pay to have Louvaen in his arms. He kissed the fragile skin at her temple, heard her mutter a sleepy “Good night,” and fell asleep soon after.

Dawn came far too early for his liking. He awoke at her first stirring. Sometime in the night he’d rolled away from her and thrown off the blankets. She’d promptly stolen them. The only part of her visible was the crown of her head at the top of the cocoon she’d fashioned. He gathered her into his arms. “Are you awake, termagant?” His breath puffed out in a warm cloud that dissipated in the cold air.

A muffled “Maybe,” drifted from the swaddling. “What hour is it?”

“Sunrise.”

Quick reflexes saved him from taking an elbow to the face as Louvaen exploded out of the covers, fell through the bed curtains and onto the floor with a thud. Ballard swung out of the bed in time to watch her sprint across the chamber and snatch her shift up from the floor where he’d dropped it the night before. He stood in front of her, eyebrows arched, as she struggled to pull the garment on, hopping up and down and growling in frustration as she tried to squeeze her head through one of the armholes.

“Louvaen,” he barked, losing patience.

“What?” she snapped back, arms bent at odd angles as she battled with the shift.

He clutched her shoulders. “Hold still,” he commanded. She did as he ordered, feet shuffling impatiently as he adjusted the shift. It slipped over her head to cover her body.

She blinked at him and scraped wispy clouds of tangled hair away from her face. “Thank you.” She glanced past him. “I need my robe.”

He touched her elbow as she sidled around him. She’d surprised him with her reaction to the news it was dawn, as if she feared the weak light leaking through the slats at the window. “So eager to leave me?”

Louvaen paused, her eyes almost silvery in the dim light. Her gaze caressed him, lingering on his morning erection. Ballard exhaled a surprised “umpf” when she launched herself at him hard enough to rock him back on his heels. His hands slid across her back to hold her close and keep his balance. She kissed him as if starved, her tongue sliding between his lips to ravish his mouth and demand the same response from him. He was only too happy to oblige.

She ended their kiss on a shuddering breath and pressed her palms against the sides of his face. “Lackwit.” She admonished him in a thin voice. “If I had the time, I’d be on my knees right this moment to give you a proper good morning.” She grinned at his groan and wrestled out of his embrace to retrieve her robe. “Cinnia sleeps like the dead but wakes with the clerics. I don’t need her catching me sneaking out of your chambers at daybreak.”

Ballard raked a hand through his hair. “Don’t tell me the girl doesn’t know you’ve rumped the sheets a time or two in your life. That isn’t innocent; it’s thick.”

She laughed. “If she were stupid, I wouldn’t have to worry about this at all. Cinnia is; however, as clever as she is beautiful. And stubborn. I’m having a difficult time as it is convincing her to resist Gavin’s charms until she’s wedded. Coming from the mouth of a hypocrite, it will be impossible.”

He resisted the urge to embrace her—afraid he might not let her go—and settled for petting her untamed hair. “The rules for a widow are far different from those for a maiden.”

Louvaen sighed and leaned into his caress for a moment. “We both know that, and so does she actually, but she’ll use any reason she can find to weaken my argument. I’ll still win, but I’d rather not make it harder on myself.”

She gave him a final peck on the cheek before dashing out of his bedchamber. He listened to her light steps as she crossed the solar, then the stealthy creak of the door as she slipped into the corridor. “Virgins,” Ballard muttered to himself as he sauntered to the garderobe. “Troublesome, useless creatures.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Ballard went about his morning preparations in a much more leisurely fashion than Louvaen, devoting a few minutes to scraping the rough stubble off his face and tying his hair back before traipsing downstairs to break his fast.

Breakfast was a haphazard affair with Magda glaring at him and Gavin while they sopped bread in their ale. “Don’t let anyone rush you two.” She clutched her broom as if it were a mace. “It isn’t as if I need the room and that table to prepare for this evening.” Ballard wondered who she’d whack first.

Gavin eyed her warily, gobbled his bread and gulped down the ale. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand

and looked to his father. “If you act as my striker, we can get that length of pulley chain repaired and replaced on the bridge by early afternoon.”

Ballard nodded. “I’ll meet you in the smithy. He hid a smile behind his cup as his son rose, edged past Magda and fled the kitchen.

“Six gone, one to go.” The housekeeper set the broom aside and cleared Gavin’s place.

Ballard settled in his chair, stretched out his legs and ignored Magda’s disapproving frown. “Chased all the rest off before they could eat?”

She gave an unapologetic sniff. “Only you two took your time getting to the table. The others ate and went about their tasks before you came down the stairs.”

He rolled his eyes. Magda made it sound as if he’d sauntered in at midday after a morning spent lolling in bed. A pleasant thought, and an indulgence he would have embraced if Louvaen hadn’t shot out of his chambers at the crack of dawn like her hair was on fire. “Where are the lovely sisters?”

“Cinnia’s bower for now, up to who knows what. She promised she’d be down in an hour to help me make pies. Your shrew is to meet Ambrose in the great hall later to decorate for Modrnicht.”

Ballard spat the mouthful of ale he’d just taken back into his goblet. “Is that wise?”

Magda shrugged and paused in her sweeping to lean, smirking, on her broom. “Probably not, but entertaining. We’d have a true Modrnicht then—one which follows the old

ways and offers sacrifice—because one is bound to kill the other before we ever sit down to the feasting.”

Despite Magda’s dire prediction and her penchant for bloodshed that equaled Louvaen’s, no one tried to kill anyone else during the hectic preparations for Modrnicht. For Ballard, the day was like any other at Ketach Tor. He helped Gavin in the smithy for hours, working the bellows to keep the forge hot and pounding metal until the tinnient chorus of hammers rang in his ears long after they’d smothered the fire and taken the newly forged link to repair the bridge. They then set to work repairing the roof of a storage building that had caved in from the weight of accumulated snow. The anemic sun sat low on the horizon by the time they finished and made for the kitchens.

When evening fell, he went downstairs to join the festivities. He’d dressed with care, outfitted in a velvet cote the color of Louvaen’s eyes, and a sword belt tooled with decorative scrollwork and inlaid at intervals with ruby cabochons. Even his boots were free of caked mud and polished to a rich sheen. Such finery was wasted on him, he thought. No amount of costly velvet or polished gemstones could overcome his disfigurements, but he’d succumbed to vanity anyway in the hopes Louvaen might admire him.

The head table, unused for centuries, sat in the middle of the hall. Its great size once accommodated as many as fifty people at dinner. Ballard recalled the times he’d hosted banquets when King Waleran’s nomadic court had taken up residence at Ketach Tor for weeks. Keeping so many people fed had decimated his larder, thinned his hunting grounds and put a sizeable dent in his coffers. While he was loyal to his

king, Ballard had celebrated when the court left his castle for another fiefdom and another nobleman to impoverish.

Magda had set only one end of the table. A white tablecloth covered the surface and was dressed with embroidered napkins and lit beeswax candles set in silver holders. Silver plates shimmered under the candlelight and shared space with several platters of food and pewter pitchers filled with spiced wine and sweet milk. Cushions covered the benches, and a dantesca chair occupied the space where the castle lord sat. A small heap of bundles wrapped in silk, linen and wool sat to the side—gifts to the women for Modrnicht.

The hall dripped with green garland swagged along the walls. Beribboned oak galls and rowan berries nestled within the branches, and his nose twitched at the cool scents of evergreen and dried artemisia. The greenery glowed with soft light—a trick no doubt employed by Ambrose—that added to the hall’s warm ambience.

Ambrose joined him by the fire, garbed in fine robes of brown and amber silk. He handed Ballard a goblet of wine and tapped his in a wordless toast. He stared at the mezzanine between the stairs. “I’ve learned the sisters abducted Magda, bound her hand and foot and are right now forcing her into a silk bodice and tying ribbons in her hair. Gavin’s gone up there to rescue her.”

Ballard chuffed in disbelief. “I’d sooner believe the sun rose at midnight or that ram you wethered last week grew a replacement pair of bollocks.” He scrutinized his sorcerer for a moment. “Methinks you’d very much like to see your woman in velvet and ribbons.”

Ambrose's nonchalant shrug didn't fool Ballard for an instant. "It would be a change from the usual apron and wool frock. I don't think Magda owns a hair ribb..." He trailed off, and Ballard followed his gaze to the second floor.

The women of his household had flocked to the top of the stairs, laughing and waving to the two men who watched them from the hall. Gavin appeared behind them, a richly dressed gander surrounded by an equally bright-feathered flock of geese. He bowed over Cinnia's hand and led her down the stairwell first. Cinnia wore a gown of the deepest green that hugged her curves and swept into an elegant train that rippled behind her as she descended the stairs on Gavin's arm. Her fair hair shimmered in Ambrose's spelled lighting, and as always Ballard had to look away from such sublime beauty.

He turned his attention to Magda, Joan and Clarimond. Next to Cinnia all three faded, but he nodded in approval at their gowns of blue, yellow and rust, their hair bound in intricate braids or covered in gossamer veils. Ballard glanced at Ambrose who stared agog at a blushing Magda. He reached out and nudged the sorcerer's mouth closed. "Good thing we aren't in midge season, Ambrose."

Ballard returned his gaze to the group and settled on Louvaen. He inhaled sharply, as stunned by the sight of her as he had been by Cinnia, except he didn't look away. Dressed in a gown the color of new blood, she raised the front hem to clear her feet and scowled. The fabric fell in sinuous folds over her body, hinting at the long line of her legs and lending her pale skin a pearlescent luster. She'd curled her hair and swept it back from her forehead, emphasizing the arch of her eyebrows and high swoop of her cheekbones. She turned to

twitch her train to the side, and Ballard mewled behind clenched teeth at the sight of her elegant back, bared to just below the shoulder blades and partially concealed by her long curls.

Merciful gods, he prayed silently. Please let the red sovereign be gone. A hard shove against his shoulder jerked him out of his pleading reverie, and he turned to scowl at a smug Ambrose.

“Good thing we aren’t in the midst of battle, *dominus.*”

Ballard didn’t answer and left Ambrose to follow him as he crossed the room to meet Gavin’s entourage at the bottom of the stairs. He bowed low before each of the women, even Clarimond and Joan who blushed and giggled at the sight of their lord’s deference. Louvaen’s gaze met his and stayed as she passed him on the way to the table. A faint smile curved the corners of her mouth, growing deeper as his hand reached out to skim the folds of her gown. Desire, hot as her gaze, swamped him, and he barely stopped himself from yanking her into his arms.

They gathered together while Ambrose poured a round of spiced wine or sweet milk and leered at Magda’s modest cleavage. Toasts were exchanged as were blessings for good health, bountiful harvest and peaceful days. Ballard claimed a space next to Louvaen and spoke low enough that only she heard him. “It’s fortunate I’m a man of fortitude and sense, Mistress Duenda, because you test both. The next time you appear in my hall garbed like that, I will hoist you onto the table and take you amidst the plates of apricots.”

Louvaen kept her eyes on Gavin and Cinnia as the two would-be lovers ogled each other. She gave no indication his

words affected her except for a stranglehold on the stem of her goblet and a voice gone husky. “That promises to be sticky, my lord—and delightful.”

He had his hand on her elbow with the intention of marching her up the stairs to his chamber, Modrnight and Cinnia’s delicate sensibilities be damned when Magda destroyed that plan. She clapped her hands and gestured imperiously for everyone to sit and begin the feast. “We didn’t work like dogs all day for this to go uneaten. Take your places. No different from the kitchen mind, just more to clean afterwards.”

Ballard growled softly, and this time Louvaen cut him an arch glance. “The night’s young, Ballard, and my body is mine again. If you wish, I’ll bring the apricots myself.” She smiled then and left him to take her place on the bench by her sister.

They started with dishes of dried apples and pears drizzled in honey, capon pies, potages of mutton stewed with potatoes and carrots and salted fish simmered in a saffron broth. Platters of roasted goose followed, along with a pork loin slathered in a sauce of almond milk and butter. Dragees of cheese wedges and spiced lumps of sugar completed the meal, and the wine flowed as freely as the conversation. As was his wont, Ballard remained quiet through the feast and concentrated on not being too obvious in admiring Louvaen. Magda’s culinary masterpieces were wasted on him. He might as well have been chewing on one of his boots for all the attention he paid the food. Louvaen sparred with Ambrose, laughed at Magda’s acerbic jokes and licked honey off her fingers in a way that had Ballard gripping his fork so hard, he

bent the metal. He tugged at the high collar of his cotte and prayed dinner would end soon.

Afterward, they grouped before the hearth, and Magda brought forth a small log cut from an ancient oak tree. She placed the piece of wood on a table Ambrose had moved in front of the fire. A knife and stack of kerchiefs bleached white as milk joined the log. As the eldest woman in the room, Magda held the honor of initiating tribute to the goddesses and the female ancestors of their small group. She lifted the knife and slashed a shallow cut into the center of her palm. Blood dripped through her clenched fist onto the log where it tracked tiny rills across the bark's ridges. She wiped the blade and passed it to Ambrose who did the same. The rest followed suit until the top of the log glistened red in the candlelight.

Magda intoned her salutation in a voice pitched low and canted. "We honor the all-Mothers; Sigel of the Sun, Erce of Earth, Fulla of the Moon, Helith of the Stag, and Nerthus of Fertility." She squeezed her hand a second time, and more blood dripped onto the log. "For Ilene of Fallaharen who bore me and raised me well."

She stepped aside as Ambrose went next, followed by Clarimond. Both paid respect to Magda who gazed lovingly at her lover and her daughter. Joan declined when her turn came and remained where she stood, her gaze shuttered. Ballard caught Louvaen's puzzled expression. He whispered in her ear. "Orphaned as a babe. She never knew her mother." Compassion softened Louvaen's features.

Cinnia went next. "To our mother, Abigail Hallis, who sang me to sleep, dried my tears and loved me." She clenched her fist and gave Louvaen a watery smile.

Louvaen stepped forward and allowed several fat drops of blood to hit the log before she relaxed her hand. “To our mother, Abigail Hallis, who took up a nonborn child and loved me as her own.”

Ballard frowned when Ambrose went rigid. His gaze snapped to Ballard, and his mouth compressed against his teeth in an obvious bid not to blurt out whatever hovered on his lips. Louvaen continued her veneration.

“To Gullveig who gave me life and died for the effort. I hope I’ve made you proud.”

The sorcerer looked as if he’d burst into flame if he stayed silent any longer. His gaze pleaded for an audience. Distracted by Ambrose’s strange behavior, Ballard bled onto the log and venerated his mother as well as his father’s gentle-spirited leman. If he didn’t fear rousing Isabeau’s enraged spirit, he’d thank her as well; she’d given him Gavin. Gavin obviously thought as he did. Like Joan, he shook his head and stepped away from the log. This time Cinnia wore a puzzled look. Louvaen’s shrewd gaze rested first on Gavin and then on Ballard, silently questioning why neither of them had honored Isabeau’s name.

At the ritual’s completion, Magda tossed the blood-slick log onto the fire. The group bowed to the sparking, crackling conflagration and turned to the business of tending their self-inflicted wounds. Ambrose pulled Ballard to the side as the others waited their turns for Magda to clean and bandage their cuts. “Did you hear what Louvaen said?”

Ballard shrugged. “Aye. What part put you in such a dodder?”

Ambrose wrung his hands and started to pace. “She’s nonborn, Ballard. Cut from her mother’s womb instead of pushed.”

“What of it?” Nonborns were uncommon enough to cause talk but not so strange as to be miraculous. He was even less surprised that Louvaen had survived. So fierce a woman would have fought death from the moment she took her first breath. An admonishment about Ambrose wasting his time hovered on his lips and faded at a sudden recollection of Isabeau’s last venomous words.

“To him I bequeath my bitterness, my rage, my hatred. When he puts childhood behind him, they will manifest. The savage you are shall raise up the savage he’ll become. No woman will love him. All your machinations—your deceit—have brought us to this. No woman born will ever love you. And the son will destroy the father.”

“No woman born will ever love me,” he said softly.

“Yes!” Ambrose glanced furtively over his shoulder to see if anyone else noticed his agitation. “Louvaen Duenda is as much a key to breaking this curse as her sister.”

The burgeoning hope welling up in Ballard’s chest flattened just as suddenly and left a crushing despair in its space. His face must have revealed some emotion because Ambrose’s triumphant grin faded. “What’s wrong?”

“How is this good news? We thought Cinnia’s love for Gavin would break it. Now we need both sisters loving both beasts to accomplish the same thing?” His gaze flitted to Louvaen, elegant in her crimson gown.

“You’re swiving her, Ballard, and she’s enjoying it, “ Ambrose countered. “Surely, she has some affection for you.”

She did: of that he had no doubt. She respected him as well, and admired him. But love him? That was altogether different, something deeper which went beyond mere desire and affection. He knew that when spring came, she’d return home to her father. Nothing she’d said or done since then indicated she’d change her mind. If she loved him, wouldn’t she ask to stay?

He shook his head. “You hold false hope, my friend.”

Ambrose’s eyes flashed annoyance. “It’s still hope, *dominus*. You owe it to yourself to hold onto hope. You owe it to your son.” He gave Ballard an abrupt, annoyed bow before making his way to Magda for a bandage.

Louvaen and Ballard waited their turns for bandages. When Magda finished and left them alone, Ballard turned to Louvaen and examined her bandaged hand. “Thanks to you, I’ve won a bet with Ambrose.”

“Oh?”

“Aye. He was certain that if cut, you’d bleed green. I disagreed.”

She tried, and failed, to stifle a laugh. “Mouthy, bastard wizard. I don’t know how Magda tolerates him.” Her eyes searched his face, and her levity disappeared. “What troubles you?”

Either he was losing the talent for hiding his emotions or she had grown more skilled at reading them in his expressions. He bowed over her hand. “Nothing that can’t be soothed by a night in your arms,” he said. “Your bed or

mine?” He thought he’d offer her the choice after her strident complaints about his cold bed.

“Mine’s too narrow for the both of us. Promise me a nice hot brick or a warming pan, and you’ll get no more complaints from me.” She paused. “About that at least.”

Ballard smiled, the melancholy of Ambrose’s interpretation of how to break the curse lessening before Louvaen’s teasing. “Done.” Were they alone in the hall, he’d kiss her to seal their bargain. Instead, he raised her hand to his mouth and pressed his lips to her knuckles. “Until tonight, mistress.”

They rejoined the others at the table, where Cinnia practically danced out of her shoes from the excitement of giving Modrnicht gifts. Ballard resumed his seat in the dantesca and drank his sixth—maybe seventh—goblet of wine. Louvaen and Cinnia gave Magda and the girls each a pair of fur lined gloves made of supple leather.

Magda ran a thumb over the fur cuff. “These are too fine to wear every day.”

Cinnia protested. “No! You should wear them any time you want. They’ll keep your hands warm on days like these.”

Clarimond presented the gifts she, Joan and Magda made for them. “To keep you busy at the wheel,” she said and handed Louvaen a basket full of Joan’s finest combed flax. “And you with your books.” She passed a small packet to Cinnia who opened it to display a pair of bone needles, whittled, smoothed and sharpened to punch through signature pages for her book binding. The women exchanged hugs, and Ballard wondered if he’d be treated to watching Louvaen’s nimble fingers transform the strick into golden thread.

Ambrose lifted one cloth wrapped package and passed it to Louvaen. “For a woman with the wild magic in her and no use for it,” he said, light winking off his spectacles and hiding the expression in his eyes. Louvaen held the gift gingerly, her eyes wide with surprise and no small amount of suspicion.

“Don’t trifle with her, Ambrose.” Ballard gestured to Louvaen and Cinnia. “A gift to be shared between you. My idea but impossible without Ambrose’s magic, so it’s from both of us.”

Louvaen slowly untied the twine holding the cloth closed while Cinnia watched. Both women gasped at the exquisitely carved hand mirror revealed. Ballard caught the spark of confusion in Louvaen’s gaze. The mirror was far more costly and finer than the ones they currently possessed, and how would they share?

“You’ve been apart from your father,” he said. “That mirror will reveal him to you. Just give the command ‘Show me,’ and say the name of the person you want to see. The glass will cast back to you a reflection of that person in that moment. When you’re done, just tell it to sleep.”

Louvaen caressed him with her gaze. “This is a thoughtful gift. Thank you both.”

In her more exuberant fashion, Cinnia raced to his chair, knelt before it and clasped his hand. “Thank you, Lord de Sauveterre,” she cried. “Thank you so much!” Before Ballard could tell her to get up, she raced back to her sister who handed her the mirror.

“Go ahead, my love. You do the summoning.”

Cinnia gripped the mirror by its ornate handle and stared into its reflective surface. “Show me Mercer Hallis,” she commanded.

For a moment, the mirror shimmered with an azure radiance in her hands before fading. Cinnia’s excited smile transformed to a shocked “O”, and her eyes grew round as dinner plates. “Papa? Dame Niamh?”

Ballard leaned forward in his chair as Louvaen’s eyebrows shot high, and her face flamed. She snatched the mirror out of Cinnia’s hand. “Sleep,” she snapped, and the mirror glowed blue a second time.

Ballard had a good idea what the mirror had revealed to the two women. He braced an elbow on the table and rested his chin in his hand. “How’s your father?”

Louvaen handed Cinnia a goblet of wine which the girl took and drained in two gulps. “Doing quite well obviously.” Louvaen downed a glass of her own before answering. “I’ll never be able to scrub that from my mind.” She patted Cinnia on the shoulder. “I think it best if I keep the mirror for now and summon the next time. What do you think?” Cinnia nodded so hard, one of the braids in her intricate hairstyle came loose.

Despite the mirror’s unexpected surprise, they all declared the evening a success. Ballard held Louvaen back when Magda drafted the others to help clear the table. He retrieved the dagger from a small chest near the hearth and handed it to her.

“You already gave us the mirror.”

“This is for you alone.” He liked the way her hands caressed the bronze velvet. “Go ahead. Open it. No magic mirror showing your sire swiving the neighbor.”

She groaned. “Please don’t remind me.” She unwrapped the velvet and inhaled at the sight of the dagger and sheath. “My gods, Ballard, what...”

Her reaction was all he’d hoped it would be. “Many years ago I was summoned to court to welcome a foreign queen to the kingdom. Her name was Estatira; she was a warrior garbed in silk. Beautiful, powerful. She passed out gifts to the courtiers who welcomed her. I received this dagger. She told me it was a favorite of hers, one she wore as both protection and a talisman of good luck. A fitting gift for a woman of great beauty and even greater strength.”

He stiffened when Louvaen shook her head and tried to give the dagger back to him. “I can’t accept this, my lord. It’s too fine a gift, and I am no queen.”

Ballard gently pushed it back to her. “You are, Louvaen. You’re simply uncrowned.”

She blinked at his compliment, rewrapped the dagger in its velvet parcel and clutched it close to her chest. Her hand lifted and glided down his cheek. He closed his eyes and leaned into her caress. “It’s a gift beyond price,” she whispered, her gray gaze tender. “I’ll treasure it always.”

He was interrupted from answering her by Gavin guiding a weaving Cinnia from the kitchen and toward the stairs. Louvaen left him to tend her sister. The girl yawned and offered a bleary smile. Louvaen sighed. “Come, my love. It’s bed for you.” She motioned to Gavin. “This will be the only time I’ll ask you to carry my sister to bed, de Lovet,

and I'm only doing it because with us wearing these deadly long frocks, she'll pitch us both down the stairs. So make the best of it."

Ballard grinned as Gavin lifted a half slumbering Cinnia in his arms and took the stairs at a snail's pace. Louvaen trailed behind them, pausing once to give Ballard a look that said she knew exactly what Gavin was doing. She winked, hugged his gift as if she were hugging him and followed his son up the stairwell.

He returned to his chamber soon after, warming pan in hand to heat the sheets. Clarimond had offered to take on the task, but he'd refused. He didn't feel like company of any kind except Louvaen's, and if he could muck out a stable, he could warm his bed for his lover. He'd just set the pan near the hearth when a soft knock sounded from the solar. He discovered Louvaen still in her crimson gown. She braced her hands on her hips and frowned.

"I'm trussed up worse than a stuffed goose," she proclaimed. "You'll have to help me out of this stupid dress. And please tell me the sheets are warm."

She laughed when he pulled her into the solar and slammed the door. She sighed his name when he lifted her in his arms and kissed her all the way to his bed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Cinnia strode into the kitchen pointing a finger at Louvaen. “You are a hypocrite!”

Magda, Clarimond and Joan stared first at a red-faced, furious Cinnia and then at Louvaen who continued to plunge the dasher up and down in the butter churn.

“So we begin,” she murmured before turning her gaze to Magda with a silent request.

The cook set down the boiled egg she was peeling and rose from the table. “Come on, lasses, to the buttery. We’ll have cyser tonight with the ale.” The two women followed her

through the door leading to the buttery, leaving the sisters alone.

Louvaen maintained her rhythm on the dasher as she met her sister's angry stare. "Why am I a hypocrite?" She knew the answer. All the sneaking about she'd been doing lately between Ballard's chamber and hers guaranteed Cinnia would catch her at some point. She was honestly relieved to have it in the open.

Cinnia crossed her arms. "I saw you leaving the solar this morning. De Sauveterre kissed you before you left. He wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing." Her cheeks rosied. "You were wearing very little."

Louvaen shrugged and continued churning the butter. "What of it?"

Cinnia's eyes bugged and she flung her arms wide. "What of it? What of it? You've been ranting at me for weeks to behave! No kissing. No touching. No embracing." She counted the restrictions off on her fingers. "I can't even walk with Gavin across the bailey without you tracking us like a lymer, and you're bedding his father!"

Louvaen winced as Cinnia practically screeched in her ear. She abandoned the churn and patted a place beside her on the bench. "Sit down."

Cinnia's mouth thinned to a mutinous line. "I don't want to sit down. I want to know why you think it's just fine for you to..."

"Sit. Down."

Moments of rebellion couldn't conquer a lifetime of obedience. Cinnia sat.

Louvaen reached for her hand. The girl snatched it out of her reach. She sighed and met Cinnia's glare with what she hoped was a neutral expression. "We've already had some of this conversation, but we'll revisit so we both know where we stand." She'd known they'd deal with this, even if she'd never become Ballard's lover. "I can shackle you to my leg, tie you to my wrist and sew you into my shoes, but my best efforts won't stop you from bedding Gavin if you insist. Are you still a virgin?"

Cinnia glared. "Yes," she hissed. "But this isn't about me."

"Oh, it's very much about you. I'm a widow. Unfair I know, but my value in society isn't based on my maidenhead. My worth as a woman is tied to the property my husband left me and my ability to bear children. I can bed as many men as I want as often as I want as long as I'm discreet. You already know where your worth lies.

Cinnia raised her chin and scowled. "Gavin doesn't see me in that light."

Louvaen scowled back. "So? He hasn't offered for you yet, has he? Until he does, what he sees doesn't matter. Others will measure differently."

The girl jerked up from the bench and began to pace. "You're right. It isn't fair. I've a good mind and was raised to have good character. I'm more than some stupid virginity."

"We all are, my love." She reached for Cinnia's hand again, and this time the girl returned the clasp.

Cinnia squeezed her fingers. "Gavin will marry me," she proclaimed with the unshakeable fervency of a newly

indoctrinated anchorite.

Louvaen heaved a weary sigh. “I want to believe; truly I do, but your faith in him is greater than mine. If he doesn’t offer for you, you have to walk out of Ketach Tor intact. Until I hear him plight you his troth, I’ll continue to act the lymer and remain the hypocrite.”

She and Cinnia stared at each other until Cinnia collapsed back on the bench with a huff, all her indignation drained away, leaving only puzzlement. “Why de Sauveterre?”

Louvaen paused. Her list of the obvious was a league long; the more subtle, short and hard to express. Ballard de Sauveterre was unlike the jocular Thomas Duenda in almost every way. Somber, weary, often taciturn, he exuded a latent power that filled whichever room he occupied. She knew little of his history, only that he was a widower and served as a Marcher lord. She’d not been surprised to learn he’d once ruled a kingdom within a kingdom. Even if he hadn’t revealed the last fact to her, she would have imagined the roles of leader and warrior for him. Louvaen respected these traits but wasn’t drawn to them. The quiet man who saved her family from ruin, laughed at her sharp-tongued quips, loved his son and protected his household: such a man drew her like iron to a lodestone. She told Cinnia none of this.

Why de Sauveterre?

She shrugged. “Why not?”

Cinnia blinked, obviously startled by the question. “Well, he’s...”

“A good man with a stalwart heart.” Louvaen grinned as Cinnia’s blinking turned to owl-eyed fascination.

“And you think him handsome? Even with his scars and claws?” Cinnia’s rounded eyes and downturned mouth spoke volumes.

“I do. Very much so.”

Louvaen continued to smile at the thought of Cinnia’s mortification if she revealed just how attracted she was to Ballard. He’d teased her and called her lusty, and he was right. She lusted after him with a ferocity that had her practically leaping on him the moment they were alone, hands sliding into every open space of his clothes while she plundered his mouth. He met her enthusiasm with equal passion, and there were many times they didn’t reach his bed or even remove all their clothing before he had her up against a wall or stretched out on the rug by the fire, deep inside her as she moaned his name.

“Do you love him?”

Cinnia’s question cooled the heat of her thoughts and turned them melancholy. She refused to ponder the possibility, though the idea had lurked in the back of her mind for several days now demanding she recognize its presence. “Your question has no bearing,” she said. “I can’t stay. Papa needs me. Leaving Ketach Tor in the spring is your question to answer.”

This interlude that had unexpectedly grown out of desperate circumstances was only temporary. She belonged at home in Montebianco, her father’s caretaker and mistress of his household. She had no intention of remarrying. That she’d ever married at all surprised everyone, including her.

She had loved Thomas, loved being his wife. He'd taken a piece of her with him when he died, and she couldn't imagine binding herself to any man after him. Until now. Recent memories teased her—sitting with Ballard in the solar during winter nights, reading to him or playing Draughts, teasing him and being teased in return, waking before dawn wrapped in his arms with his slow breaths warm on her neck, his body curled around hers.

She gave Cinnia a severe look. “You sly minx. You made this about me after all, didn't you?”

Cinnia's unrepentant smile reflected in her brown eyes. “Only a little.” An anxious frown replaced the smile, and she bent to kiss Louvaen's knuckles. “You'll be careful, Lou? You're so busy watching after me, I don't want you to forget about you. If de Sauveterre hurts you, maybe I'll be the one to shoot someone,” she declared with a scowl and flourish of her hand.

Louvaen hugged her and gave her a peck on her forehead. “My love, I didn't bring enough powder and shot to take down all three men, but there are crossbows and swords handy. I'm sure you'd make do.”

The two parted company, Cinnia leaving Louvaen to the thoroughly detested task of churning while she helped Clarimond dip candles.

Ballard found her later in Cinnia's bower alone, carding from a basket of raw wool. Louvaen bade him enter at his polite knock. He stood in the doorway and leaned indolently against the frame. She stroked the teasel brushes against each other, drawing the wool into longer fibers. “What brings a

handsome lord to visit a lowly spinner this cold morning?" she said.

Ballard made a show of looking over his shoulder and peering down the hall before turning back to her. "I wouldn't know. There are no handsome lords or lowly spinners here—just me seeking the favor of a beautiful woman who happens to spin."

"You've a silver tongue, Lord de Sauveterre."

"That isn't how you described it last night, Mistress Duenda."

She heel-toed the two teasels too short, matting the fibers. "Ballard!" she admonished him.

He lifted his hands in a nonchalant gesture. "What? From what I hear, your virginal sister is aware you share my bed. What secrets do you have to keep now?"

Louvaen dropped the teasels into the basket and rose to join him at the doorway. "News travels fast."

"We're one castle and eight people. News doesn't have far to go or many ears to reach." He straightened from the doorframe. "I have to ride the land boundaries. Come with me. The sun is out and the sky clear."

She recalled the list of tasks she intended to do for the day and promptly tossed them aside. Magda wouldn't mind, and Cinnia would welcome a reprieve from her guardianship. Best of all, she'd have Ballard to herself all day instead of a few stolen dark hours. She stopped short of accepting his invitation, disappointment dampening her excitement. "I can't. Plowfoot is frightened of you. I'd have to fight him the entire way to keep him from galloping back to the stables."

Except for Magnus, animals feared Ballard. Plowfoot had almost kicked his stall door down once, trying to put distance between him and the master of Ketach Tor as Ballard and Gavin mucked out the stables. Gavin had to trot the horse out to the bailey and tie him to a post until they'd finished cleaning.

Ballard offered an easy solution. "You'll ride pillion on Magnus. He can carry us both at full gallop without breathing hard."

She gathered her cloak and mittens and changed her shoes for heavier boots. As he promised, the sky arced a clear, deep blue overhead. Louvaen squinted against the sun's glare after so many weeks spent either outdoors with gray-washed skies or indoors under candlelight. The snow had cleared, but the air burned like cold fire in her nostrils and lungs. The stable's warmth practically lulled her into a torpor after the bracing temperatures outside. Magnus nickered and blew at her skirts as she waited for Ballard to saddle him.

"He doesn't mind a second person?" She and Cinnia often rode Plowfoot together, but their mild-mannered draught horse was nothing like this sleek, battle-ready courser.

Ballard adjusted the cinch strap and blanket beneath the saddle. "No. You may not recall, but he carried us both back to the castle after you fell in the pond." He focused on her next, pulling her hood forward to shelter her face and tightening the laces at her throat. Unlike her, he was impervious to the chill and wore only a quilted surcoat over a heavy wool shirt and leather breeches. "Are you ready?" She nodded, and he sprang nimbly into the saddle without using

the stirrup. She took his offered arm and swung behind him, landing neatly on Magnus's rump amidst a flurry of skirts.

"I told you I didn't need a stool." She proceeded to squirm until she adjusted her dress to her satisfaction and Magnus snorted his disapproval.

Ballard looked over his shoulder. "No, but a pair of breeches instead of your dress might have worked better."

Louvaen slid her arms around his narrow waist and nestled against his back for warmth. "Stop complaining. This ride was your idea." She very much liked the way the low laugh vibrating along his spine made her cheek tingle.

They rode through the bailey, skirting the serpentine roses. The blooms swiveled on their stems as Magnus trotted past, the crimson petals opening and closing. They hissed their disapproval as the horse rode by, untroubled by their presence. Louvaen pressed closer to Ballard and hissed back.

They crossed the smaller bridge notched into the back of the castle. It stretched across the chasm at the narrowest point, putting them on the track leading to the pond. Louvaen shuddered at the memory of falling into that black, frozen water.

Ballard must have felt her shivers. "Too cold?" he said over his shoulder.

"Not yet." She was grateful when he led Magnus off the path and down another that twisted and turned through a maze of trees before descending into a shallow gulley and up again to a narrow ridge that hugged the forest edge. They rode without speaking, serenaded by the creak of Ballard's saddle and the muffled rhythm of the horse's gait as he trod on a

carpet of dead leaves layered with snow. Louvaen settled in to enjoy the ride. Her legs and back prickled from the cold, but the front of her torso stayed warm as she held Ballard close and gazed upon the bare forest locked in winter.

She straightened abruptly when a flash of blue danced in the corner of her eye and disappeared. The flash appeared again, rippling within the shadows cast by a thick stand of birches. Three more times it teased her, flitting in and out of her vision quick as a firefly in summer. She tapped Ballard's arm. "Are we near a strong pool of magic? There's blue light darting through the trees."

His reply surprised her. "You can't deny your mother's heritage, mistress. Those of us without the gift of magery don't see what you do. We're following the line of Ambrose's ward. I'm told the boundary sometimes shimmers blue."

Louvaen peered more closely into the trees and this time noted the odd rippling effect—like a wall of clear water—passing through the undergrowth. The tingles dancing upon her skin were more than just the cold. Magic streamed off the barrier in cerulean runnels, leaving glowing tracers over tree limbs and along the snow-spackled ground. She leaned around Ballard to track the barrier's path. It edged the ridge, continuing past her line of sight. "How far does the ward go?"

"A league in all directions."

She gasped. Ballard had mentioned Ambrose possessed an impressive talent for sorcery. Only now did she understand the scope of his power. Erecting and maintaining a barrier so large required a conjurer of both formidable strength and decades of experienced spell-casting. Louvaen groaned into

Ballard's back. "Dear gods, Ambrose could have turned me into a toad or a slug with the snap of his fingers."

"I believe he's done so in the past to a few unfortunates foolish enough to cross him."

He swept his arm across the panoramic view. "My lands once covered ten times the distance they do now, and Ketach Tor nearly burst at the seams with people. I spent my days administering court, settling disputes, reading estate reports, gathering rents and hunting. Sometimes I went to war."

He recited his past duties as she would a list of those things she needed for market, but Louvaen caught the wistfulness in his flat description. She tightened her arms around his middle. "The flux changed everything."

"Aye. We're cut off from the world with only Gavin to tell us of news when he returns from his journeys."

The manifestations caused by the flux confused her. She was no magic user, even if she could see magic at work, but fluxes were nothing more than swells of power, sometimes channeled by sorcerers for good or evil, but neutral on their own. "I don't understand. Wild magic isn't malicious or vengeful; just unpredictable. Why has this pool changed you so much and imprisoned you here?"

He stiffened against her. "You'll have to talk to Ambrose about such things. He's the wizard, not I." His voice had sharpened, whetted on a biting sarcasm that took her aback and signaled an end to any more conversation on the topic.

Louvaen heeded the warning and went quiet. She'd never been one to tiptoe around people, preferring a

straightforward approach that was sometimes heavy-handed. It had made her more enemies than friends, but no one was ever unsure where they stood with her. She didn't believe her question insulted Ballard, but something she said had split the scab on an old wound that still smarted, and he'd snarled in response. One part of her understood this and respected his boundary; the other part bristled, stung by his suddenly hostile manner. She swallowed a biting retort and strangled the temptation to box his ears.

A gravid silence swelled between them. Several times during her stay at Ketach Tor she'd kept wordless company with Ballard, an easy quiet with only the rhythmic tap of her foot on the spinning wheel's treadle to mar it. This was different.

Louvaen sat up straight and pulled her hands from where they rested against Ballard's sides. He captured one hand, pressing it hard to his ribs. "Don't," he said. "Don't draw away from me." He tugged her hand upward and bent to kiss her gloved fingertips. His tone remained somber but no longer carried the earlier hostility. "There are regrets hard to ponder, even harder to speak of. I can't answer your question, Louvaen; I won't. I value your regard too much to lose it."

Louvaen tilted her head, puzzled by the ominous statement, and shivered within her cloak as a chill that had nothing to do with the weather drizzled down her back. "I can be a fishwife of the worst sort, my lord, but I'm a lot more forgiving than most people think. I would hope to comfort instead of judge."

He tugged on her hand a second time, forcing her to lean into his back once more as he wrapped her arm snugly around

his middle. Her other arm soon joined, and she embraced him fully. “Your companionship is my greatest comfort, mistress.”

“I’ll remind you of that the next time I dive naked into that ice pit you call a bed.”

He rewarded her jesting with a soft chuckle, and relaxed in the saddle. “You accuse me unjustly now, Louvaen. The bed’s been warm these past nights.”

She couldn’t argue that one. He’d wielded the warming pan as enthusiastically as he did a sword, telling her several times that his reward for the effort far outweighed the humbleness of the task. Louvaen made sure she rewarded him as often as possible for the kindness.

They continued their journey along the boundaries of his diminished demesne, riding beside fenced pasture land that held the flock of wooly sheep Ambrose both guarded and despised and passing fields sleeping fallow for winter. Ballard pointed to the ones closest to where they rode.

“When the flax blooms, the earth mirrors the sky. Fields of blue as far as the eye can see.”

Her fingers twitched with the urge to twist into Ballard’s tunic. Cinnia would see the flax bloom; Louvaen would be in Montebianco caring for their father and trying not to think too much about the master of Ketach Tor. Then again, she might be kept busy lying to all and sundry about where she and Cinnia had wintered if her sister ended up returning home with her.

“Ballard,” she said. “I have a question, and I want you to answer me honestly.”

He tensed, obviously bracing himself for more questioning about the flux and why it changed him. “Ask,” he said. She noted he didn’t promise her the honest answer.

She intended to do exactly as he suggested earlier and, at the risk of being turned into a toad, interrogate Ambrose about the oddities of the flux. For now, other things weighed heavily on her mind. “Will Gavin ask for Cinnia’s hand?”

Ballard caressed her arm. “You can put your fears to rest. I’ve no doubts he’ll do so within a sennight.”

She almost wilted with relief before another worry plagued her. While everyone knew Cinnia didn’t have two silvers to rub together, Louvaen felt she needed to remind Ballard of the fact. “My father’s remaining wealth and influence went down with his ships. Cinnia will come to this marriage without a dowry or family connections. She has only a loving heart and great beauty to offer your son, and beauty doesn’t last.”

Ballard brought Magnus to a halt. He twisted around to meet Louvaen’s eyes, his gaze flitting to the top of her head, to her lips and chin before returning to her eyes. The somber set of his mouth deepened. “The only dowry he wants from her is a return of his love. As for her beauty: the Cinnia Gavin sees now will be the Cinnia he sees when she’s as withered as a dried fig and clutching a walking stick.”

A bubble of emotion swelled in her chest and rose to her throat, almost choking her. How fortunate her sister would be, married to a man raised by such a father. “Thank you, Ballard,” she whispered.

He inclined his head, straightened in his seat and set Magnus in motion. Louvaen hugged his middle hard enough

to make him grunt. “What other questions can I answer to earn such affection from you, mistress?” His voice took on a teasing note.

She pressed her cheek into his back. “That’ll do for now, my lord.”

They returned to the fortress by mid afternoon when the sky had faded to gray, and snow drifted lazily on a rising breeze. Louvaen’s teeth chattered, and she patted her nose with one hand, certain she’d find an icicle hanging from the tip. She was grateful when they rode into the stable’s relative warmth, eager to thaw her bones. The horse and Ballard’s body heat had kept her chest and back of her legs warm. The rest of her shivered and shuddered under the layers of wool and fur she wore.

Ballard dismounted first, swinging his leg over Magnus’s neck to drop lightly to the ground. He held his arms up and motioned to Louvaen. She slid into his embrace and wrapped her arms around his neck. He clasped her to him, his face pale from the cold, enigmatic in the stable’s feeble light.

She raised a hand to trace her thumb over one of his prominent cheekbones. “I wish I could be here when the flax blooms.”

He searched her face, his dark eyes turning even blacker. “Stay then.” His arms tightened on her back, and his voice deepened even more. “Stay with me at Ketach Tor.”

Oh, how badly she wanted to say yes; scream it to the nearby mountains over and over until they heard the echo all the way back in Monteblanco. The word stuck in her throat. Her allegiance belonged to her father. Even without the threat of the scheming Gabriella Jimenin, Mercer Hallis needed his

eldest child if for nothing more than to act as caretaker and keep him from falling into any more harebrained financial schemes.

Louvaen leaned her forehead against Ballard's. "I can't."

He closed his eyes, giving her a view of his thick lashes and the delicate skin of his eyelids. "I know," he said in the same low voice, though now it resonated bleak instead of impassioned.

She had the oddest sense that while he knew her reasons for not remaining at Ketach Tor, his agreement with her refusal sprang from something else entirely. She brushed her lips across his closed lids, over his brows and the bridge of his nose. Magnus interrupted them with an impatient snort. Louvaen grinned as the animal leveled a look on Ballard that conveyed his displeasure at being left standing in the stables still bridled and saddled.

Ballard grinned. "All right, lad, I'm getting to you." He captured Louvaen's hand and kissed her palm. "Go inside and get warm. I'll tend to his majesty and join you soon."

The snow fell faster, dusting everything white as she crossed the bailey. She skirted the portion of wall covered in the twisted mat of vermillion roses, so vibrant amidst surroundings washed in gray. So malignant and fetid. The vines rustled as she passed, their serpentine slide along the wall making the hair on her nape stand up.

Magda halted her at the door leading into the kitchen. "I just swept the floors. If you want inside and something to eat, you'll leave those muddy boots on the stoop."

Louvaen did as ordered and hurried to the fire to shed her cloak and gloves and warm her feet. She hid her smile behind her goblet of ale when the housekeeper barred Ballard from entering with the same command. After a few muttered epithets and the remark that a conquest of his fortress by a *domina* shouldn't have been so easy, he toed off his boots and joined Louvaen at the fire.

“Wretched old hag,” he grouched and took the goblet Louvaen offered him. “One of these days I’ll toss her skinny arse out into the snow.”

Magda sniffed as she strode by them on her way to the pantry. “Will never happen. You’d marry me if I’d have you—which I won’t—and you know it.”

Ballard glared at her back for a moment before joining Louvaen in her laughter. “She’s right you know.” He leered at Louvaen. “I’d still keep you as my leman.”

She harrumphed. “Then you’d be dead because one of us would kill you for even entertaining the idea. I don’t share easily, especially husbands. I doubt Magda does either.”

She yelped when he suddenly yanked her against him, almost spilling her ale. His easy smile faded. “Nothing to hide from Cinnia now, and you claim you trust her to do as you ask. Come to my chambers. Give me the remainder of the day and all of the night.” His eyebrows rose when a sudden gurgling noise rose between them.

Louvaen grimaced. “We’ve kissed the hare’s foot, and I’m hungry.”

Her statement that they’d missed dinner didn’t deter him from his plan. He simply handed her his goblet, plucked the

leftover bread, cheese and dried apples Magda had left for them and ushered her from the kitchen, through the great hall and up the stairs to his chamber.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



The door's slam reverberated in the room. Louvaen chuckled and deposited their goblets on the table set between the two chairs before the fire. She took the food from his arms and put it with the goblets. "Will you lock me in now, my lord?"

He eyed her with a mock scowl. "Do I need to?"

"Hardly. There's food here, and I'm starved enough to gnaw on this table." She offered a suggestive smile. "I should warn you though; your virtue is now in jeopardy."

“Is that a threat or a promise?” He didn’t give her a chance to answer. Instead, he scooped her into his arms and settled into one of the chairs with her in his lap. “No matter. Either one will be pleasurable.”

Louvaen twirled a lock of his hair around her finger. “We’ll miss our supper as well if we stay in here too long. What delicacy will you nibble on then?”

Ballard buried his face in her neck, and she laughed as he snuffled, nipping at her earlobe and the skin under her jaw. “You,” he growled in her ear. “Sweeter than a damson.” He nibbled his way toward her shoulder. “Soft on the tongue like a tipsycake.” His fingers danced along her ribs. She chortled and swatted at his hands. “More delicate than a roasted haunch of venison.”

“What?” Louvaen thrust her hands into his hair, using the leverage to tug his face away from her neck. She met his grin with a scowl. “Ballard, there’s nothing delicate about a haunch of anything.”

The hand tickling her side slipped nimbly under her skirts to stroke her leg from knee to hip. One of his eyebrows winged upward. “I disagree. This one is.” He bent to nuzzle her cleavage but paused when her stomach protested with an even louder growl than before.

Louvaen shrugged. “What do you expect, talking of tipsycakes and plums and such?”

His frustrated chuff dusted her collarbones. “My horse, my cook, your belly.” He pushed her gently off his lap and toward the other chair. “I’m a vassal to you all.”

They shared the simple meal between them, teasing each other as they consumed the food. Even though she'd spend the evening with Ballard and share his bed through the night, she found herself wishing the day might never end—not because she'd discarded the day's toil but because she'd devoted those hours to the master of the house and reveled in his companionship. That he felt a great affection for her, she had no doubt. He was reserved with her around others but generous in his passion and tenderness when they were alone. The hours spent riding along his land borders together had merely strengthened the bonds that tethered her to him.

Cinnia had asked earlier if she loved him. Now, Louvaen would say yes, unequivocally. She was deeply in love with Ballard de Sauveterre, as much if not more so than she'd been with Thomas Duenda. That epiphany—its utter futility—stunned her, and for a moment she forgot how to breathe. The apple she held fell to the floor, and she swayed in her chair.

Ballard shot from his seat, twin lines furrowed between his eyebrows in a harsh frown. He knelt in front of her and took her hand. “What’s wrong? You’ve gone pale as the dead.”

She reached for her goblet with a hand that remained blessedly steady. “Just thirsty. And full.”

He gazed at her, his frown lingering while he drew circles on her knee with his thumb. Louvaen stared into his dark eyes, wondering if he could see the emotions roiling through her, hear the declaration of devotion hovering on her tongue.

“Come to bed,” he said abruptly and rose to his feet with a hand outstretched.

Startled, she glanced at the shuttered window through which tendrils of insipid light unfurled, then back at him. “A little early for slumber, don’t you think?”

Ballard grasped her fingers, pulled her up from the chair and relieved her of her goblet. “I never said anything about sleeping.”

This time she didn’t complain about cold sheets or worry that Cinnia would come hunting for her. A growing sense of dread consumed her, along with a desperation to hoard every minute with Ballard. For some reason, the moment she’d acknowledged to herself she loved him an hourglass had turned on its end, and the sands ran fine and fast. Spring was still weeks away, yet she felt as if it hovered outside the door, a harbinger not only of rebirth but finality. She shivered in Ballard’s arms and kissed him hard enough to taste blood.

He made love to her as afternoon gave way to twilight and then to night. In the quieter moments when they rested, Louvaen entangled her legs with his and clutched him close.

“Tell me what troubles you, Louvaen,” he said, his voice easy and deep. They reclined together and he stroked her back and shoulders while she lay docile in arms.

“I’m well.” She lied. She wasn’t well. She despaired and raged at the knowledge she’d soon return home and never see him again. “What could possibly trouble me right now?” She nestled into him and contented herself with carding his hair through her fingers, hoping to distract him from more questions. He grew heavier against her, and his breathing deepened, signaling he’d fallen asleep.

Louvaen stared into the darkness. A week. She had a week, maybe a fortnight if Cinnia wanted a wedding ceremony more elaborate than Ambrose binding her hand to Gavin's with golden cord and giving the ritual blessing of unification. After that, Louvaen had no more reason to stay. The weather would be fair enough to travel. She might even catch the first blooming daffodils as she rode Plowfoot over the drawbridge and onto the land opposite Ketach Tor.

"I wish I could stay, Ballard," she whispered. "I do love you."

The words had barely left her lips when the air around her compressed, and her ears popped. Beside her, Ballard jerked and muttered in his sleep. She couldn't discern anything in the shadows swallowing the curtained bed. Dizziness overwhelmed her, as if a great hand had grabbed the bed and launched it into a spin. The sickening motion stopped almost as soon as it began, and Louvaen clutched Ballard to her, gasping. He didn't awaken—a strange thing itself as she'd learned he was a light sleeper and sensitive to her slightest movements.

Her skin prickled, and the fine hairs on her arms rose; the air smelled of magic—sharp and cool like the first breeze before the coming of a downpour. She lay still, waiting for the dizziness to return. She half expected the tell-tale blue sparks to make an appearance. The scent of rain dissipated; the bed didn't spin, and no fae lights appeared. Whatever sorcery had surged through the chamber was gone, leaving nothing more than a light draft on the bed curtains. Louvaen lay rigid in the bed long afterwards, only relaxing—one wary muscle at a time—as the room remained steeped in quiet. Her eyelids grew heavy. Ketach Tor convulsed within a tide—this flux Ballard

and Gavin mentioned but never expanded on—and she wanted answers. Tomorrow she'd track down Ambrose and demand them. She draped an arm across her lover's waist and fell asleep to the sound of his gentle snores.

She woke to a thing far less soothing. During the night she'd engaged in her customary act of cocooning herself in the blankets for warmth. Ballard, impervious to the chamber's frigid temperatures, slept peacefully beside her, his back pressed against hers. Louvaen wrinkled her nose at an odor both familiar and repulsive—roses and dead bodies. In the four years she'd been married to an undertaker, she'd gotten a nose full of those two smells combined. She opened one eye to the predawn darkness and made to untangle herself from the covers. A sudden, sharp pain shot through her thigh and radiated down her leg to her knee.

“Ow!” She wrestled with the blankets, trying to reach her leg and whatever was gnawing on it.

Ballard jolted beside her. “Louvaen,” he slurred. “What...” He swore on a pained gasp, and this time his voice was clear, enraged. “Evil-minded bitch! Why can't you just die?”

The mattress shifted beneath them with his movements. Louvaen, stunned by Ballard's hostile response, screeched as whatever had crawled into the blankets with her took additional bites out of her leg, side and shoulder. “Sweet gods, Ballard! Stop moving! You're making it bite me!”

He ignored her command and jostled the bed even harder, low growls reverberating in the suffocating black. Her skin did its best to dance its way off her bones at the thought of what might be sharing the covers, and Louvaen yanked her

uninjured arm free. She'd get no help from Ballard who seemed intent on making the bed bounce across the room. If she unwrapped the blankets, she could wiggle out without further disturbing whatever crawling horror lurked in the bed with them. Her plan, along with the last vestiges of any calm, died a quick death when something slithered along her pillow and wrapped itself around her arm in a constricting grip.

"Snake!" she shrieked and thrashed out of the blankets, flinching at the vicious jabs peppering her from shoulder to wrist, as if someone punctured her flesh with a handful of sewing needles. She fought her way toward the bed's edge, kicking and flailing when a pair of powerful arms grasped her around the waist.

"For the love of gods, Louvaen," Ballard bellowed. "Keep still!"

Caught in the grip of hysteria that made her ears ring and her heart beat hard enough to crack her ribs, she barely heard him. Snakes. There were snakes in the bed. As if her jumbled thoughts conjured another serpent to join its mates, a whipping hiss penetrated the darkness. Louvaen hurled herself away from the sound, slamming into Ballard as her unseen tormentor struck her cheek with a pair of fangs. The audible snap of teeth sounded behind her, followed by a garbled "Blessed fuck!"

Some small part of her mind still functioning properly acknowledged she'd head-butted him in the face. The rest of her screamed inwardly to bolt from the bed, even if that meant stomping Ballard into the mattress.

His arms tightened around her in a vise, and she was lifted clear of the bed for a moment before he dropped her

back down like a sack of grain. He collapsed on her, his weight crushing her into the mattress.

“HOLD STILL, WOMAN!”

Louvaen froze. Whether it was from him blasting her ears to her head or smashing her chest flat, his command punched through her panic. She blinked, seeing nothing in the thick shadows except Ballard’s eyes, lambent and fierce.

“No snakes, Louvaen,” he said between harsh pants that blew strands of her hair across her forehead. “Roses.”

Had she been able to draw breath, she might have questioned him as to how those ghoulish flowers had ended up in his bed. “Can’t breathe,” she gasped out in a thin whisper.

Ballard cursed and shifted. Louvaen inhaled in relief and exhaled on a whimper as the invisible fangs that didn’t belong to serpents sank deeper into her arms and side. Wet ribbons trickled down her skin and pooled in her palm. Blood no doubt. More tickled her cheek and slid to her ear. Tears sprang to her eyes. “What is stabbing me?” Even through her pain, she heard the anguish and the fury in his answer.

“Thorns,” he said. “They’ve pinned us both. It’s why I need you to stay still, my beauty: so I can cut us free.”

Thorns? These weren’t thorns; they were coffin nails. Louvaen pictured the rose vine in the bailey, the flowers like bloodied mouths, the defensive thorns as long and pointed as mercy daggers. She bit her lip and took shallow breaths. The repulsive scent of flowers mixed with rot flooded her nostrils. “I hate those blasted plants!” The thorns dug in harder, and she groaned.

“Unless you want to keep suffering, you’ll stay quiet while I do this.” A hard snapping noise punctuated his statement, followed by several more. Pinned to the bed, Louvaen could only listen to the rustle of bed linens and Ballard’s quick indrawn breaths as he cut away their thorny shackles. The vines holding her captive loosened around her arms and her leg, yet the thorns remained embedded.

“Rise slowly,” Ballard instructed. “You should be able to leave the bed. I’ll help with the thorns in a moment.”

She crawled to the edge of the bed, muscles rigid while she waited for a hidden vine to lash out from behind the pillows and garrote her.

The bedchamber had brightened to a false twilight—just enough to reveal her injuries. Slashed vines hung from her arm and side and encircled her leg, anchored by the thorns embedded in her skin. The vines writhed and coiled around each other like vipers in death throes. The one wrapped around her thigh gave a muscular flex, driving the thorns deeper and sending rills of hot blood down her leg to puddle at her feet. She almost bit through her lip in the effort not to scream.

Her blankets had protected her from the worst of the plant’s insidious attack, with only the side of her body without cover taking the brunt of its malice. The urge to start ripping the vines off, no matter the damage or pain she’d inflict on herself almost overwhelmed her. She didn’t wait for Ballard to help, but she did control her revulsion and set to work on her arm, carefully sliding each hooked barb out of her skin. More blood pearled at the puncture wounds until her arm was washed red, and tears dripped down her cheeks.

“Louvaen, why didn’t you wait? I said I’d help you.”

Louvaen turned at Ballard’s voice and gasped. Like her, he stood bloodied and vine-covered. The roses had saved the worst of their savagery for him. Hundreds of thorns pierced his arms and legs, sank hooks into his belly and chest and coiled around his neck in a bristling collar. He plucked at one of the vines, and Louvaen’s eyes rounded. His nails, short and blunt the previous day, had grown overnight. They curved, black and pointed over his fingertips, as menacing and far deadlier than the thorns trying to bleed him dry. His feet suffered the same fate.

She blinked back her tears. “My gods, Ballard, worry about yourself. In fact, I should be helping you. You’re worse off than I am.” She unraveled the last of the vine from her arm and tossed it into the hearth’s cold ashes. “What caused this?” She worked at the cluster of thorns snarled into the skin along her topmost rib and clenched her teeth to keep from crying out.

“The flux has begun.” His lips curved into a humorless smile when her gaze dropped to his hands. He curled his fingers, highlighting the arch of the claws. “I once told you your efforts were wasted.” He clutched a vine attached to his chest and tore it away.

“Stop!” Louvaen limped to him and caught his wrist. A pattern of half-moon cuts decorated his chest, encircled a nipple, and marched diagonally across his ribcage to his back. Even in the growing daylight, his eyes retained their bestial color, the pupils black pinpoints in yellow irises. The whites of his eyes were so reddened, he looked as if he could weep blood. “Are you not in enough pain?” And she’d contributed

to his mauling. His bottom lip swelled, sporting two livid cuts from where she'd bashed him in the mouth with her head. She glided a fingertip along his chin. "I'm sorry for hurting you."

"Two black eyes, a split lip—what will you add to your list next?" He winked and stood peacefully while she carefully peeled the vines off his body. He did the same for her, his hands delicate as feathers. Louvaen bore the marks of dozens of punctures from the rose thorns but not a single scratch from Ballard's claws.

By the time she pried away the last of the vines, her hands were slippery with his blood. Her own wounds had scabbed over in the cold air, making her itch. "We'll need baths. We're both a mess." She glanced up when he didn't answer her. He stared past her shoulder, a far-away expression in his owl-yellow eyes. She shook his wrist. "Ballard, where have you gone?"

He blinked, brought back from some mysterious distance by her question. He raised his arms to survey the rose's cruelty. "They're all gone then?" His voice rang hollow, and the morning light cast his pale features in sharp relief.

Louvaen frowned. "They're gone, and I hope they don't return." She shivered, though she didn't know if it was from standing naked in the cold bedchamber or watching her lover suddenly slip into a dreamlike lethargy. She retrieved her chemise from the bundle of clothing left on one of the chairs when Ballard undressed her the night before and pulled it over her head. The thin linen didn't chase away the chill, but it helped and didn't stick to her scabs.

“No time for a bath,” Ballard said. “I need to find Magda and have her prepare my cell.”

She gawked at him. “You’re covered in blood, my lord, and those wounds need tending.” Nausea settled in her belly as she turned her attention to his second statement. “What do you mean Magda is to prepare your cell?” The question was rhetorical; she hoped Ballard would give her a different answer than the one she expected.

He doomed her to disappointment with a humorless smile and luminous gaze. “You know why.”

“Does the flux really change you so much?” She prayed he’d tell her no.

“Aye, though I didn’t expect it this soon or to be so strong. The roses are the first to react—our warning of what’s to come. As you’ve just learned to your misery, they’re even more dangerous during the high tide.” He looked away. “As am I.”

The sickness in her gut roiled up toward her throat. This proud man, of enormous heart and strong character, was ashamed. She tangled her bloodied fingers through his and tugged until he met her eyes once more. “If I promise not to kick you in the face this time...” she paused and smiled wryly. “Or headbutt you, will you let me stay with you?”

His features softened, and he squeezed her fingers until the tips turned white. “Beautiful fishwife, how do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Give me back my dignity.”

Louvaen pulled one of her hands out of his grasp and wiped it down her shift, leaving a red smear behind. “Don’t be foolish, my lord. Your dignity is as much a part of you as your rather impressive nose. I give you nothing you don’t already possess.”

He laughed then and almost pulled her into his arms, stopping when she flinched. He settled for brushing his lips against hers. “Speaking of impressive noses...”

She frowned. “I’ll thank you not to. I’ll be hard pressed explaining to your household how you drowned yourself in your bath.”

A pounding at the solar door interrupted their banter. Ballard dragged a blanket off the bed and wrapped it around his waist. “In case it’s your sister,” he said. Louvaen followed more slowly behind him as he left the bedchamber to greet their visitor.

Ambrose stood in the corridor, barefoot, spectacles askew, and dressed in threadbare robes. His white hair stuck out from his scalp in spiny tufts, as if he’d danced with a lightning bolt. “Ballard, the flux has...” he paused at the sight of a crimson-washed Ballard and the bloodied Louvaen behind him. “Begun.” His gaze flitted to Ballard’s hand before returning to his face. “But I think you know that already.”

Ballard stepped aside and motioned for the sorcerer to enter. “The roses paid us a visit some time during the night. I was about to find Magda and ask her for witch hazel and the keys to my cell.”

“You’ll find her with Gavin. He’s taken to his bed.”

What little color remained in Ballard's pale face leached away. "So soon?" he said, voice anguished.

Ambrose nodded. "I've brewed a draught for him to ease the pain. She's making sure he drinks it." He turned his attention to Louvaen. "Cinnia guards his door better than a dragon with treasure. He refuses to see her. I need you to coax her away."

Louvaen crossed her arms and quickly uncrossed them at the sting of her injuries. "I'll do no such thing. He wants her to marry him? Then he shows her what she'll deal with if she does—a man made invalid by what should be neutral magic." She eyed Ambrose, suspicious. "Though I'm guessing there's nothing neutral about this particular sorcery."

He met her narrow-eyed gaze with one of his own. "Magic is always more than it seems, Mistress Duenda."

She growled under her breath. "Very clever, magician. And deceptive. Your answer smells as bad as those foul roses." She turned to Ballard. "You'll want to see Gavin, yes?" At his nod, she continued. "So will Cinnia. She's more like me than any of you realize."

Ambrose muttered "Gods help Gavin then."

Ignoring the sorcerer, Louvaen laid a hand on Ballard's forearm. "She needs to understand what he suffers during the flux. Protecting her from such knowledge does neither of them any favors. I can assure you she won't run or cower away. If she does, is that truly the wife you want for your son?"

Ballard shook his head. "No." He smiled faintly. "The men of Ketach Tor aren't known for binding themselves to

milksops.” He turned to Ambrose. “Let Cinnia into the room.”

“But *dominus*, Gavin doesn’t want...”

“Right now I don’t care what Gavin does or doesn’t want. If he intends to take her to wife, he’ll allow her across his threshold.” He captured a flyaway strand of Louvaen’s hair and ran it between his thumb and forefinger before releasing it. “Bath from a basin, mistress, nothing more. And a poultice for the wounds. We don’t have the time for anything else.” He stalked back to the bedchamber, leaving Louvaen with Ambrose.

The two sized each other up like hounds before a fight, Ambrose as sour as if he’d eaten a bowl of unripe currants. “Happy now? You got what you wanted.”

Louvaen snorted. “Hardly. I’m certain both Cinnia and I are being gulled by you and de Sauveterre regarding this flux or whatever you want to call it. This has all the signs of a curse.” The subtle shift in his expression—a blankness that smoothed his features—signaled she’d hit her mark. Her eyes rounded. “That’s it, isn’t it? This is curse magic. Admit it!”

He huffed, his outrage making his spiky hair quiver and his robes snap as he quit the solar. “I admit nothing,” he declared on his way out. “You want confessions? Ask the *dominus*, not me.” He strode down the corridor toward the second floor mezzanine and Gavin’s room, leaving Louvaen to smack the flat of her palm against the door.

“He told me to ask you, you gleedy old spitting frog,” she snapped.

“I heard that,” he called out without turning around.

“Good!” Louvaen yelled back and slammed the door.

She whirled to find Ballard standing not far behind her, already dressed in breeches. He pulled on a bbliaud, not bothering with the laces. He hadn't taken time to rinse away the blood on his skin, and pink stains blossomed across the shirt, speckling his chest and arms. He looked as ragged as she felt, the scars livid against his gray pallor. “Where's Ambrose?”

“Returned to Gavin's room.” She'd guessed right about a curse and burned to know more but kept her tongue behind her teeth. In the weeks she'd spent at Ketach Tor, she'd never seen fear in Ballard's eyes until now. That fear was for his son. In his place, she'd have no patience for satisfying someone's curiosity at the moment. “I'll meet you there once I've dressed. I know you're as anxious as Cinnia.”

He nodded, pausing long enough to brush a kiss across her brow before following Ambrose. Louvaen watched him until he disappeared into the stairwell. Her own dressing took longer than his, accompanied by a great quantity of cursing and hisses as her frock sleeves scraped the tears in her skin, and her stockings pulled on the scabs dotting her leg. She joined the parade of visitors to Gavin's chambers and found Cinnia standing outside the bedroom's closed door, wiping away tears with the corner of her sleeve. When she saw Louvaen, she threw herself into her arms. The sobs started anew.

Louvaen swallowed a pained yelp and stroked her sister's back. “How is he?”

Cinnia stepped back and sniffled. Even with a red nose, swollen eyes, and skin blotched with tears, she was

breathhtaking. “In pain. Unhappy to see me.” She smiled crookedly. “You were right about his eyes. De Sauveterre admitted that Ambrose ensorcelled Gavin the last time so I wouldn’t become frightened.”

“Are you frightened now?”

“Yes, but not for myself.” Cinnia used her sodden sleeve a second time to scrub her face. “Gavin reminds me of Thomas when he first got sick.”

Louvaen swayed, dizzy with horror.

Cinnia gripped her arm. “It isn’t plague, Lou; it isn’t just the flux either.”

“I know.” Her sister’s eyebrows rose in question. Louvaen gestured to Gavin’s closed door. “I made a good guess and caught Ambrose by surprise. What did Gavin tell you?”

Cinnia plucked at her skirts. “Nothing, but Magda hinted at it when I was in there. Something to do with his mother Isabeau and curses.”

Once again, the de Sauveterre household danced around a revelation, saying just enough to fire the curiosity but leaving out the most important details. “Magda’s picked up some of her lover’s bad habits. Sly hints and half truths seem to be the order of the morning.” Louvaen wished she could shake one of them until the details spilled out. She returned Cinnia’s sudden stare. “What?”

“What happened to your cheek?”

Louvaen ran a fingertip gingerly across the deep scratch that marred her cheekbone. “You know those disgusting

roses?”

Cinnia’s eyes widened. “They did that? How?”

“An unwelcomed dawn visit through a broken shutter. They’re sensitive to the flux the same way Gavin and his father are.” Louvaen paled at the image of Cinnia venturing too close to that seething mass of thorns and being ripped apart. “Don’t go anywhere near the roses, my love. I don’t care how beautiful you think they are.”

Distracted by the sound of the latch on Gavin’s door, Cinnia only nodded. Magda emerged from the room, closing the door gently behind her. Her pinched expression softened when she saw Cinnia, and she patted the girl’s arm. “He’s sleeping for now. The *dominus* insists on staying, even though he’ll need those cuts tended.” Her gaze settled on Louvaen, pausing at the scratch on her cheek before moving on to the injuries hidden by her wrinkled frock. “You too, I’ll wager.” She waved them along with her as she reached the stairwell. “Come downstairs. I’ll heat water and pour cyser. We can all use a cup a two, methinks.”

A tepid sponge bath followed by a slathering of yarrow ointment and two cups of cyser improved Louvaen’s mood from grim to anxious. As much as she wanted to indulge in a bit of pacing and hand-wringing, she put forth her best impression of a calm demeanor for Cinnia’s sake. The girl was doing enough worrying for two people.

“Do you think Gavin is feeling better now?” she asked for the fifth time in the past quarter hour. She helped Louvaen strip the blood-stained linens off Ballard’s bed and pile them by the door.

“Maybe,” Louvaen replied patiently. “We’ll know soon enough.” Gathering laundry wasn’t the most interesting way of distracting her sister nor the most successful, but she needed something to keep her occupied and not pacing outside Gavin’s door.

Magda had sent them upstairs after Louvaen pulled her aside. “I’ll ruin Joan’s fine tare if I try to spin, and Cinnia will drive us all to madness before noon with her misery. There’s plenty to do here, but I want something harder than dipping candles to keep her mind off what’s going on in Gavin’s room.”

The cook gave her a knowing look. “Just her?”

Louvaen shrugged. “Me too, if you must know.”

“Hard toil does wonders for an idle mind,” Magda said with a faint smile. “You can wash those sheets and clothing you and Ballard bloodied this morning.”

They yanked the last of the sheets from the mattress and bundled everything in a blanket to drag downstairs. Louvaen kept a wary eye on the window as they made their way to the door, ready to snatch Cinnia and run if a thorny vine coiled through the shutter slats.

Magda had a barrel and bucket ready, along with a bucking cloth filled with ash. Cinnia threw herself into the drudgery of rinsing, scrubbing and beating with gusto, only halting when Louvaen threatened to take the washing bat to her head if she didn’t stop long enough to eat Magda’s dinner of stewed chicken. All the threats in the world couldn’t force her to do more than pick at her portion, and Louvaen didn’t push her. Her own food grew cold as she pushed it listlessly from one side of her plate to the other. She hadn’t expected

Gavin to make an appearance, but she'd hope Ballard might. She'd even welcome Ambrose's usual censure of her if it meant learning more about this latest flux. Unfortunately, only Magda kept them company, and she'd warned them no amount of charm, tears or demands would move her to divulge the household secrets.

Dusk crept over the horizon by the time they draped the last sheets across winter hedges set up in the laundry room. Louvaen stretched her back and raised her hands to show Cinnia. "Prune fingers," she said.

Cinnia smiled weakly. "This reminded me how much I hated the spring great washes. I didn't think I'd ever dry out afterwards." She glanced toward the kitchen and the stairwell beyond the screens. Her smile vanished as quickly as it appeared. "I can't stand it, Lou. I need to check on him."

Louvaen didn't blame her. Hours had passed with only Magda and the maids for company. Magda had left for Gavin's room a few minutes earlier carrying a cup and bottle filled with dark liquid. Cinnia watched her go with a longing gaze. Louvaen took pity on her. "Go on then. I'll finish here." The words barely left her lips before Cinnia flew out of the laundry room.

She desperately wanted to follow Cinnia, not so much to see Gavin but to find Ballard. He'd looked knackered and fearful when he left her in the morning, his wide shoulders drooping when Ambrose told him his son had already taken to his bed, ill from the flux. She put away the washing bats instead and headed for the kitchen. She entered in time to hear the door to the buttery open and close—Joan or Clarimond to fetch ale or wine. Something within her said otherwise, and

she followed the sound, propelled by the certainty that the man she sought had just passed her and was descending to the well room.

Her instincts proved accurate. Louvaen discovered Ballard in the cell he'd occupied when she first arrived at Ketach Tor. The room had been scrubbed clean, and fresh straw carpeted the floor. Someone had left a stack of neatly folded blankets against one wall. Ballard stood inside, a length of chain coiled around his forearm. He braced his weight and pulled, testing the bracket that attached the chain to the stone blocks.

She hovered inside the doorway and prayed her voice didn't quiver as much as her insides did. "Will it hold?"

He didn't startle at her presence. The chain clattered into the straw. "It should. If it doesn't, I'd still have to kick or claw my way out, and Ambrose will have the door so ensorcelled, I'd challenge a dragon to gnaw its way through." He turned to face her, and Louvaen bit back a gasp. His earlier pallor had worsened, and shadows carved gaunt hollows beneath his cheekbones and eyes. Those were the least of his troubles. His pupils were no longer round; they glittered elliptical and black in irises as bright as saffron moons. The pathways of scars etched into his face shifted, crawling under the skin until they mapped new roads over his nose and into his hairline.

"Behold the beast, my beauty." He grinned, flashing incisors grown more curved and pointed. His mirth never touched that reptilian gaze.

Louvaen breathed slowly and locked her knees against the urge to flee. Here stood a predator of terrifying aspect, a

being unnamed and unknown. She could weather the sight of fangs, writhing scars, even the serpent's eyes, but if he flicked a forked tongue at her she'd lose the last speck of courage she possessed and succumb to the bone-deep revulsion every creature that walked on legs had for those which slithered on their bellies.

Ballard's mocking grin dimmed. He raised an eyebrow at her continued silence. "I must truly be grotesque to render the outspoken Louvaen Duenda speechless."

She crossed her arms and adopted a severe expression. "I looked like you once. The morning after Thomas and I attended Beatrice Cooper's handfasting, and the wine flowed a little too freely. Thomas hurled himself out of the bed in fright at his first sight of me."

His empty smile disappeared altogether. "You're amused by this?"

"No one here is laughing, my lord." She reached for his hand, holding tight when he tried to pull away from her. The tips of his claws scraped her knuckles. "I'm not laughing, and I'm not running. I won't lie either. You're a chilling sight to behold. I've had nightmares of monsters prettier than you." She stepped closer and raised her other hand to thread her fingers through his hair. This time he didn't flinch away. "But you're still you under all this flux nonsense. Only a fool of a woman would run from such an extraordinary man, and I am no fool, Ballard de Sauveterre."

To her relief, he closed his eyes and enfolded her in a tentative embrace. She went willingly, hugging him close and resting her head on his shoulder. He felt the same as before, smelled the same. If she closed her eyes, she pictured him as

he was the previous night—still scarred but so much more human. The pointed claws drawing designs on her back through her dress reminded her this new day brought a grimmer reality.

“You shouldn’t be alone down here,” she said. “I’ll bring my spinning wheel and keep you company.”

He stiffened and shrugged out of her arms. She didn’t think he could appear any bleaker than he already did, but he managed. “I don’t want you here, Louvaen,” he said flatly.

Louvaen bristled, stung by his abrupt refusal. “Why not? I’ve seen you in the midst of the flux before.”

He shook his head as a wry smile curved his mouth. “No you haven’t. That was ebb tide when the worst was over.”

She remembered the filthy cell and the hunched beast screeching its torment to the walls. Everything within her recoiled at the knowledge that greater suffering awaited him. She fidgeted with the laces on his tunic. “My affections for you will remain the same, Ballard.” She’d nursed Thomas through the horrors of the plague—the task had left scars of its own inside her. “I’m not a weak spirit.”

He stroked her arm from shoulder to wrist. “No, you aren’t, but I’m not human during the flux’s peak. And I still have some shred of pride.” Remnants of the shame he’d revealed the night before flickered in his yellow eyes. “This is for me, Louvaen, not you. I beg your indulgence.”

Louvaen thought her eyes would pop out of her head from the effort it took not to cry. She latched onto anger instead and let it burn. This curse no one would talk about

was a treacherous thing, inflicting not only pain and madness but robbing its victim of dignity. She fisted her hands in her skirts and took deep breaths until the tight bands inside her chest loosened, and she could speak without gasping. “You have been very generous with the warming pan lately, my lord,” she teased gently. “I think it only fair I grant you this indulgence. But don’t get used to it,” she said in her sternest voice.

He took her into his arms a second time and bent his head. Louvaen closed her eyes, relief surging through her when he brushed her bottom lip with his still very human tongue. They held each other for several minutes, trading kisses and soft endearments.

Finally, Ballard set her from him and gestured to the stairs. “Time for you to go upstairs, my beauty.” The black claws that could easily slice her to ribbons sketched butterfly patterns down her neck and over her collarbones. “I’ve a comfortable cell, and Magda will bring me dinner later.” He patted his flat stomach. “I’ll be in no danger of starving.”

Louvaen grasped his hand and kissed his bony knuckles. “You’ll call for me if you need me?”

“No.”

She glared. “Ballard...”

He glared back. “I won’t know you, woman. I’ll be lucky if I can garble out words instead of growls.” He returned her gesture and kissed her hand before unclasping her fingers and retreating farther into the cell. “If you want to succor me, help the others with Gavin.” His eyes flared like newly lit torches. “My son is why I breathe, Louvaen.” He

turned away from her. She stood there for several moments, staring at his back before leaving him to his solitude.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



She found Magda at the kitchen hearth, turning a spit of meat. The cook indicated two pitchers on a nearby table with her chin. “Ale or cyser?”

Louvaen fished a goblet from one of the cupboards lining the walls. “Both,” she said.

The rest of the day moved at a crawl. By evening, Louvaen’s mood had blackened, and she listened so intently for any sound from the well room her ears began to ring. The atmosphere at supper had all the joviality of mourners in a graveyard. Ambrose stared off into the distance, worrying his lower lip between thumb and forefinger while his food grew

cold. Cinnia, eyes almost swollen shut with tears, sniffled so often that Louvaen had to switch places with her on the bench so Magda, annoyed, wouldn't stab her with her eating knife. Clarimond and Joan had wisely chosen to eat by the hearth and away from the tension hanging around the others thicker than the stew no one was eating.

Only Louvaen came to the solar afterwards, and only because she didn't want to cart her spinning wheel back to her chambers. She spun far into the night, with the clack of the treadle keeping her company. The room had grown so dark that she guided the flax onto the flyer using a practiced touch instead of sight. At dawn, the first agonized screams from the well room drifted throughout the castle, and her fingers began to bleed. She continued spinning, teeth clenched and fingers burning, until Cinnia entered the solar with a torch in hand. The light clasp on her shoulder brought her out of her stupor. She lowered her foot from the treadle, vaguely aware of a numbness in her calf and thigh. The spinning wheel slowed and finally creaked to a stop.

Cinnia set the torch into a nearby bracket and crouched down by Louvaen's knees. "You've been up all night, haven't you?" She grasped her sister's wrist and raised her hand to the wavering light. Blood slid down her fingers to run between her knuckles and coat her palm, streaming from the countless lacerations abrading her fingertips. "Oh Lou," Cinnia crooned in an anguished voice. "I'd hoped never to see this again. Why didn't you stop?"

Louvaen shrugged. "I didn't notice." The distaff was nearly empty and the spindle nearly full—not with linen thread spun from the basket of flax tow at her feet, but with wire as

fine as thread and sharp enough to slice flesh. The last time she'd spun flax into steel, Thomas had lay dying in their bed.

Cinnia rose and urged Louvaen up with her. "Come on. We'll go downstairs, treat those cuts and get your hands wrapped. No spinning for you the next few days. You'll have to take up the fine arts of pacing and sniveling with me."

Clarimond manned the kitchens for the morning. "Mam is upstairs tending to Sir Gavin." She winced at Louvaen's hands. "I'll heat water for you, mistress, and bring honey and bandages."

An hour later, Louvaen held up hands slathered in honey and wrapped in linen bandages. She turned to Cinnia, noting the dark circles under the girl's eyes, her bedraggled braid and wrinkled clothing. She wasn't the only one who didn't sleep the previous night. "I can manage cleaning my teeth, but you'll have to..." A tormented scream barreled up from below, vibrating the floor beneath their feet. Louvaen closed her eyes for a moment before opening them again to Cinnia's ashen features. "...lace me once I change clothes," she continued in a hollow voice.

"He sounds so much worse than last time." Cinnia grabbed frantically for the cup an equally pale Clarimond handed her and downed the drink. "I wish we had something stronger than the ale."

"How is Gavin?" Louvaen was almost afraid to ask. This was the first time in the past twenty-four hours she'd seen Cinnia dry-eyed. She prayed her question wouldn't start another crying jag. She was too preoccupied with the tenant in the well room cell to be much comfort to her sister at the moment.

“Not suffering like his father, thank the gods.” Cinnia clapped a hand to her mouth. “I’m sorry, Lou. I don’t mean I’m glad de Sauveterre is hurting. I’m just saying...”

Louvaen chucked her lightly under the chin. “Don’t be a goose. I know what you meant.” She rose, thanked Clarimond for her physicking and refused the offer of breakfast. Her stomach was knotted worse than her hair. If she tried to eat, she feared she’d retch. She nudged Cinnia. “Come with me. I have to dress and need your help. You could use a little tidying yourself.”

They readied themselves for the day, serenaded by a cacophony of tortured cries. The flux had swelled and would continue to rise for the next few days before receding, turning Gavin into a bed-ridden invalid and his father into a bestial revenant. Louvaen wondered if by the end of the tide, they might all join Ballard in his madness. She left Cinnia at Gavin’s door, wringing from her the promise that she’d fetch Louvaen if she needed her.

Cinnia paused with her hand on the latch. “Where will you be?”

“Cleaning the buttery.” Louvaen stared at her sister, daring her to argue.

The girl gazed at her in silence for a moment. “Be careful, Lou,” she said and slipped into the chamber where Gavin rested and Magda comforted him.

Louvaen waited outside, listening to the murmur of voices—Gavin’s weak and raspy, Cinnia’s falsely cheerful. She shook her head and went downstairs, never stopping for broom or mop in the kitchen. The door between the buttery and the well room was closed and barred. Beyond the barrier

of wood all was silent. She sat down on one side of the top most step, arranged her skirts and leaned back against the wall to wait. She did as Ballard asked and stayed out of the well room, but she'd keep vigilance here, out of sight. He might not see or hear her, but she'd be there just the same.

She sat for hours, sometimes smothered by the quiet, other times with her bandaged hands over her ears as Ballard threatened to bring the roof down. The guttural howls were terrible, testament to his assertions that he wasn't human during the flux. The whimpers were worse—broken noises as if the pain were so bad, it hurt too much to scream. Twice, Louvaen stood up and prepared to march down the stairs, throw the door wide and check his cell. Only her promise to leave him some illusion of gravitas stopped her. She plopped back down on the step, propped her elbows on her knees and covered her face with her hands.

“If you sit there much longer, your backside will freeze to the step.”

Louvaen looked up and scooted over to give Ambrose room beside her. He settled his robes around him and tucked his hands into his voluminous sleeves for warmth. “I thought I might find you here.”

She shrugged. “Where else would I be?”

“With your sister.”

“I was with her earlier. She doesn't need my company at the moment.”

His spectacles reflected back her features, effectively hiding his expression as he scrutinized her. “What happened to your hands?”

She almost tossed off a flippant response, some meaningless excuse about clumsiness and distraction. She discarded the notion. Ambrose might not have sought her out specifically, but he sat beside her holding a conversation which didn't involve the exchange of barbed remarks. Maybe if she revealed something in good faith, he might return the favor and tell her of the curse that burdened the de Sauveterre men.

She held out her hands as if to admire Clarimond's handiwork. "As much as I'd like to, I can't always deny my mother's legacy. When I'm upset, I spin."

One of his eyebrows rose to crinkle his forehead, and his lips twitched. "That's surprisingly harmless. I'd imagine you preferred pitchforking people."

Louvaen scowled. Had Cinnia told *everyone* the Farmer Toddle story? "I do that for sport," she snapped. She ignored his chuckle. "Cinnia once mentioned that our father joked I could spin straw into gold. I haven't mastered such a profitable skill yet, but if I'm angry enough, or grieving, I can spin flax and wool into wire." She tucked her hands into her lap. "Makes a bit of a mess."

Ambrose stared at her as if she'd just transformed into a winged cat. "Well, well. Who knew? Your magic comes through when you lower your guard."

She nodded. "I spun baskets of wire after Thomas died and wore bandages on my hands for weeks."

"Why do you hate magic so much?"

"You ask me that when the roses outside will shred a man to bloody bits, and your lord screams his agony while chained to a wall?"

“Not all magic is so pernicious, mistress. Don’t play the hoddypeak with me. You know it’s true.”

Louvaen’s jaw dropped. Instead of thinking she was a dimwitted turnip, he now admonished her for acting like one. They’d come a long way in the space of a few moments. He still hadn’t revealed a thing about the curse, and here she was spilling more of her family history to him. If he tried to get away with another load of innuendo and ambiguous hints, she’d kill him.

“When Abigail—Cinnia’s mother—lay dying, my father called in every hedgehog and conjurer to save her. Those with a true skill were honest most times and told him there was nothing to be done. The others though—they poured every kind of vile nostrum and slipper-sauce down her throat, chanted nonsensical spells over her, burned her skin with hot spoons and bled her blue to release the demons fighting for control of her spirit. I don’t know which killed her first, her sickness or their cures.”

They lapsed into silence until Ambrose clasped his fingers together and stared at his shoes. “I’m sorry for what happened to your stepmother, but what you witnessed was nothing more than base trickery. You’ve seen true magic at Ketach Tor.”

Louvaen nearly choked on a bitter cackle. “I have. It tortures Ballard so badly he no longer possesses his mind. You’ve used it to gull my sister. I can’t abide magic because all I’ve seen is the misery it causes and the lies it perpetuates.” Her lip curled in disgust. “I want no part of the stuff. If I could find a way to rip it out of me, I would.”

“Then your hatred is misplaced,” he said sharply. “You detest the tool, not the wielder.” He removed his spectacles to clean the lenses on his robes. He blinked owlishly at her before setting them back on his nose. “You guessed right when you said Ballard and Gavin suffered from a curse. Isabeau cast her bane before she died, though I don’t think even she realized how deeply her hatred would take hold or how great the power of her words.”

She sat quietly as Ambrose told the story of Ballard’s marriage to Isabeau, his inheritance of her valuable dower lands, his slaying of Cederic of Granthing and finally of the bane, spun off the bloodied lips of a dying woman who thirsted for vengeance instead of peace with her last breath.

A low pitiful groan spilled from the well room followed by Ballard’s voice, now raspy and gasping. “Mercy, Isabeau,” he said. “I beg you.”

“Mercy, Isabeau,” Louvaen and Ambrose repeated in unison. They stared at each other, Louvaen wide-eyed and sick to her soul; Ambrose paler than milk.

Ballard’s brief remarks about Isabeau had hinted at an enmity between them. Still Ambrose’s tale stunned her. Not because Isabeau had cast the curse against Ballard—plenty of spouses hated each other enough to wield curses, knives and skillets against each other—but against Gavin as well. “She hated her own son.”

“Just as much as she hated her husband—which was a lot as you can tell.”

“How old was Gavin when the curse manifested?”

“Twelve and fostering with a lord’s household a few leagues from Ketach Tor. He was still a page and eager for the day he’d become a squire.” Ambrose ran a hand through his spiny hair. “The curse took him without warning, turned him into a beast both cunning and violent. He killed two men before he changed back to a boy—bloodied, terrified and a prayer away from being put to the sword. Only Ballard’s long friendship with the fostering lord saved him.

Louvaen shook her head. “My gods, that poor child.”

Ambrose sighed. “Indeed. Ballard paid *blot wite* to the slain men’s families and took Gavin home, but word passed swiftly and soon everyone from the borderlands to Waleran’s court heard that the only child of the Margrave of Ketach Tor carried a curse. The curse struck again a fortnight later. We had to tie him to his bed and post guards at the door. After that, people left Ketach Tor.”

Another round of shrieking swelled up from the bottom of the stairs. When it stopped, Louvaen thought she’d need an iron crow to pry her clenched teeth apart. “Is there nothing you can give him to ease his suffering?”

Even in the buttery’s frigid air, Ambrose’s brow was beaded with sweat. “No. I’d have to brew the draught so strong, I’d end up poisoning him.”

They waited for more of Ballard’s howls, but it remained quiet. Louvaen exhaled a shuddering breath. “If the curse is supposed to manifest in Gavin, how does Ballard shoulder the brunt of it?”

Ambrose’s eyes closed for a moment, as if he prayed for strength. “The situation was unacceptable, and Ballard was willing to do whatever was necessary to shield Gavin from

Isabeau's malice." His gaze turned bright and watery. "I told him it would be a mercy to just kill the boy. Isabeau had no hold over the dead, and Ballard's part of the curse—a woman not loving him—was of no importance." He chuffed. "I hate being wrong."

"I can't imagine Ballard would even consider killing his own son."

The sorcerer's humorless smile hid a world of secrets. "That's just it. Gavin isn't Ballard's son by blood. Granthing sired him, and Ballard knew it."

Louvaen's thoughts reeled. "My gods, did Isabeau not know? What good was all that son-destroying-the-father twaddle if Granthing was already dead?"

Ambrose's eyes lit behind the reflective spectacles, and a tiny smile played around his mouth. "Ah, Mistress Duenda, you do have a way of humbling the most epic notions." He shrugged. "I don't know if she knew. She may have guessed. I personally believe she was exacting her revenge on Granthing as well, in case Ballard lied and Granthing lived. I think she knew in the end he didn't love her any more than Ballard did; he only pretended. His betrayal was worse than Ballard's indifference."

"She'd destroy the heir Ballard so desperately wanted for Ketach Tor and turn him into the instrument of Granthing's death in the event Ballard hadn't actually killed him." Louvaen sighed. "Not so much twaddle then."

"No, but there was a way out for Ballard. He could marry again, father a child on another wife. Love is no requirement for siring a child. He'd still have his heir and keep Isabeau's land."

“My son is why I breathe, Louvaen.”

She stared at the door between the buttery and the well room, imagining the tormented man imprisoned in the dark cell with only his pain for company. “Who sired him has no meaning here. Gavin de Lovet is the true son and heir of Ballard de Sauveterre.”

“Aye, he is.” Ambrose followed her gaze to the door. “I couldn’t break the curse, but I could manipulate it. I redirected the symptoms onto Ballard. Everything Isabeau would have burdened Gavin with, I shifted to his father—the disfigurements, the pain, the physical bonds tethering him to this castle and lands.”

Louvaen pressed the heels of her hands against her aching eyes. She wouldn’t weep. Not now. Not even later. Maybe when the flux ebbed and the curse’s effects with it, she’d cry. For Ballard, for Gavin, and for Cinnia. Most of all for Cinnia who had the towering misfortune of falling in love with a cursed man. She might even cry for herself for falling in love with the ruin of one.

“Are you all right, mistress?” For the first time since she’d met him, Ambrose’s eyes were soft with concern—for her.

She answered with a question of her own. “Are Gavin’s eyes always yellow during the flux?”

Ambrose shook his head. “No. We’ve battled this curse for a long time. As Ballard says, he’s like a bucket filled to the brim. Some spills over and rebounds back to Gavin. So far only his eyes have changed.”

“How long is a long time?”

Ambrose hesitated. “Three-hundred and seventy two years, give or take a week.”

Louvaen gaped at him. “Are you jesting?”

His earlier wry smile reappeared. “My powers aren’t unlimited, mistress, but they’re still formidable. We sit in a river of wild magic. Curses cast by vengeful women have teeth, and sorcerers like me can slow time.”

Ice water slid down her spine. She’d known he was powerful. Not just the potions brewer she first assumed or a clever magician who fooled a gullible lord, but he surprised her at every turn. By all rights and every stricture of common sense, she should be terrified of him. The gods knew she’d irritated him enough on several occasions to at least warrant a mute spell. “Tell me something, sorcerer. How often did you imagine me as a toad in your brew pot?”

He flashed her a grin. “Oh mistress, nothing so pretty as a toad. More like a slug and me with the salt cellar in hand.”

She nudged him with an elbow, not quite daring more contact. “For an old squint-a-pipes, you’re useful to have around.”

Ambrose sniffed. “I don’t squint. And for such a scold growing fat on our favors, you give yourself a lot of airs.”

They stared at each other before breaking into grins. The pressure that had thrummed in her chest all day eased a little. She’d needed this bit of silliness, and by the look of him, so did Ambrose.

“For a man nearly four hundred years old, you’ve aged well. When did you start meddling with time?”

“I’m over four hundred years old, and I built that spell once I directed the curse’s symptoms to Ballard. I needed time—time to find a way to defeat Isabeau’s vengeance. Ballard, Gavin, Magda, Clarimond and Joan—and I of course—we’ve seen countless seasons pass. The world moves by in years while we age by months.”

Louvaen calculated in her head and came away confused. “I don’t understand. If times flows around Ketach Tor and you don’t age, wouldn’t Gavin still be a young boy?”

Ambrose swept his arm wide to indicate his surroundings. “He would be if he always stayed here. When he travels beyond the borders I’ve set around Ketach Tor, he’s subject to aging. I’d guess he’s now Ballard’s age when he was born—six and twenty.”

Louvaen wondered if Ambrose realized the gift he’d given Gavin—the chance to grow up and experience the world beyond Ketach Tor, free of his mother’s vindictive legacy, even if only for short periods.

She worried a loose thread on the embroidery of her sleeve. “A small freedom for him and maybe a way to break the curse. That is if you believe in the stories of true love and true love’s kiss breaking curses. I always thought those children’s tales.”

Ambrose blew out a loud sigh. “Interpreted simply, they are. But that’s where you start and work from there. I just wish it were as simple as a kiss.”

A nagging thought tickled the back of her mind, flitting out of reach each time she tried to capture it. “So if Cinnia loved Gavin, the curse would break.”

He nodded. “If her love is true, yes. Or so I first thought. A well-sprung curse isn’t that simple.”

While Louvaen considered Isabeau a spiteful creature, she admired the thoroughness of her wording. That bane was wrapped in layers and tied in knots, a complicated puzzle with deceptively easy requirements for breaking it. Nearly four hundred years later, and the powerful Ambrose still hadn’t defeated it. She jerked the thread free. Lovely. This was just lovely.

The sudden heaviness of the air around her made her stiffen. Ambrose’s expression had turned guarded, his gaze piercing. “Gavin brought to Ketach Tor not just one woman who could break the curse; he brought two.”

Louvaen frowned. Ambrose did love his annoying, cryptic proclamations. She returned his stare and the elusive thought flitting along the fringes of her memory held still. “No woman born will ever love you,” she said softly, repeating the part of the curse that addressed Ballard directly. Her eyes widened. “I’m nonborn.”

Ambrose inclined his head. “Yes you are.”

He didn’t ask her if she loved Ballard. Louvaen understood why. There were rules to curse breakage, and he wouldn’t risk jeopardizing a possible victory. Louvaen recalled the odd ear-popping noise she heard in Ballard’s chamber two nights previous, followed by the pitch and roll of the bed though the frame never moved out of place, the roses’ attack and the sudden sharp rise of the flux. She paled. “This flux—I think it’s my fault.”

Ambrose clutched her arm. “What are you talking about?”

She shook him off and lurched to her feet. He rose with her, far more graceful in his ascent than she was after sitting on the hard step for hours. “I told Ballard night before last that I loved him.”

The sorcerer’s face flushed and then paled. “You did?”

She gathered her skirts and trotted up the stairs with him close on her heels. “He didn’t hear me. He was asleep,” she said over her shoulder. “But something happened after I said it. A sound or...” She snapped her fingers. “No, more like a feeling as when a ship hits a bow wave and you can feel the boards quiver under your feet.”

Louvaen halted just before she reached the kitchens. Ambrose swept nimbly around her to avoid walking into her back. “What is it?”

She wrung her hands. “I said it first. I told Ballard I loved him. What if, by doing so, I actually made the curse work faster to fulfill its purpose before we could unravel the rest? Another flux hard on the heels of this one...”

As if her revelation summoned the event, a familiar pressure thrummed in her ears, and the steps seemed to ripple under her feet. Ambrose looked down and then at her with wide, startled eyes. “Cinnia,” they said at the same time.

Her name had hardly left their lips when multiple terrified cries echoed from the great hall, and the usually unflappable Magda’s panicked voice rose in a shrill plea.

“Ambrose! Ambrose, come quick!”

They tore through the kitchen and rounded the screens in time to see Joan and Clarimond’s frightened faces as they tried to squash themselves into a shallow niche under the stairs

leading to the second floor. Their wide-eyed stares were riveted on the far corner of the hall. Louvaen's heart stopped at the sight before her.

Magda stood with Cinnia next to the largest trestle table, clutching a rolling pin like a cudgel. A creature stalked them. It was of a man's size, but all resemblance to humanity ended there. Black fur covered a body deformed into a demon's plaything. Curved claws tipped large hands and toes hideously stretched into thin, flexible digits that dug splinters of stone out of the floor as it shuffled closer to the women. Elongated ears flared from either side of its head, and transparent membranes of veined pink skin webbed the underside of the arms to the ribs. It slowly turned its head, and Louvaen choked back a scream.

Ballard, with his twisting scars and reptilian eyes, was breathtakingly handsome compared to this abomination. Brimstone eyes blazed in a face melded together from both bat and wolf. Teeth, long and sharp, glistened in a lipless mouth as it snarled at the newcomers before returning its attention to Cinnia and Magda.

Her sister held still, her features bloodless but curiously unafraid. "Gavin," she said in a pitying voice.

Gavin. Louvaen clapped her hand over her mouth. Merciful goddess, despite the father's desperate efforts, the curse had fully taken the son. The charming young lord who had courted a merchant's daughter was no more, subsumed by this thing that edged ever closer, sniffing at Cinnia with a split, leathery snout.

"Gavin, it's Ambrose. Look at me, boy."

In those frozen moments while Louvaen watched Gavin corner Cinnia, Ambrose had stolen away from her and eased his way closer to the women. The Gavin creature growled low in its throat and swiped a hand at the sorcerer in warning. Ambrose halted but never took his eyes off Gavin. “Gavin,” he said softly. “Remember who you are, son. Come back to us.” His words had no effect other than to make Gavin’s enlarged ears tighten against his head and a line of hackles rise on his hunched back. Ambrose glanced briefly at Cinnia. “Girl, did you tell him you loved him?”

Cinnia and Magda stared at him as if he had transformed as well. “Yes,” she said.

“Don’t say it again. If you value our lives, you’ll keep your mouth shut.”

“But...”

“For gods’ sake, Cinnia,” Louvaen snapped. “Do as he says.”

A collective gasp echoed in the hall as Gavin spun about and loped toward Louvaen, hackles bristling even higher as he drew closer. He stank of dark magic and bog water. Never in her life had she wished for something so much as she did for her flintlock right now. Her legs quivered, every muscle and instinct shrieking at her to flee.

“Don’t run, Louvaen. He’ll kill you if you do.” Ambrose, so deceptively calm, edged carefully along the wall, motioning to Cinnia and Magda to get toward the stairs and relative safety of the second floor.

Alerted by the soft flap of skirts and scuffle of slippers feet, Gavin forgot about Louvaen. His low-pitched growls

swelled to an enraged bellow when he caught sight of Cinnia scampering up the stairs. He sprang toward them.

Every terror Louvaen held for her sister's safety exploded within her, leaving only blind reaction behind. She threw herself against Gavin, hitting his back hard enough to make him stumble. She went down hard in a cloud of dusty rushes. A cacophony of sound—more screams, shouts, and above all Ambrose's commanding voice—filled her ears. Gavin crouched over her, lipless mouth split wide, a clawed hand raised to strike her. She covered her face and head with her arms, waiting for either the blow or bite that would rip her apart.

A flash of intense light seared her closed lids before a heavy weight slammed onto her, knocking the breath out of her so hard she could only wheeze. More cries swirled around her, human ones beaten into silence by the most awful, plaintive howl that rose from the depths of Ketach Tor and threatened to shake the castle's very foundation loose. Louvaen cautiously opened one eye. Were she not already half suffocated into silence she'd be struck speechless by what filled her vision.

Gavin lay atop her, fully human, unconscious, naked, and crushing the air out of her lungs. Black spots danced in front of her eyes, expanding until her vision narrowed to a thin tunnel and a ringing in her ears grew louder. She blinked, trying to focus. The last thing she saw was Ambrose's pale, sour features over Gavin's shoulder.

"Daft shrew," he said. "There isn't a woman in this entire castle who listens to a damned thing I say."

Louvaen fainted.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



The small animal spat and howled, thrashing against the glowing bonds imprisoning it on the bed. Wiry fur covered a gaunt body of striated muscle and dark, leathery skin. The lipless snout peeled back to reveal a set of fangs that shone a yellowed ivory in the chamber's semi-darkness. The creature's clawed hands and feet had savaged the bedding, sending up a blizzard of feathers. They spun in flurries before cascading to the floor. Ballard stared at what was once his son and wished his wife was alive right now so he'd have the satisfaction of killing her.

"Do something," he said in a low voice.

Ambrose stood beside him, covered in down feathers. "This is all I can do for now, dominus. Restrain him so he doesn't hurt others or himself."

Ballard ran his hands through his hair, horrified at the scene before him. The curse had struck a second time in as many weeks. He hadn't seen the first manifestation, when Gavin had transformed and torn two men to pieces in Aelfric Haseldane's bailey. He understood now why that easy-natured lord had almost executed the boy. "My gods, Isabeau, what have you done?"

The sorcerer tapped him on the arm and inclined his head toward the door. Ballard followed him into the hall.

"I can't do anything at the moment," Ambrose said. "But I can after the flux."

Hope soared. Were Ballard of a more affectionate nature, he'd embrace his sorcerer. "Do what you must."

Ambrose held up his hand, his features grim. "Wait. It's a poor solution at best, and honestly, I think you should refuse."

Ballard scowled. "What is it?"

"Before I tell you, I want you to consider another choice." Ambrose's voice was as hard and flat as his expression. "Granthing sired Gavin." He paused at Ballard's glower. "Blood wills out, dominus—stronger than curses. Marry again; sire a son of your blood." He pointed at the door. "That thing in there isn't Gavin; show mercy and put a bolt through him."

A dullness settled inside Ballard followed by a surge of impotent rage. A growl erupted from his throat, as bestial as

the sounds his tormented son uttered in his bedroom. He slammed a fist into the wall's unyielding stone. His eyes watered as a shockwave of pain surged up his arm and into his shoulder. Ambrose didn't flinch before his lord's anger. He waited quietly as Ballard paced in front of him, cursing and cradling his hand.

Ballard flexed his fingers. His knuckles began to swell and he'd split the thin skin deep enough to bleed. "Blood or no, Gavin is mine," he said. "I'll not murder my son. Find another way."

Ambrose sighed. "I knew you'd say that, but I wanted you to know there was a choice."

"That's no choice. What's your solution?"

"I can't break the curse, but I can manipulate it." He shook his head as Ballard's eyes widened. "Words are power, especially in curses. They bind their victims in several ways. You and Gavin are intertwined in Isabeau's words. I can redirect the curse's effects from Gavin to you. You won't be able to withstand them forever, but you're a man grown and stronger than Gavin in every way. You can resist more. However, when it breaks you—and you will break—the curse will snap back like sinew stretched too taut."

Ballard's gut roiled. The image of Gavin, feral and inhuman, rose in his mind's eye. Would he turn into the same thing? Something worse? A creature of such insensate violence that Ambrose—or someone else—would have to put him down like a diseased dog? "You'll need to do a lot more than just tie me to a bed."

"Yes."

“Will such a measure give you enough time to find a way to break the curse?”

Ambrose shrugged. “I hope so, but I can’t guarantee success.” His hard gaze turned pitying. “You are my liege and my friend, Ballard, as was your father before you. My actions won’t be those of a friend. The spell I’d use to redirect the curse’s effects is permanent. Once I cast it, I can’t reverse or revoke.”

Ballard stared at his boots. He’d always been a man of implacable purpose and deep pride. Those traits had gained him power, prestige and wealth. They also blinded him to the wants of others, especially his wife. She’d exacted her revenge, and her son now suffered for Ballard’s hubris.

He clapped Ambrose on the shoulder. “Do it, my friend. If we can’t break the curse—if Gavin and I both turn—then you kill us.”

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Three days had passed since the flux faded, and while he’d regained most of his lucidity, he’d lost the ability to see in color. The world became shades of gray. The fire dancing in the hearth gave off heat, but the flames were no more colorful than the ash they produced.

Long years and the continuous transformations to his body after each flux had built within him a kind of numb acceptance. A colorless world was the least of his problems now. Ballard raised an arm to study the patch of skin from elbow to wrist. His claws skated across the ridges and crevices of hardened flesh resembling the bark of an old gnarled oak. He sported a similar patch on his right side, riding along his lower ribs and down to his hip.

A day after the flux, he'd discovered the bony protrusions erupting from his scalp—a single pair peeking above his mop of hair like the brow tines on a young stag. He'd laughed aloud at that—Isabeau mocked her cuckolded husband from the grave. He laughed even harder when his fingers tangled in a mat, not of hair but of thread-like vines as delicate as tendrils of bittersweet nightshade. He plucked one, feeling a hard pinch. The tendril, crowned by a leaf, coiled around his finger.

The curse had changed him in many ways; these were new and different. Like Gavin, he bore an animalistic appearance with his reptilian eyes, claws and fangs. Unlike Gavin, he also wore the mark of the forest. Bark for skin, vines for hair—as if Nature laid claim to him, turning him into an amalgam of the very land for which he'd sacrificed his wife and ultimately his son.

A hard banging at the solar's door interrupted his thoughts. He ignored it, as he had the past dozen times.

“Ballard, you whiteliver! Open this damn door!”

He remembered a time when he would have ripped the door off its frame to reach and kill the person who dared call him a coward. Now he simply shifted on the pallet near the hearth and stared up at the ceiling, listening to Louvaen rail at him for the fifth time today.

“Ballard, I know you can hear me!”

He'd wager half the countryside heard her. He could never boast he loved a shy, retiring woman.

He waited through another round of pounding on the wood before it stopped. Despite his lethargy, the sudden quiet

piqued his curiosity. He sat up and listened. Only the fire's crackle teased his ears. He'd known her just a few months but learned early that Louvaen Duenda didn't give up easily when she had a purpose. She tenaciously stood outside his door for three days, at first cajoling him with a soft voice to let her in, then in firmer tones that grew increasingly frustrated and angry when he refused to acknowledge her or the food tray she or Magda brought him twice a day.

Ballard missed her. He saw her face each time he closed his eyes to sleep, and his arms ached to hold her slender body against his. As loving as she was shrewish, she offered him succor unmatched in her boundless affection for him. She was blind as a mole to his disfigurement, but he'd seen the faintest shadow of aversion in her gaze when she discovered him testing the chain in the well room's cell. Even she couldn't ignore the worst of the changes, and he'd bled inside despite her lighthearted banter and her continued willingness to embrace him.

The particular rhythm of her gait alerted him she'd returned. He waited for the next round of insults she'd hurl at him. Instead, a loud thwack sounded, and the door vibrated. It continued to shake while Louvaen muttered words guaranteed to make a sailor blush. Another hard thwack followed the first, and he rose, drawn to the door despite his resolve to ignore everyone and everything on the other side. More baleful mutterings and a third thwack made the planks quiver under Ballard's palm.

"What are you doing?" Ambrose's voice, heavy with disapproval, halted her cursing.

"What does it look like? I'm opening the door."

Ballard's lips twitched at the sarcasm in her tone.

"Give me the axe, mistress."

His eyebrows shot up. He could picture the scene in the hall. Louvaen's temporary retreat had been anything but retreat; she'd gone for a weapon. If he wouldn't come to her, then by gods she'd come to him. He shook his head and allowed himself a brief smile. Blood-thirsty termagant.

Ambrose repeated his demand. "Give it to me, Louvaen."

"No. Since his all-mightiness has gone deaf and chosen to starve, I'm opening this door even if I have to hack my way through it."

"Hand the axe to me right now or you and I will have another *profound* discussion on the merits of toads. Do you take my meaning?"

The silence that followed seethed through the slivered cracks between door and walls. Ballard eavesdropped, captivated by the exchange between his quarrelsome lover and his equally contentious sorcerer.

"I'm going down to get his dinner," she warned. "If the door is still barred by the time I return, I will drag Plowfoot up here and tear the thing out of the wall."

Ballard listened to the furious snap of her skirts as she marched away.

"I know you heard that argument, *dominus*," Ambrose said. "You might as well give up and open the door. If anyone can shove a harnessed draught horse up a flight of stairs, it's

that stubborn fishwife you had the odd notion to take to your bed.”

Ballard slid the bar free to let Ambrose in. He eyed the damage Louvaen had inflicted, noting the gouges she'd cleaved into the wood with the axe blade and the sharp splinters littering the floor. He closed the door but left the bar raised.

Ambrose handed him the axe. “I suggest you hide this. I wouldn't put it past her to try and split your skull if you refuse to eat.”

Ballard limped to a shadowed corner of the room and set the axe against the wall. The flux's residual agony coursed through his body, pooling in his joints so that his shoulders cracked every time he raised his arms. His pelvis throbbed as if Magnus had trampled him not once but several times.

Ambrose nudged one of the chairs toward him. “Are you still in much pain?”

He sat down gingerly, feeling every one of the four hundred and ten years he had lived. “Aye. The flux did a good job of crippling me this time.”

“I can brew you a simple. It might help.”

Nothing would help, not even Ambrose's strongest concoctions. He'd only end up sleepy or worse, delirious. “No. I've just recovered my wits. I'll gladly suffer an ache or two to keep them intact.”

“I'd say you're suffering from more than an ache or bruise.”

Ballard waved him off. “Stop hovering. How's Gavin?”

Ambrose clasped his hands behind his back and took up a short run of pacing. “Worried about you.”

A cold lump of dread settled in Ballard’s gut. After so many years his son had once again fallen to the curse’s full effect, only now he was a man grown and made demonically strong by his mother’s bane. And he’d turned on Louvaen. Were it not for Ambrose wrenching the curse out of Gavin and slamming it into Ballard with all the magic he could muster, she’d be dead—ripped apart by claws and teeth.

“Forget me,” he said. “Has he recovered?”

Ambrose ceased his pacing and took the chair opposite Ballard. “Except for his eyes, he’s once more the Gavin we know. You should talk to him, *dominus*.” He indicated the solar door with a thrust of his chin. “I doubt he’ll turn the door into kindling like some people, but he needs to see you. You’re his father, and he has news.”

Ballard stiffened and bit back a pained groan. “What news?”

“He’s marrying Cinnia. Today.”

Ballard dragged his hand over his face. “I didn’t think I’d raised a stupid child. What was he thinking to pledge his troth? Especially after what happened?”

Ambrose smiled wryly. “He didn’t pledge. Cinnia did, and he accepted.”

Even knowing he’d pay for it with more pain, Ballard chuckled. “Boldness must skip generations in the Hallis line. Mercer Hallis’s daughters inherited all that he lacks.

“The elder sister certainly got more than her fair share.”

Ballard lifted himself stiffly out of the chair. “Today you say?”

Ambrose nodded. “I’ll marry them this afternoon. Gavin wants you there, as does Cinnia. And I’m certain I don’t need to remark on Mistress Duenda’s wishes where you’re concerned.” He stared at Ballard for a moment. “I can always marry two couples...”

Ballard held up a hand to interrupt him. He wouldn’t dwell on the impossible. “Bad enough that Gavin will make a widow of his new bride within a week. I won’t widow Louvaen a second time, nor will I tie her to Ketach Tor. Even with no heir to inherit and no army to defend that inheritance, she’ll try to hold onto the thing she considers my legacy. When we die, Ketach Tor must die with us.” He closed his eyes for a moment, fighting despair. “Tell Gavin I’ll be there, but I want to speak with him first.”

Ambrose bowed and strode to the door. He paused to stare at a point beyond Ballard’s shoulder, expression severe. “I ask your forgiveness, *dominus*. I could think of no other way to stop Gavin from killing Louvaen. I almost killed you in the process.”

Ballard gripped the other man’s shoulder. “I’d demand your apology if you hadn’t done what you did. You saved them both. There’s nothing to forgive.” Ambrose shuddered under his hand, and his eyes closed. “Don’t break on me now, friend,” Ballard said. “You’ve a harder task to carry out soon enough. I’m counting on you.”

The sorcerer gave a mournful sigh. “I regret making such a pact with you. You ask too much of me.”

He pulled away and left the room. The door closed behind him with a quiet click.

Ballard stared at the expanse of wood, as if he could see Ambrose through the boards. “I know,” he said.

Ambrose, who had been instrumental in lessening the curse’s effects on Gavin, would have to kill him in the end—and Ballard as well. He had reason to balk at this last, murderous duty, but Ballard refused to rescind his order to his most trusted retainer.

The enormity of what he’d force Ambrose to do—the absolute failure of every desperate endeavor to save Gavin—made him stagger. He sank to the floor and leaned against the wall, defeated.

Louvaen found him that way a few minutes later. The clatter of dishware sounded behind him as she set his dinner down nearby. He refused to look at her and chastised himself for not throwing on his cloak before she returned with the food. Except for the breeches, he sat bare before her, his latest metamorphosis testament to the curse’s triumph.

He stiffened as she drew closer and sat down behind him. Her skirts dragged across the floor as she pressed against the curve of his back, legs spread so that her knees bent on either side of him. Her cheek was cool and soft on his skin, her slender arms gentle against his sides.

“I’m not at all sorry about your door,” she said, her breath tickling his spine. “In fact, I consider its current state your fault.”

Despite the hopelessness that threatened to drown him, he managed a small smile. “I’ll shoulder the blame,” he said.

“I should have hidden the weapons.”

“No, you should have opened the door when I asked so nicely the first time.” She nuzzled her face into his back.

He wondered how she overcame the revulsion she must surely suffer at feeling the serpentine vines under his skin writhe against her cheek. The idea sickened him.

“I don’t want you seeing me this way.”

She grumbled under her breath, and her arms tightened on his ribs hard enough to make him wince. “You are either vain, or stubborn or both. Or you think me the worst sort of shallow fizgig.”

Ballard could list a number of terms that applied to Louvaen; shallow and frivolous weren’t on the list. “Vanity has never been one of my shortcomings nor shallowness one of yours, woman.”

“Then give me your faith, my lord. I haven’t turned away yet.”

“I don’t want your pity, Louvaen.”

“And you won’t be getting it, though you’re seriously tempting me to use that axe on your head. You should have hidden it when you had the chance.”

This time Ballard chuckled. “Ambrose said the same thing before he left.”

A puff of warm air gusted across his shoulder as she huffed. “Well he’s right. And if you tell him I said so, I’ll strangle you.”

She let him go and scrambled to her feet. “Up with you. You haven’t eaten in at least three days, and Magda worked

hard to make sure the food stayed hot.”

He shook his head. “I’ve no appetite.” As if to make a liar of him, his belly issued a gurgling squeal. He heard the grin in her voice.

“Tell that to your stomach.” She tapped him on the shoulder. “You can’t sit there all day holding up the wall.”

She maneuvered around his legs until she stood between his feet and filled his vision with the hem of her dress and shoes. He kept his head lowered. He couldn’t hide the horns or vines woven through his hair, but he’d shield her from the greater devastation of his face.

“Let me see you,” she said.

“No.”

One foot set to tapping an impatient beat. “Did Ambrose tell you Gavin will marry Cinnia today?” He nodded. “Good. Then I’ll be back with the tub and soap.”

She was starting to fray his temper. “I don’t want a bath,” he half snarled. He glanced up to catch her glare.

“I don’t care,” she said in a flat voice. “My only sister, whom I adore, is marrying a man who turns into a bat-faced cur when she tells him she loves him.” Ballard flinched, but she was relentless. “Afford her the courtesy of appearing at her wedding bathed and dressed in your best finery.”

Why had he ever feared he’d earn her pity?

Louvaen crouched before him and reached out to touch his face. Ballard caught her wrist, his claws clicking together as they closed around the fragile bones. He met her eyes then,

as gray as the rest of his world had become but far more compassionate. “Gavin almost killed you,” he said gruffly.

She tilted her head, scrutinizing him with a gaze that saw past his features. “No, a curse almost killed me. And you make too much of it.” Undeterred by his disbelieving snort, she continued. “All I have to show for my brush with death are two bruised elbows and a stubbed toe. I’ve more to fear from your fish pond.”

He freed her arm to scrub at his face. “You make light of dangerous things, Louvaen.”

“If I didn’t, I’d weep for us all, and I wouldn’t stop.” Her solemn expression softened, and she reached for him a second time, fingers gliding along his jaw, up to his temple and into his matted hair. “You’ve flowers in your hair,” she said. Tender amusement, instead of distaste, threaded her voice.

“That’s because they’re growing out of my head. Along with a pair of horns.”

“At least they aren’t roses. Her smile wilted as her fingers continued their trek through his hair, back down to his face, over the bridge of his nose and across one cheekbone. “Do these hurt?”

He shook his head. “No.” The scars had throbbed and burned so badly during the flux, he was lucky he didn’t try and tear his face off his skull. Now they were the only things on him that didn’t ache.

Louvaen leaned forward and replaced her hand with her mouth. She might not offer him a drop of pity, but she gave

unstintingly of her devotion, even now when he was more forest creature than man.

She pressed a last kiss to the corner of his mouth before rising. His hands delved into the folds of her skirts in an unconscious bid to keep her there. “I’ll be back with everything you need for a bath.” Ballard blinked at the speed in which her tender look turned severe. She pointed a threatening finger at him. “Don’t even think about barring the door again.”

Ballard watched her go, the memory of her touch lingering on his face. He wondered how altered his life might have been if it were Louvaen instead of Isabeau he was betrothed to centuries earlier. He grinned as he clambered to his feet. One thing was certain; Gavin wouldn’t be blond.

The smell of food enticed his rumbling stomach. He’d been too sick to eat the first day Ambrose and Gavin had taken him from the cell and too exhausted yesterday.

He retrieved his cloak and threw it over his shoulders. Magda had already seen him at his worst—filthy and incoherent, curled in on himself as he spasmed in agony and retched blood and bile onto her shoes.

She’d just stroked his tangled hair and gone about the business of sponging the muck off him. She’d dressed him in clean clothes, trimmed the claws on his feet, and coaxed him to crawl onto the pallet she’d prepared before the fire.

While this flux had been the worst so far, it was one of several similar episodes, and the stalwart housekeeper had tended him without hesitation.

Only she, of the women in the castle, saw him after a flux. Joan and Clarimond were always banished to another part of the castle while he recovered. They had only witnessed the aftereffects of the curse, the scarring that slowly covered him and turned him from man to monster. His disfigurements were so much worse this time, and he wasn't interested in hearing the smothered gasps of shock or horror if they saw him. It was best to remain concealed when they arrived with the tub.

He had finished the last of the stew Magda prepared when the door opened on a short knock. Ballard pulled the hood over his head and retreated to a shadowed corner. All the women of his household, except Cinnia, entered in procession, dragging the tub with them, along with pails of water.

Ambrose came through last, a bulging sack slung over his shoulder. He dropped his burden by the hearth with a loud rattle. "A bag of rocks," he said, holding his lower back as he straightened. "Don't say I never gave you anything."

It took another half hour and continuous parades of water pails before they'd filled the bathtub enough and heated all the rocks to keep the water warm.

Ambrose spread his fingers above the water's surface and gave Ballard a warning look. "Don't get used to it. I've better things to do with my magic than warm your bath water." With those words, a ripple spread out in a widening circle across the water. Heat flowed over the tub's edge, wafting across Ballard's hands. The sorcerer inclined his head and bowed before leaving.

Only Magda and Louvaen remained in the room, and the former gathered up the dishes to take downstairs. She sniffed.

“Well, about time you ate. If you want more, send Louvaen down.” She followed Ambrose out, leaving Ballard to Louvaen’s care.

She trailed her fingertips through the water. Steam undulated across the surface in revenant tendrils. “The water’s hot, my lord.”

He turned away. She’d seen enough of him today—held him in her arms and kissed him. He sorely needed the comfort, but he couldn’t ignore the urge to retreat from her gaze. “I don’t need your help.”

“Who said anything about helping? You’re sharing.”

His eyebrows arched, and he turned in time to see her shrug out of her unlaced bodice. She winked at him before shedding the rest of her clothing to stand nude before him. “Your turn,” she said.

He’d give his sword arm and what was left of his property to see colors again. He could only imagine the rosy glow of the hearth’s light washing over her skin or the red tint to her dark hair bound in braids. She was still beautiful—long-legged and dappled in shades of slate, smoke and iron.

He returned her quiet scrutiny. “Woman, I think you’re truly blind.”

She crossed her arms, hiding the delectable sight of her small nipples tightened with cold, and frowned. “I can see perfectly, maybe better than you see me. Now let’s get a look at the rest of you.”

She was an intractable force, with or without an axe in her hand. Her insistence on having him bare-arsed was far

greater than his will to resist her demands. Ballard tossed off the cloak along with his breeches.

Her frown transformed to a delighted smile. She stepped closer to him, her gaze resting on his thighs. To his surprise, he hardened under her regard. He'd thought this last flux had stripped him of desire, turning him into a eunuch without castrating him. He returned her smile. Leave it to the militant Louvaen to make even his cock obey her.

Her hand glided down the length of his shaft, fingers sifting through the curls of soft hair surrounding its base. "Oh," she said in disappointed voice. "No flowers to pick." She winked a second time.

He remembered the sharp pinch on his scalp when he yanked one of the curling vines from his hair. His thighs tensed. "One small mercy," he said.

And it was a clemency. During his first lucid minutes of recovery from the flux, he'd done as any man would and checked between his legs. The thundering heartbeat he refused to acknowledge as terror had calmed once he ascertained that while a great deal of him had changed, one very important part was still human.

Louvaen tied her braids to the top of her head, securing them with a complicated knot. The style accentuated her elegant neck. She took his hand and led him to the tub, affording him a fine view of her graceful back and curved backside as she stepped into the water first. Ballard couldn't resist and cupped one buttock, careful not to dig his claws into her smooth skin. She paused with one leg in the tub and glanced over her shoulder with a half smile. "Such a gallant knight to help a lady into her bath."

She climbed in and sat down. Steamy water rose to submerge her to her shoulders. She emitted a low moan that sent heat flooding his body and made him hard as stone. No eunuch here. Louvaen motioned to him with a languid hand. “Are you just going to stand there?”

He joined her, positioning himself so that his back reclined against her front, and he sat cradled between her legs. Louvaen slid an arm under one of his and the other over his opposite shoulder, linking her fingers together just above his heart. He sank low in the tub and laid his head on her shoulder, savoring the feel of her surrounding him. The aches and pains plaguing him lessened, eased by the water’s heat and buoyancy. They’d return full-force once he left the bath, but he’d deal with them later.

Louvaen didn’t immediately set to scrubbing him. Instead, she occupied herself with dropping kisses along his neck, across his cheek and against his temple. Ballard closed his eyes, content to bask in her affections. He’d happily prune up in the tub for hours and let the water go cold if she did this to him the entire time. His peace lasted only a few minutes.

“Did you instruct Ambrose to lock me in my room once the flux was finished?”

His eyes snapped open. Suddenly, the sensuous bath became an avenue for a possible drowning. Had he possessed charm, wit and a less honed sense of survival, he might have attempted to pacify her with false platitudes. He chose to answer her in a way she herself would have done—with straightforward honesty.

“No. I wasn’t capable of speech at the time. Ambrose knows me well enough though. Had I been able to talk, I

would have ordered it.”

She twitched against him as if suppressing the urge to shove his head underwater. “Why?” A wealth of annoyance weighted that single word.

Ambrose told him she’d been like a wild thing in a trap, screeching her rage and insistence to be let out. The sorcerer had unspelled the locked door from a safe distance down the hall. Louvaen had burst out of her room and raced to the stairs. “Looked like a crazed ell-woman seeking her next victim,” he said.

With Cinnia’s upcoming marriage to Gavin, Ballard’s time with Louvaen was over. She hadn’t changed her mind and asked to stay; he hadn’t repeated the request he’d made in the stables. Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t. None of the women could stay at Ketach Tor. In a few days time, only he, Ambrose and Gavin would remain, and in the end only Ambrose. He didn’t want Louvaen to leave his home with her strongest memory of him being that of a gibbering wreck convulsed with agony and too dangerous to help.

“You’re returning to your father,” he said. “I don’t much care for the idea that this is how you’ll remember me, and I’m handsome now compared to the foul thing Ambrose and Gavin pull out of that cell after every flux.”

Silence settled between them, and Louvaen took up the task of untangling the vines matted with his hair.

“Do you know what I remember best about Thomas?” Her lips grazed his temple. “It was the way he laughed. His eyes would crinkle first and then the skin at the top of his nose between his eyebrows. His shoulders would roll, and he’d tuck his chin into his chest.” Ballard envied Thomas the

fondness in his widow's voice. "He'd not uttered a sound until all of a sudden he'd let out this great roaring laugh. I swear he made the windows rattle. Even his hair and beard seemed to laugh." She tugged on a knot of bittersweet vine resting against Ballard's neck. "This is nothing compared to Thomas's mop, and he wasn't cursed."

She paused and her voice grew thick with unshed tears. "His laugh was a gift because even in your bleakest mood you couldn't help but laugh with him when you heard it." Her arms tightened across Ballard's chest. "He died of the plague, but it's his laughter I remember—and will always remember most—about Thomas Duenda."

Four hundred years earlier he would have paupered himself, defied a king and single-handedly conquered an empire if that's what it took to win this woman. The irony that all too soon he'd willingly let her ride out of Ketach Tor for the very same reason he once would have fought so fiercely to possess her made him want to howl his fury. He took one of her hands instead and kissed her healing fingertips. He'd learned of her strange magic and how her spinning wheel spun out her grief. "How will you remember me?" he said.

Her soft laughter tickled his ear. "I'll think of the man, so grave and dignified, who gave me a queen's dagger. Or maybe the lusty lord who figured out the way to lure me to his bed was to warm the sheets."

She wiggled from behind him, slippery thighs sliding across his as she changed positions. Water sloshed over the rim of the tub, and Ballard held her hips as she settled into his lap facing him. She curved her palms around his face, her expression teasing and pensive by turns. "From castle lord to

forest king. I never thought I'd fall in love with a Green Man."

She leaned into him, breasts pressed to his chest, as she opened his mouth with hers and swept her tongue inside to entwine with his. She tasted of sorrow sweetened by the cyser Magda brewed. He hoped she'd remember him. He would recall nothing of her, and that knowledge made his own kiss as bitter as the poisonous vine entangled in his hair.

Louvaen ended the kiss first. Her thumbs caressed the ridges of his cheekbones below his eyes. "If I'd known you'd suffer so much for it, I would never have said I loved you. I'm sorry, Ballard."

Ballard wanted to castigate her for telling him something so profound after he'd fallen asleep. He'd nearly gone to his knees when the sorcerer recounted the events leading up to Gavin's harsh and sudden transformation. Afterwards, he'd locked Louvaen out of the solar, dreading the moment when he'd reveal himself to her and watch as the love she declared for him turned to revulsion.

His fears had been for naught, but he still wished mightily he had heard those longed-for words from her himself.

He caressed her back from shoulder to hip, tracing the indentation of her spine and the matched pair of dimples just above her buttocks. Her nipples tightened beneath his gaze, the areolas pebbling in anticipation of his touch. He didn't disappoint her.

She moaned his name and arched into him as he took one breast into his mouth and suckled the tip. Her hands

kneaded his shoulders, and her hips rocked back and forth, sending waves of water splashing onto the floor.

Ballard moved to her other breast, kissing an ever diminishing circle around the swell until he caught her nipple and worried it gently between his teeth. Louvaen's moans turned to growls, and she squeezed his hips between her thighs, the rocking rhythm she'd set picking up speed.

He stroked her sides, descending lower until his hands rode her hips. He pulled away, leaving her panting and wide-eyed. "Tell me, my beautiful Louvaen," he said in a voice made raspy with days of agonized screaming. "I have no more time and soon no more memory. Give me the words when I'm awake."

She stilled in his embrace except for her hands. They slid from his shoulders, up his neck and returned to his face. Her gaze, more black than gray now, bore into him. "I love you," she said softly. They both tensed, but no snapping noise burst in their ears, no floor boards heaved, and no thorny roses broke through the window to attack them.

Ballard lifted Louvaen enough to sit up straighter. "Again," he said and lowered her slowly onto his lap.

"I love you." Her hands returned to his shoulders, bracing her weight as the tip of his cock nudged between her thighs, seeking.

"Again," he repeated. She sank onto him, and he groaned his pleasure as he slid inside her, oblivious to any pain.

"I love you. Love you. Love you," she chanted on short breaths, the rhythm of her declaration keeping time with the

motion of her hips as she rode him in the water.

He followed where she led, guided by the grip of her hands and thighs, the clench of internal muscles and her demanding kisses. His busy hands caressed her wet skin, holding her tightly as he thrust into her. Steam and sweat mingled to trickle down his neck and soak the hair at his temples.

She found her release first, nails digging into his arms before she fell forward and bit him where his neck met his shoulder. The tiny burst of pain, so different from the curse's lash, sent him over the edge. Ballard cried out her name as his hips surged upward, hard enough to lift them both half out of the water. They sank together, sending another rolling tide over the tub's rim to douse the floor.

Louvaen rested in his embrace, limp and momentarily docile. Ballard fought to catch his breath and the overwhelming torpor brought on by his climax and the steamy water. He stroked her shoulders and toyed with her knotted braids.

"We've destroyed the floor," she murmured into his neck. "Magda will kill us."

He undid one of her braids to twirl it around his finger. "I'll let you hide the axe."

She chortled and gave him a quick kiss on the tip of his nose. She wiggled out of his arms, and he groaned his disappointment when he slipped from her body. "We can't stay in here all day, Ballard."

"Why not?" Ballard thought it a fine idea, and the wedding wasn't until later. They had a couple of hours still

and plenty of hot rocks to keep the water warm.

Louvaen stood, offering him another chance to ogle her. She stepped gracefully out of the tub to retrieve one of the drying cloths stacked on a nearby table. Ballard relaxed in the water and watched as she dried and shrugged into her shift. “As lord of the castle, you can lounge about all day. I need to help my sister prepare for her wedding.” She motioned to him. “Stand up. I’ll scrub your head. You can take care of the rest.”

“High-handed scold,” he muttered before heaving himself to a standing position. “Maybe I should throw you over my shoulder, take you to bed and have my way with you.”

“You’ll not drop me atop those bitter sheets, you lusty tup,” she admonished before dumping a pail of lukewarm water over his head. “Not before they’ve seen a warming pan.”

He stood compliant under her ministrations, wincing only once when even her careful washing of his hair still managed to yank a few of the slender vines. He washed his body while she finished dressing and used all but one of the drying cloths to sop up the puddles staining the floor. He hoped Magda was in a forgiving mood.

He chased her off when it came time for him to don clothing. “See to your sister,” he said. “This is her wedding day; she needs you.” He bowed gallantly. “I’ll visit with my son.”

Louvaen took his face in her hands and kissed him. Ballard thought she’d leave him then, but she paused, her expression somber. “Cinnia can’t remain at Ketach Tor, Ballard—even as Gavin’s wife.”

“No, she can’t. None of the women can.” He wished he could refute her statement, give them both hope that with their admissions of love, she and Cinnia had broken the curse. “The next flux will finish me and Gavin. Ambrose and I planned for such an event long ago.” Her eyes narrowed, suspicion igniting her gaze. “Magda and her maids will leave in a week’s time. We’d thought to send them to a village a few leagues from here.”

“No, they’ll come with us,” she declared. “It would be the worst sort of cruelty to take Cinnia from Gavin right after the wedding. We can wait a sennight before returning home. Magda and the others are welcome to stay with us as long as they want. My father would enjoy the company.”

His heart ached with loving her. She’d offered hearth and home to his household with no promise of monetary help from him. There was no question of him giving it. The Hallis family might not be noble by blood, but his treasury would make them so once he was dead. And she’d given him a week of her company. He’d pay a king’s ransom for such a gift.

He lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles. “You realize Magda will want Ambrose to join her later.” He tried not to laugh as twin frown lines furrowed the space between her eyebrows.

Her features pinched as if she’d bitten into something sour. “We have a comfortable barn.”

He chuckled, kissed her hand a second time before letting her go and opened the door.

Louvaen ran a caressing hand down his arm before disappearing into the hall.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



He finished dressing once she left. The cotehardie and bliaud were the ones he wore for Modrnicht. He felt ridiculous in the finery now, especially when he intended to cover up with a cloak.

“Who wrestled a sea monster and lost?”

Ballard looked up from belting the cotehardie to find Gavin picking his way around the remaining puddles of water scattered across the solar’s floor. The younger man paused and eyed the axe in the corner before turning to stare at the

door. He began to laugh. "I'd possess the temperament of a dragon had you two created me."

"And a hawk's beak for a nose," Ballard shot back. He met him halfway and clapped a hand on his son's shoulder, wishing he hadn't isolated himself from the one person who truly understood what he went through at each flux.

As stunningly handsome as his mother had been beautiful, Gavin cut a noble figure in a cotehardie of silk brocade that highlighted his wide chest and trim waist. His hair fell over broad shoulders in waves, and he wore a short sword belted low at his hip.

No one would ever guess that a few days ago this dignified man had been overwhelmed by a malice that reduced him to a creature Louvaen so brutally but accurately called "a bat-faced cur."

"I'm told you'll marry the beautiful Hallis girl today," Ballard said. "This is still what you want?"

Gavin gave a vigorous nod. "As much as I've wanted the life of a normal man. Maybe more." His gaze searched his father's face. "I feared you wouldn't be able to stand with me when Cinnia and I married." Shadows darkened his eyes. "Who knew a woman's love would turn the curse so vicious?"

Ballard shrugged. "A woman's hatred brought it to life." He turned to retrieve his cloak.

Gavin grasped his elbow, making him pause. "I'd take it back if I could. Shoulder what should be mine."

"I wouldn't let you." Ballard never had a day's regret in agreeing to Ambrose's plan of redirecting the curse to him.

Gavin's grip tightened. "Curse or no curse, I am proud to be the son of the noblest of men."

Floundering before Gavin's unexpected praise, Ballard sought footing in wry humor. "Good thing I'm the ugliest man too, or I might have challenged you for the lovely Cinnia." He smiled at Gavin's disbelieving snort.

"She's far too soft for your tastes. You like them with teeth and claws to match yours." The two grinned at each other until Gavin's features turned somber once more. "She's a walking sheaf of dried thistles, but Louvaen is also kind. I'm glad she chose otherwise, but I wouldn't have forbidden her from taking Cinnia with her right after the wedding. I don't know that it's safe for anyone to be here with us, even now with the flux at ebb tide."

The same thought plagued Ballard. The hard inner jerk on his spine always forewarned him of a coming flux. In the past they had time to prepare for the curse's onslaught. Ballard feared they'd get no warning before the next flux.

Gavin continued. "It's dangerous for the women to travel with pack horses loaded down with gold. Ambrose will enchant the contents of the treasury so they appear inside Mistress Duenda's house. Clarimond and Joan already started filling chests." He offered Ballard a grim smile. "Cinnia will be a rich widow, with plenty left over for the others."

Ballard motioned for Gavin to follow him as he returned to his bedchamber for his cloak. "As long as Louvaen can keep her father from wasting every last coin on risky ventures."

"I doubt she'll let that happen again."

Ballard prayed he was right. He reached for his finest cloak, a garment made of oil-tanned leather so soft and supple it flowed over his hand like velvet.

“Leave the cloak. Come down as you are.” Gavin tried to pull the cloak out of Ballard’s resisting grasp. “We’re your family,” he said. “You don’t have to hide from us.”

Ballard wrested the garment back and tossed it over his shoulders. “Louvaen will murder me, as will Cinnia,” he joked. “I’d have a lot to answer for if everyone gawked at me instead of your bride on her wedding day. The cloak stays on.”

Gavin sighed. “Then come down to the kitchens and share a flagon of wine with me. I’ve a virgin to gentle in my bed tonight.” His eyebrows wiggled playfully. “I could use a dram or six.”

Ballard strode out of the bedchamber. “I’ll take a sea monster over a virgin any day. You’ll need something a lot stronger than wine.”

They found themselves alone in a kitchen saturated with the scents of freshly baked bread, saffron and cinnamon. Gavin opened one of the cupboard doors, revealing a towel-covered platter. He peeked beneath the cloth and whistled. “I think Magda is the magician here, not Ambrose. She’s made fig pies for the celebration.”

Ballard sat down in his customary seat at the table. “She’ll split you from gullet to navel if you thieve so much as a crumb off that plate. Go get us the wine you promised.”

Gavin grinned and left for the buttery. He returned with a full pitcher and two goblets. Ballard poured, and the two

men toasted each other before quaffing the first cup.

Ballard savored the time with his son, this layered camaraderie existing not only between parent and child but between two battle-weary fighters who faced a common enemy and soon a common end. He wished he might face the last alone.

They made small talk between them, Ballard recounting tales of the various weddings he'd been forced to attend for reasons of courtesy and politics. "I'm surprised I remember half of them," he said. "I was cupshot through most of those celebrations. So was everyone else."

Gavin refilled their goblets a fourth time. "It isn't a wedding if you can't empty the host's stock of wine and ale in an evening."

Ambrose discovered them a few minutes later. He eyed the pitcher and pulled a third goblet from one of Magda's many cupboards. "Tell me there's a little more. I've just escaped a flock of harpies."

Ballard blinked. "You went to the bower? Were you looking to die?" He'd faced armies populated with berserkers without flinching; he wouldn't dare approach a bride's bower before the wedding.

The sorcerer swelled up like an adder. "I was in the hallway making my way to the stairs and minding my own business. Magda lured me into that death trap with a sweet smile."

Gavin choked on his wine. A hard thump across the back from his father, and he cleared his throat. "That should

have been your first warning,” he said between gasps of wheezy laughter.

Ambrose poured the last of the wine into his cup and drained it to the dregs. He smirked at the two men. “Well here’s a warning from the grand demoness herself: be in the great hall by the time Cinnia reaches the mezzanine, and you better be able to stand without swaying.”

Gavin’s face paled. He jerked up from his seat and swayed. Ballard and Ambrose groaned in unison. “I’m not drunk,” he assured them.

Ambrose slid a glance to Ballard who shrugged. “He shouldn’t be. It was just one flagon split between us.” He smiled wryly at his son. “I’d say you’re suffering from wedding terrors.”

Gavin nodded and gripped the table’s edge so hard his fingernails turned white.

“Are you sure you want to do this, boy?” Ambrose stared at him warily. “I’ll brave the pit of damnation up there if you want me to deliver a different message.”

Gavin gave another fervent nod. “I’m sure. I love Cinnia and want nothing more than to make her my wife.”

Ballard rose, refusing to dwell on the fantasy of being in Gavin’s place, preparing to wed Louvaen. “Let’s go,” he said and nudged Gavin toward the great hall. “You don’t want to keep them waiting and raise Magda’s ire.”

They entered the hall where a small portion had been sectioned off for the ceremony. Two chairs covered in ells of costly dossier faced each other. The rich fabric shimmered in the candle and torchlight, turning the serviceable chairs into

seats suitable for royalty. A veil of fine transparent lawn had been erected between them, the symbolic barrier separating bride from bridegroom before they were declared married.

As the officiant, Ambrose took his place in front of the chairs. Ballard nudged Gavin toward the one on his right. “Remember, don’t sit until Ambrose says so.” His son was still pale as a wraith. “And don’t swoon.”

He smiled when Gavin rounded on him, frowning. “I’m not some milksop woman, Father.”

Ambrose sniffed. “Ketach Tor certainly doesn’t house an overabundance of those.”

A door opened and closed above them. Ballard tracked the small entourage of women as they made their way down the last flight of stairs. Except for Cinnia, each woman had donned the same garments they’d worn for Modrnicht. They were doves instead of buntings and finches to his eyes now—sporting shades of gray in their skirts and ribbons. The bride wore a flowing gown embroidered in glittering thread—an acquisition from one of Gavin’s forays into the world beyond Ketach Tor. The intricate embroidery reflected the light, seeming to undulate across the gown’s hem and draping sleeves. Cinnia’s features, as sublime as the dawn, broke into a wide smile when she saw Gavin.

Ballard’s gaze rested on Louvaen, dressed in the gown he remembered as red. He’d freed her from it an eternity ago in the sensuous quiet of his bedchamber. Maybe tonight she’d allow him to help her a second time. She returned his stare with a brief frown, and he caught the flash of annoyance in her eyes. She didn’t like him wearing the cloak and hood anymore than Gavin did.

Once they reached the chairs, Ambrose bade Gavin and Cinnia to sit on either side of the veil with their hands clasped together below it. The ceremony itself was a simple one—the wrapping of velvet cord over the couple’s hands with assurances from the bride and groom that they entered the union willingly and vows exchanged of love, fidelity and loyalty.

Ambrose invoked a prayer of good fortune and long life over the two, and Ballard tried not to flinch. He looked to Louvaen who watched her sister, pale skin drawn tight against her facial bones, a faint smile hovering around her mouth.

He silently repeated the sorcerer’s words as Ambrose pulled away the veil and recited the last prayer. “Thus no longer divided. I recommend unto thee a man with a wife and a woman with a husband. Happy is the place upon which a holy man builds a house, with fire and cattle, wife and children and good followers.”

They were ardent words uttered for so long by ascetics and celebrants that they’d become rote. Ballard had only half listened to them when he married Isabeau. All had been lies in that union. Some were still lies in this one, but not from lack of effort by the married couple. Given a chance and a future, they might have fulfilled every part of the prayer.

Gavin helped Cinnia to her feet, enfolding her in his arms for a passionate kiss. There was cheering and applause amongst the witnesses, along with sniffles and hastily wiped tears from Louvaen and Magda.

Ballard pulled Gavin into a hard embrace, forcing a grunt from the younger man. “You’re truly shackled now, boy.”

Gavin grinned and nestled Cinnia into his side. “In the best way, Father.”

Custom dictated that Ballard embrace his son’s new wife as well and kiss her cheeks as part of his welcoming her to his household. He offered her a respectful bow instead. “Welcome to the House of Ketach, Lady de Lovet.”

She blushed and curtsied in return. “Thank you, Lord de Sauveterre.”

Both men watched as she went to Louvaen. The two women hugged. Cinnia burst into tears, prompting Louvaen to hush her and pass her a handkerchief. Gavin started forward, his formerly ecstatic expression dissolved into outright fear.

Ballard halted him with a hand on his arm. “Leave her be, son. She isn’t regretting your union; she’s just snipping the last lead string from her sister’s apron.”

They waited for the women to finish their conversation. Ballard stood easily next to Gavin who, despite his father’s assurances, remained tense and uneasy at Cinnia’s tears. His knees visibly buckled with relief when she returned to him, still sniffling but smiling happily at him.

Ballard left them to receive congratulations from the others and sought out Louvaen who now stood alone to one side. She turned to him, watery-eyed. “I’m not crying,” she said. “The rushes need to be thrown out. They’re full of dust.”

Ballard played along. “Magda’s housekeeping has slackened, though I understand she’s made fig pies.”

“Oh, well in that case, anyone can forgive a little dust.”

He captured one of her hands and lifted it to his mouth to kiss. “No longer the lymer,” he murmured against her knuckles.”

Her shoulders sagged. “No, and I don’t know whether to be relieved or sad I’m not tasked with guard duty anymore.” Her brow knitted into a faint frown. “We did have the inevitable discussion about what to expect the first time in the marriage bed.”

Ballard could only imagine how that went. Cinnia wide-eyed and stunned while Louvaen described the act in her blunt fashion. “And?”

“Mortifying,” she said. “I wish our mother Abigail was still alive. Cinnia wouldn’t have dared ask the questions of her she asked me. You’d think I was the keeper of a knocking shop with all the details she wanted.”

Ballard’s bark of laughter earned him a singeing glare from a blushing Louvaen and stares from the others. His new daughter-in-law had surprised him a second time today. He’d once thought Cinnia a timid creature engulfed by her powerful sister’s long shadow. He suspected she’d prove him wrong many times over the next few days. “She’s a lot more like you than I ever guessed.”

“More fool her then.” Louvaen’s expression turned melancholy as she gazed at her sister in Gavin’s arms. “Cinnia would have married Gavin barefoot and in a rainstorm, but this isn’t how I imagined her wedding. I gave her the mirror so she could at least see Papa today. It’s a small comfort but better than nothing.” She still held his hand and squeezed his fingers. “You and Ambrose concocted a lovely idea for a gift for us.” She winked. “Even if it reeks of magic.”

Ballard tugged on her hand until she stood within the circle of his embrace. She stared at him, unflinching. “If I didn’t know that marrying you would split your loyalties and bind you to this castle, I’d make you my wife, Louvaen.” He tightened his arms against her back. “Ambrose has already offered to wed us. I said no.” He stood still beneath her scrutiny, awaiting her judgment.

Ages of time passed before she flicked the edge of his hood with her fingers. “What need have I of some puffed up magician to declare us bound?” She grinned. “You are mine, Green Man. And I am yours.”

She squeaked a protest when he lifted her off her feet and crushed her to him. He wanted to kiss her senseless—absorb the essence that made her burn so fiercely, carry her with him until the curse took him completely, and his last human spark guttered and died.

But this day didn’t belong to them, and Ambrose’s less than subtle throat-clearing signaled he and Louvaen had ignored everyone long enough.

Dinner was a high-spirited affair, with much toasting to the newly married pair and a great deal of joking and sly innuendo that even had Gavin blushing at times. Louvaen sat at Ballard’s right, within easy reach of his hand which wandered from her knee to her thigh and back again. This wasn’t his wedding day, but he hoped to make it his wedding night. She’d stay with him another week before returning home to her father with Cinnia and nearly all his household in tow. He didn’t intend to waste precious time.

Cinnia rose, kissed Gavin and excused herself from the celebration. “I’ll be right back,” she said. “I’m off to get the

mirror. Papa might not be here in person, but he can be in spirit.”

Gavin stood up as well. “I’ll go with you,” he said eagerly.

Louvaen leaned into Ballard. “They’ll never make it back down the stairs.”

Ballard motioned for Gavin to sit down and refilled his goblet. “Cool the fire, boy. She’ll return soon.”

Gavin plopped down in his seat but never took his eyes off the stairwell. The rest of the group returned to eating and chatting without him.

Everyone shot up from the table at Cinnia’s horrified shriek. Gavin pulled his sword from its scabbard and bolted for the stairs, Ballard behind him with only his eating dagger in hand. Cinnia met them halfway down the steps, almost cannoning into Gavin in her haste.

“Lou! Look at this!” She clutched the enchanted mirror in one hand, waving it wildly at Louvaen.

She struggled out of Gavin’s arms and shoved both men against the wall in her bid to reach her sister. The sweet lovely bride had been replaced with a wild-eyed harridan, and Ballard shrugged in confusion when Louvaen cast him a questioning look before stopping her sister’s headlong flight. She jerked her head back just in time to keep Cinnia from smashing the mirror into her face.

“Father’s in the gaol!”

Louvaen snatched the mirror out of Cinnia’s hand and stared at it with a such a ferocious scowl, Ballard thought she

might crack the glass.

“I’m going to kill Jimenin,” she said.

Cinnia paced in front of her, wringing her hands. “You paid the debt!”

“I know I paid the debt!” Louvaen gripped the mirror, wishing she could bludgeon her nemesis with it. “I’m sure he’s dredged or made up some new marker Papa supposedly owes him.” She stomped her foot. “Argh! I should have shot him when I had the chance.”

Ballard clenched the eating knife as a low growl rumbled in his throat. Jimenin. Louvaen’s adversary and the source of the Hallis family’s many troubles. He was also the catalyst that had brought Louvaen to him, but it didn’t stop Ballard from wanting to ride for Monteblanco and rip the man’s head off his shoulders.

War-trained and more than capable of protecting and defending his own, he was stripped of the ability to help her—made impotent by the curse and the chains that bound him to Ketach Tor. Even Gavin, yellow-eyed and balanced on the edge of another flux, couldn’t go in his stead. Louvaen would have to face Jimenin alone a second time.

He met her bleak gaze over Cinnia’s head. “You can’t wait a week.”

“No. I’ll gather my things now.”

“I’m going with you,” Cinnia said.

Louvaen’s angry expression softened. “I don’t think so.”

“But Lou…”

“Cinnia, you’re a new wife on borrowed time with your husband. I’ll deal with this.”

Ballard admired her tactics. Nothing delicate about them, but she’d effectively silenced any arguments or insistence from both parties. He caught Gavin’s attention. “Loan her Sparrow to ride. Jimenin will expect her to show up riding the slower Plowfoot. Coming in on an unfamiliar horse will buy her time.”

“I’ll get him saddled.” Gavin kissed Cinnia and left for the stables.

“I can put you much closer to your Montebianco than before,” Ambrose said. “Shorten your trip to a day and a half instead of six, but you’ll have to embrace a little magic, mistress.”

Louvaen glanced once more at the mirror and then at him. “I’ll kiss the stuff if it gets me there faster, sorcerer.” She looked to Ballard next, and his heart clinched at the sorrow in her eyes. “Come upstairs with me.”

He nodded. “Give me a moment with Ambrose. I’ll be there.” He watched her stride for the stairs, Cinnia on her heels.

He turned to Ambrose once they were out of earshot. “I’d wager a good courser Jimenin somehow found out Louvaen was returning in the spring and thinks Cinnia will return with her. The girl would buckle the moment she saw her father imprisoned and do whatever Jimenin wanted. He’ll be looking for them. How close can you put her to her home?”

Ambrose spread his hands in a helpless gesture. “No closer than what I mentioned. But she’ll be on an unfamiliar

horse, and if she conceals herself she'll get into Montebianco before he spots her."

Ballard ran a hand over his face. "Gods, this is the worst of the curse. I can't even protect her by accompanying her. Neither can Gavin, and she won't leave her father to rot in the gaol while she stays at Ketach Tor."

"She'll know what to do. She's resourceful and no wilting flower by any stretch, and she's dealt with Jimenin before." Ambrose worried his lower lip, a sure sign he was planning and strategizing. "You can keep watch with the mirror I gave her and Cinnia."

"That's as bad as not knowing anything if I can do nothing to help. Besides, she'll want the mirror to keep an eye on Cinnia."

"You as well," Ambrose pointed out. "Is that what you want?"

The idea she might summon his image in the mirror as he transformed for a final time made the cold knot of dread in Ballard's gut swell until it threatened to choke him. "No," he said.

Ambrose snapped his fingers. "An easy solution. Mirrors aren't hard to enchant; they're just hard to control sometimes. I can enchant another one so that Louvaen can only summon Cinnia. It can act as a beacon as well, in case she needs to return to Ketach Tor."

Ballard scowled. "She better not come back. I expect the others to be long gone by the time her business with her father is finished."

“She may have to, *dominus*. If something happens to me, and I can’t get the women out, then Louvaen needs the means to return and do it for me.”

Ballard growled his frustration. “She’s right. She should have shot Jimenin.” He took the stairs two at a time, tossing instructions over his shoulder to Ambrose as he went. “When Gavin returns, tell him to gather up the coin he thinks she’ll need to free her father. I’d bet long we’ll be paying a king’s ransom for his release.”

He found Louvaen in her chamber. She waved him in as she and Cinnia tossed clothing and personal toiletries haphazardly into a satchel, at least until Louvaen lifted the wrapped dagger he’d given her. She placed the gift within her jumble of possessions with careful hands, burying it deep amongst crushed skirts and shifts.

Sometime during his conversation with Ambrose, she’d exchanged her fancier dress with its many laces for a plainer, more practical garment. The ornamental combs in her hair were gone, and she’d bound the dark locks into a heavy plait that fell down her back. His fantasy of unlacing her and keeping her locked in his chamber with him for a week was so much dust.

“Are you ready?” he said.

She paused in closing the satchel. “Yes.” Her slender hands trembled on the ties.

Cinnia gazed at her and Ballard. Her lower lip quivered. She patted Louvaen’s shoulder. “I’ll be downstairs when you’re ready,” she said and fled the room.

Louvaen's lashes were damp with unshed tears. "You save my family again."

He shook his head and came to stand before her. His hands rested heavy on her slender shoulders. "Your father became Gavin's father as well when Cinnia married him. He has a duty to Mercer Hallis. In this, you are simply the messenger for Lord de Lovet."

She offered him a weak smile. "You made him give up his horse. I'll take good care of Sparrow until I can return him."

"He's Cinnia's now. Keep him for her. Gavin would wish it." Ballard gathered her close until her scent of cloves filled his nostrils, and her strong features filled his vision. He pushed back his hood so she might see him as clearly as he saw her. "Wife of my soul," he said softly.

She closed her eyes and sagged in his arms. "Oh gods, Ballard. I don't want to go." She straightened abruptly, almost bumping his nose. Her hands slid into his hair and tugged him down until her mouth touched his and they were kissing wildly—a battle of clutching hands and desperate moans until they gasped for air.

Ballard set her from him. "Get your cloak, and then it's downstairs with you, witch, or I'll change my mind and lock you in Ketach Tor with me forever, your father be damned." He shouldered her satchel and ushered her out the door before she could protest and before he gave in to temptation.

They met the others in the bailey, with Gavin holding the reins of a saddled Sparrow. Someone had lowered the drawbridge, and its chains clinked in the wind gusting up from

the abyss. Nearby, the roses rustled, and Ballard caught the sibilant laughter within their restless motion.

Cinnia hugged her sister and passed her a mirror similar to the one she'd received on Modrnicht. This one was smaller and plainer, hurriedly enchanted by Ambrose. "Like my mirror," she told Louvaen. "Except you'll only be able to summon me."

Louvaen took it and cast a sideways glance first at Ambrose and then at Ballard. The question was as clear in her gaze as if she'd spoken the words. *This was your idea, wasn't it?* He acknowledged her inquiry with a brief, unapologetic nod.

She returned her attention to Cinnia, hugged her hard and promised to rescue their father as soon as possible. She embraced Magda and the maids as well.

The housekeeper patted her shoulder. "We'll take good care of your girl until you see her again."

Louvaen and Ambrose faced each other. Ambrose spoke first. "There's plenty of coin hidden under Sparrow's saddle, enchanted like the mirror to look like part of his blanket. It should be more than enough to release your father." He gestured to the mirror she held. "Cinnia didn't tell you, but the mirror is a beacon as well in case you need to return."

"She won't need to return," Ballard said and scowled at his sorcerer.

Ambrose refused to give ground. "So you say, but I want to be certain."

Louvaen's gaze flitted between them before settling on Ambrose. The corner of her mouth lifted. "Old spitfrog, don't

bespell me off a cliff. You'll kill Gavin's favorite mount."

Ambrose harrumphed, and a smile hovered on his lips. "That bit of horseflesh is the only thing saving you from a bad end, you foul harpy."

Were he not wrenched sideways inside at her imminent departure, Ballard might have grinned at the awkward affection between his lover and his magician.

She stopped in front of Gavin who handed her the reins. "Sparrow's smooth on the canter and will rattle your teeth in the trot," he said. "He's also sensitive on his left side, so nudge lightly." He pulled her into a quick embrace and released her just as speedily. "Godspeed, sister." He returned to a teary Cinnia, and Ambrose shepherded them a small distance away to give her and Ballard privacy.

Ballard tied the satchel securely to the back of the saddle and turned to face Louvaen. Pale and severe in the shadow of her hood, she refused to lift her gaze higher than the top lace of his bliaud. He raised her chin with his thumb and curved his hands along either side of her jaw. He spoke the words guaranteed to make her look at him. "Am I so ugly to you now, Louvaen?"

As he predicted, her eyes snapped up, and she stared at him with a small frown. "Don't be a fool..." She paused and frowned even harder. "You know me too well, Ballard de Sauveterre."

He couldn't find within him the will to summon the smallest smile. He contented himself with gliding his thumbs across her smooth skin. It was an exercise in futility, but he touched on every detail of her face, committing each to memory.

It would have been better if she saw him as he once was, scarred by war but not enchantment—simply a man who once lived by the sword and would have died either in battle or his bed. But he'd take what he could get.

He looked hard into her eyes. "Remember me," he said in a voice both commanding and supplicating. She had time only to utter a gasp before he lifted her and swung her into the saddle. He handed her the reins as she blinked at him and slapped Sparrow on the hindquarters. The horse leapt forward, and Louvaen held on, looking back only once as they cantered out of the bailey and over the drawbridge.

Ballard ignored Cinnia's quiet sobs behind him and Gavin's comforting murmurs. He watched long after horse and rider disappeared into the forest of leafless birch trees. The sun dipped below the horizon, and he remained sentry in the twilight until Ambrose touched his shoulder.

"She'll be fine, *dominus*. You should come inside. The light's almost gone."

No, he thought. *The light is gone.*

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Louvaen halted before Montebianco's Merchant House with its imposing façade of arched windows and grand doors recessed into a thick wall of stone. The sign posted out front bore a simple bench carved into the panel, symbol of a lending establishment and to her jaundiced eye the street marker pointing the way to a place far more corrupt than any knocking shop. A stream of townspeople passed through the door, some looking as if they'd just left the wake of a loved one, others wearing expressions of relief equal to that of men given stays of execution. Her father had worn both faces at various times when he returned home from the Merchant House.

If anyone should sit in a prison cell, it was the hive of thieves operating the Merchant House. Monteblanco's four richest families controlled it, and through the course of generations, clever practices and manipulations of investments, had become partial or full owners of nearly every home, farm and shop in and around the town.

Her breath swirled in front of her in a misty cloud, and she huddled deeper in her cloak. A few townsfolk cast her curious glances, but none recognized her or called her name. She rode an unfamiliar horse, and her nondescript cloak shrouded her well enough as long as she kept her head down and didn't look anyone in the eye. A quick survey of the street revealed nothing obvious, but she was certain Jimenin had posted watchers along the main road to notify him the moment they caught sight of her—or even better, her and Cinnia together.

She stopped herself from kicking Sparrow into a gallop and racing for the debtors' tower to check on her father. The reflection displayed in the mirror had shown a dejected Mercer Hallis sitting in the corner of a common cell crowded with other prisoners. He'd have to wait a little longer. Paying whatever debt Jimenin had trumped up this time was her first order of business and the one guaranteed to send him into an apoplexy when he realized she once again thwarted his plans. With any luck he'd drop dead in the street from sheer frustration.

Sparrow nickered softly to her when she dismounted and tied his reins to one of the hitch rings mounted outside the building. She stroked his nose. "Patience, friend. There's a comfortable stall waiting for you. I'll be done soon." Her hand passed over the blanket where it edged the horse's

withers and closed around the bespelled purse tied there. She tugged it free and slipped it into a pocket sewn inside her cloak. The jingle of coin rattled her nerves but drew no attention from the milling crowd. The sound was a common one here. Louvaen pushed back her hood and crossed the threshold.

Tables crowded the front chamber's floor space, each stacked with documents and occupied by harried scribes seated behind them. Louvaen set her sights on the unfortunate clerk sitting at a table closest to the door. She remembered him in particular. He was the one tasked with blocking her from barging into Magister Hildebrandt's chambers the last time she'd appeared to pay her father's debts. That encounter hadn't ended well.

He spotted her and promptly blanched. "Mistress Duenda," he said in a voice so heavy with dread, Louvaen almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

"We meet again, Goodman Calcun. Are you going to tell me where I may find Magister Hildebrandt and the latest bill of exchange?" She stalked him around the table, cutting off his only avenue of escape. "Or do we dispense with the niceties and duel each other with the candlesticks like last time?" She glanced meaningfully at the two pewter candlesticks flanking the clerk's stacks of loan documents.

He snatched them behind his back, and his eyes had rounded to the size of saucers. "Magister Hildebrandt is... is..."

"Is right here," said a voice cold enough to freeze a lit torch. Louvaen turned and found herself face to face with the Merchant House's principle owner. Tall, gaunt and brittle as

an icicle, Magister Hildebrandt stared down his nose at her. His thin-lipped mouth drooped in a perpetual frown enhanced by an even droopier white mustache. Dislike simmered in his sunken blue eyes. “Stop terrorizing my scrivener, Mistress Duenda.”

He gestured for her to enter his chambers with a twitch of his bony fingers. Louvaen strode into a familiar room filled with ledger books. More occupied most of the available floor space, teetering altars built to the gods of debt and usury. She squelched the impulse to kick a few over as she sat in one of the chairs facing the magister’s desk.

He followed behind her and took his place behind the desk, spidery hands tapping their way across stacks of documents until he found the one he wanted. After a cursory glance, he slid it to her. “You’re here to review the bill of exchange?”

“I’m assuming it’s why my father is knitting mittens in the debtor’s tower.” She ignored the magister’s scowl and perused the document. The more she read, the angrier she grew. “This is dated prior to the last bill, yet Jimenin made no mention of another debt when I was here to make payment several weeks ago.” She glared at Hildebrandt. “Why is this showing up now?” She knew exactly why this latest bill had suddenly appeared at the lending house, but she was curious as to what the magister would tell her.

He eyed her over the steeple of his clasped hands, intent as a vulture. “Don Jimenin felt it wasn’t charitable turning them over to us just after you paid the last debt. He wanted to give your family time to recover.”

It would be sheer, unadulterated luck if the top of her head didn't blow off by the time she finished with this vile business. "Charitable?" The bill crumpled in her grip before she relaxed her fingers at Hildebrandt's alarmed expression. "Jimenin wouldn't recognize charity if it bit him in half." Gods, how she wished her name was Charity.

Hildebrandt reached gingerly for the bill only to retreat when Louvaen bared her teeth at him. She separated the document and passed the last page to him. "This is a forged bill. I'm familiar with my father's signature, and this isn't his."

He made a show of examining the parchment before shaking his head. "The signature is too similar to his earlier ones to ignore, mistress."

She slapped the paper on the desk. "I'm telling you my father didn't sign this bill. Nor would he. Even he knows such a venture would fail. A cargo of ice shipped from the north in the height of summer? Really?" The ridiculousness of the investment scheme assured her of its fabrication. "What did he say before you sent your catchpoles for him?"

"The same thing you did. Don Jimenin, however, produced a witness who gave sworn statement he was present when your father signed the bill."

"I'll just bet he did," she said. "Throw around enough coin, and people will swear they rode a flying cow at sunset."

The magister sighed and gathered the papers together, smoothing and sifting them into an orderly pile. "Regardless of your opinion of Don Jimenin's business practices, the debt is open. Mercer Hallis will remain incarcerated in the debtor's tower until payment is settled." He paused and scooted his

chair back from his desk. “Don Jimenin has stated his offer of debt forgiveness still stands if your father agrees to a marriage between him and your sister Cinnia. He’ll pay the bill of exchange as the bride price.”

Extortion not so subtly buried in a falsely magnanimous gesture. Hildebrandt tensed in his seat as Louvaen stared at him with narrowed eyes. She wondered how much of a fight the magister would put up if she reached across the desk and wrapped her hands around his throat. Then again, there was no benefit in killing the messenger. Thanks to Ballard and Gavin, her best revenge came in knowing she had defeated Jimenin a second time.

She reached into the pocket of her cloak and dropped the full purse on the desk. It struck the surface with a satisfying thunk. “Draw up an article of endorsement. I brought payment.”

She smirked as Hildebrandt’s hollow eyes rounded. He gawked as she counted out the required amount. “That’s a great deal of money, mistress. Where did you get—?”

“Your only concern, magister, is that I can pay the debt.” She paused in her counting as he watched her, entranced. “Are you planning to draw up the endorsement and call in a witness? Or do I need to go out there and trap a clerk or two?”

His thin lips disappeared into a tight line, and he rose to call in three scribes. Louvaen waited impatiently while one of the scribes drew up copies of the article of endorsement. Once signed, witnessed and the money exchanged, the magister sealed the document with the Merchant House’s seal. He passed one to Louvaen. “You may present this to the

bailiff who will then release your father. As before, one copy will remain with the Merchant House. Another will be given to Don Jimenin.” He looked as relieved as she felt at having their transaction concluded.

Louvaen stood, tucked her much lighter purse into her cloak pocket and held onto the endorsement as if her life depended on it. Her father’s freedom did. “Are there any other ransoms—oh, sorry—debts besides this one I should know about before I go?”

Hildebrandt waved his minions out of the chamber. They scattered like frightened birds before a hawk. His eyebrows knitted together, creating a furry white caterpillar over his eyes. Louvaen might have laughed if she didn’t want to slap him. “I’ve had enough of you sharpening that tongue on my hide, mistress. This unpleasantness could have been avoided if your father had agreed to a betrothal.”

“If Jimenin wasn’t such a pip tarse with an unnatural obsession for my sister, this unpleasantness as you so gently describe it wouldn’t exist.” Louvaen took juvenile pleasure in the magister’s pinched disapproval of her vulgarity. She took even greater pleasure in his shock when she told him “Besides, my father can’t agree to a betrothal. Cinnia was married day before yesterday. You may know of him. Gavin de Lovet? She is Lady de Lovet now.”

Hildebrandt’s mouth fell open, closed and opened again, reminding her of a dying fish. He finally snagged the frayed edges of his dignity and wrapped himself in a cloak of undisguised disdain. “Please extend my congratulations.”

Louvaen snorted. “Our business is concluded, magister. I better not see a single one of your buzzard catchpoles lurking

about my doorstep, or I'll shoot him on sight.”

She marched out of his chambers, nodded to the clerk peeking at her from behind his ledgers and slammed the doors behind her.

Sparrow whickered, and she gave him a quick hug in celebration of her victory. She had mounted and was in the midst of guiding the horse away from the hitch rail when the voice of the man she most despised spoke behind her. “Mistress Duenda, no one told me you'd returned to Monteblanco.”

Louvaen's hands clenched the reins as she turned Sparrow and found Jimenin standing in front of her, a shark's smile pasted on his banal features. She fancied an oily darkness watched her from his empty eyes. She shuddered but refused to reveal her fear. “Obviously someone told you, or you wouldn't be here,” she countered.

He stretched out a hand as if to lay it on Sparrow's neck. The horse's ears laid flat against its head. Louvaen liked Sparrow even more. Jimenin ignored the warning and reached for the bridle. “Leaving the Merchant House? Nasty business in there. I heard about your poor father. Maybe I can help.”

With those words, Louvaen snapped. She swung the spare length of both reins, lashing as hard as she could. The leather whistled through the air, cracking across Jimenin's smirking features. Blood splattered Louvaen's hem. He screamed and staggered away, clutching his face. Louvaen followed, using Sparrow's bulk to shove Jimenin until he fell to his knees. The crowd milling around them halted and stared.

Louvaen shook in the saddle, rage tempting her to trample the fallen Jimenin in the streets. Her voice rang in the quiet. “I’m done with you, you loathsome toad. Come near my family again, and I’ll kill you.”

She’d likely signed her death warrant with that declaration before half the town; she didn’t care. As a final insult, she leaned from Sparrow’s back and spat on Jimenin before wheeling the horse around to gallop out of the square.

Once she assured herself she wasn’t followed, she slowed Sparrow to a brisk trot and set out for the debtor’s tower. The last standing portion of an ancient fortress, the four-story prison with its fortified walls and double gates had served as both short and long-term residence to several of the town’s citizens. Louvaen had hoped never to visit it for any reason. She left Sparrow at the nearby stables and slogged across the muddy street to the entry gate and guard post. The guard on duty directed her to the warden’s office in a bored voice and promptly turned a longing gaze toward the closest pub. Louvaen wondered how many detainees had escaped the tower and ambled right past this particular guard.

The warden’s office was tucked into a narrow corner where guardhouse met tower. She rapped on the oak batten door, and a boisterous voice bade her enter. Illuminated by the morning sun pouring through one window and a brace of candles perched on a scarred and worn table, the office was as plain and humble as the Merchant House had been pretentious.

The man charged with the governing of the tower was a scruffy sort, with a bedraggled beard Louvaen suspected worked as a comfortable nest for fleas. He peered at her from rheumy eyes. “What do you want?”

“My father’s release.” She handed him the copy of the endorsement. “Debt paid for Mercer Hallis.”

He opened the endorsement, read the signatures while picking his teeth with dirty fingers and returned it to her with a grunt. “Take a seat. I’ll get him.”

He left her in the office to worry and pace. It was only minutes but seemed like hours before the door opened and Mercer shuffled into the office. Louvaen leapt up and threw her arms around her father. “Papa!”

“Louvaen?” Mercer returned her hug before stepping back to stare at her. His tired features drooped in dismay. “My darling girl, you shouldn’t be here.”

She blinked, stunned. Of all the greetings she might have expected, this one caught her completely by surprise. She took his hand, noting the cracked skin and black dirt caked under his nails. “Don’t be silly, Papa. Where else would I be?”

Mercer closed his eyes, and Louvaen noticed the ravages that age and worry had stamped on his face—the parchment-thin eyelids as crinkled as whitewash baked years in the sun, the deep lines the fanned from the corners of his eyes to his temples and bracketed his mouth. The deaths of two beloved wives had aged him, but this business with Jimenin had painted decades on him. He looked worn-out. “I wish you hadn’t come,” he said.

She laid an arm across his shoulders and ushered him toward the door. “Well there’s nothing to be done for it. I’m here, and we’re going home.” Maybe a bath, a hot meal and a nap in his own bed would erase this strange and desperate melancholy that made her fear for his mind.

He glanced back, peering into the office as if its shadows hid an unknown threat. “Where’s Cinnia?”

“I came alone, Papa.” His shoulders sagged under her grip, whether from relief or despair, she didn’t know. “I’ll tell you everything once we get settled.”

Unsure if Sparrow would accept a second rider, they opted to walk home. Mercer was a morose companion, and Louvaen was too focused on watching every alleyway they passed, fearful a vengeful Jimenin would set his paid brutes on them.

Though she ached to see Ballard and missed the dilapidated comfort of his castle, the sight of the home she once shared with Thomas made her grin. A modest two-story timber frame with a stone and plaster façade, the house had been Thomas’s and later hers after his death. A row of rose bushes, flowerless and black, bristled below the front windows. In late spring and summer, they’d blossom with lush yellow and pink blooms. She made a note to herself to rip them out by the roots at the first opportunity and replace them with cowslips and foxglove.

The back garden was big enough to hold a small stable for horses, a coop for hens and a potager for herbs and vegetables. Louvaen loved every crack and corner of the property. She hoped her soon-to-be guests from Ketach Tor would love it as well, because they’d be packed in like cordwood until they found new accommodations.

She gave Mercer the key to the house and promised to light a fire in the parlor as soon as she unsaddled and stabled Sparrow. The bleak expression he wore flummoxed her. His remark that he wished she hadn’t come had equally shocked

her. “What does he think?” she muttered to herself as she led the horse to the stables. “That I’d let him rot in a prison?” None of this made any sense, and she planned to question him as soon as he’d rested enough from his ordeal.

Sunlight streamed through the transom of windows set high on one side of the stables. The two stalls had been swept clean in her absence. Sparrow would have the place to himself. Plowfoot remained at Ketach Tor for now. An image of Ballard’s face rose in her mind’s eye, and she sighed.

The sound of voices halted her as she put her hand on the back door to enter the kitchen. She recognized Mercer’s voice and finally the feminine one speaking to him. The neighbor. Niamh must have noticed their arrival and wasted no time paying a visit. Louvaen liked Niamh and was grateful for her care of Mercer while his daughters had virtually disappeared into the far north. The older woman greeted her with a hug when she stepped into the kitchen.

Short and plump, with a sweet face and shrewd dark eyes, Niamh Cooper had lived next door since before Thomas brought Louvaen home as his bride. She’d comforted Louvaen after Thomas’s death—one widow to another—and had shared tea and laughter over the latest town gossip and the antics of Cinnia’s many suitors. She ran a successful carding business and was respected in the community. For all that Mercer didn’t make the soundest financial decisions, he had a knack for attracting smart, capable women.

Niamh pressed a cup of tea into her hand and helped remove the satchel from her shoulder. “Thank the gods you’re back. I was up all night last night thinking of ways to free your father.” She pushed Louvaen to one of the chairs at the

kitchen table and made her sit before bustling to the hearth and stoking the fire. “I’ve made a pest of myself and invaded your house. Just toss me out when you’re ready.”

Tired from her journey and still infuriated at having to ransom her father out of prison, Louvaen was too happy for the help. “Please stay, Niamh. You brew a fine tea, and I welcome the company as much as Papa does.”

Mercer sat next to his daughter, uncharacteristically dour. “You shouldn’t be here, Lou.”

His litany annoyed her, and snappish words hovered on her lips before Niamh interrupted her. She shook an admonishing finger at Mercer. “Don’t be a fool, old man. Of course she should be here. She and Cinnia are the only ones who could get you out of the tower.” She eyed Louvaen, puzzled. “Though I’m impressed with the fates. Were you returning home when the Merchant House sent the catchpoles for your father? I thought it a week’s journey at least.”

“It is, but I had a little help from the de Sauveterres’ sorcerer.”

It was Mercer’s turn to look puzzled. “You don’t like magic.”

How many times had she made such a declaration and then eaten those words in the past few months? “No, I don’t. But it has its uses. I didn’t leave Ketach Tor until I saw you in the prison cell.” Two pairs of eyebrows went up at her statement, and she smiled. “Why don’t you sit down with a cup of your own, Niamh. This requires a lengthy explanation.”

She started with her return trip to Ketach Tor, after she'd paid the first set of Jimenin's markers. Her story had all the makings of a fairytale. A curse cast by a vengeful woman and barely leashed by a powerful sorcerer who could halt aging for centuries, a crumbling castle, magic mirrors and a kind, beautiful girl who'd fallen in love with a man turning into a beast.

The reality was magical but not at all charming. Louvaen had developed a robust hatred for roses. Her kind and beautiful sister looked forward to an early widowhood. The man who married her would die as a man and be reborn a creature straight out of a nightmare, same as the father who had sacrificed himself to save him. She left out the parts in her recitation where she'd almost drowned in the pond and Gavin had tried to kill her. Mercer already stared at her wide-eyed and pale.

"Ambrose—the sorcerer—gave me another enchanted mirror before I left this time. I can summon Cinnia. Would you like to see her?"

Mercer nodded eagerly at her offer. She retrieved the mirror from her satchel, unwound its protective cloth and handed it to him. The silver gilt backing glinted in the sunlight, highlighting delicate scrollwork etched by a master silversmith centuries earlier.

Mercer grasped the handle as if it might shatter. The glass reflected back his somber visage. He wet his lips. "What do I say?"

She smiled. "It's ensorcelled to obey only my command. Watch." She leaned toward the mirror and said in a clear voice "Show me Cinnia."

Niamh left her seat to join them as they watched the glass cloud with a heavy mist. Louvaen lifted one hand, ready to banish the image if they caught Cinnia during a delicate moment. Her luck held as the mist cleared, revealing her sister sitting peacefully in a chair by the fire in the bower. Gavin sat on a low stool at her knees, his head in her lap, eyes closed in bliss as she slid her fingers through his hair.

“Oh, how lovely,” Niamh said.

Tears glossed Mercer’s eyes. “My beautiful daughter. What a lovely bride you must have made.”

Louvaen coughed to ease the tightness in her throat. “She was beautiful, as always. Happy to marry the man she loved but sorry you weren’t there. She would have married Gavin in Monteblanco if she’d been able to, Papa.”

His gaze remained riveted on the tranquil image. “She does look happy.”

“She is.” At least for now. If will and desire equaled power, Louvaen would halt the future that bore down on her sister and her new husband. But she was powerless. Another woman’s rage had defeated them. She had only comfort to offer Cinnia when she grieved and sanctuary to give Ballard’s household when they abandoned Ketach Tor.

Mercer blinked several times and returned the mirror to Louvaen. “Enough for now. It’s good she’s there, safe with her new husband. I wish you’d stayed with her, Lou.”

She waved her hand over the glass, scattering the image. “You keep saying that, Papa. What’s changed? I paid this new—and fraudulent—debt. Married and bedded, Cinnia

is no longer of interest to Jimenin. And what kind of daughter would I be to leave you in a prison cell?”

“A wise one.” He pushed away his teacup. “This hasn’t been about Cinnia since you returned the first time and paid off my debt with de Sauveterre’s money. This is about you.”

Louvaen spat her tea back into her cup. “Me? You aren’t making sense. Rickety old longshanks Hildebrandt repeated Jimenin’s offer to forgive the debt if you gave him Cinnia in marriage. This was always about her.”

He shook his head. “No. Even if I lost my senses and agreed to such a union, Jimenin would still exact revenge. You out-maneuvered and humiliated him—twice now. He didn’t know when you’d return. By tossing me in the debtor’s tower, he hoped I’d die in there before you returned to Montebianco. I’m not enfeebled but I’m old, and that’s no place for the healthiest man. He’d have his revenge. No amount of money or threats from you could resurrect me.” His mouth curved into a weak smile. “I expect you took him by surprise when you showed up after only a day.” The smile faded. “He’ll be a man burning with purpose now—eager to destroy you. To be honest, I kept waiting for one of his henchmen to shoot one or both of us on the way home.”

Louvaen buried her face in her hands. “I curse the day that slimy scurf was born.” Her mind whirled with a thousand different thoughts. Reason dictated she heed her father’s warning, especially now after her earlier confrontation with him. And she would, when the quiet came, and she lay in her bed wondering how she’d get out of this calamity. The plans to house Cinnia, Magda and the girls—not to mention Ambrose—might need to change. A new thought struck her.

For the first time since she and Ballard had discussed where his household would go after they left Ketach Tor, she was happy at the idea of Ambrose living with them. Jimenin had a pack of minions to do his dirty work; Louvaen had a curmudgeonly old sorcerer. They were more than equally matched. She just had to make sure and avoid her adversary until Ambrose got here.

“Move to another town.” Niamh refilled Mercer’s cup with the last of the tea. “Find someplace else to live away from Jimenin and his influence. Sell your house to the Hildebrandts or the Kadinass. They’ll gladly buy it and rent it out to some merchant for an exorbitant amount and make their money back in less than a year.”

Louvaen’s hackles rose. “I’m staying. Jimenin has already made me run and jump like a trained pony. He won’t chase me out of my home.”

She smiled when Niamh placed an affectionate kiss on the top of Mercer’s head before bustling around the table to the larder. “You can discuss it more later. I know your kitchen as well as my own now, Louvaen. You and your father are knackered. Why don’t you take a nap? I’ll have water heated and a little dinner ready when you wake.”

Louvaen didn’t protest. Melancholy had worn her down more than the journey. Now was not the time to wallow in sorrow or regrets. There were too many things to do, too many things to plan, but she couldn’t shake the weight settling deep in her chest that made it hard to breathe and oh so easy to cry. She thanked Niamh for the help, hugged her father and trekked up the stairs with her satchel.

Her room was neater than when she left—the bed made and her books in order on the shelf near the window. Because her father had never been one to wield a duster, she expected a fine layer of dust on everything, but even the mirror was clear and the floor swept. Niamh must have been here with her broom and dust rags.

She dropped the bag on the bed and emptied the contents. Her day frocks and chemise were wrinkled beyond hope. She'd add ironing to her list of tasks if she didn't want to look like a frazzled drassock. A narrow bundle wrapped in familiar bronze silk fell among the clothes. The dagger Ballard gave her. She left it covered and placed the weapon on the small table by her bed.

His eyes, so dark before the last flux, had revealed a wary hope when he presented her with the knife, as if unsure she'd like the piece. That he offered so fine a gift and in the spirit in which it was given almost brought her to her knees. Thank the gods she had accepted. Other than her memories of him, this was the only thing of his she could call hers.

Or so she thought. A quick shake of the upended satchel gave up a wilted and crushed bit of bittersweet. A soft sob escaped her as she picked up the piece of tendril and twined it around her finger. The battered leaf drooped, curled at the edges but still green. The tears she'd held back since he'd tossed her on Sparrow and sent the horse galloping through the gate flooded her eyes and coursed down her cheeks.

“Remember me.”

She collapsed onto the bed, the bittersweet still clutched in her hand, and curled into a ball of misery. Her closed door

and a strategically placed pillow muffled her crying, and she wept until she hiccupped and her eyes swelled nearly shut.

A tickling caress against her ear made her open her eyes. The bittersweet was no longer a lone tendril. During her crying jag, it had grown, watered by sorrow, until it spread across the bed in a verdant net and entwined with her hair. A purple blossom nuzzled her ear before sliding down her neck to wind around her throat.

Louvaen held her breath, waiting. Beautiful and poisonous, the bittersweet was far more fragile than the castle's hissing roses, and they fluttered over her skin as lovingly as Ballard's pale hands.

Her fingers slid along one of the tendrils, gently stroking.

"Remember me."

A command handed down by a man accustomed to leading armies. She'd do as he ordered and remember him, not as the serpent-eyed forest king with his horns and claws, but as the somber, sloe-eyed lord who warmed the sheets and loved her through the long winter nights. His image was the last thing she saw before she fell into an exhausted slumber.

She woke to a dark bedroom. The bed squeaked as she sat up and scrubbed her face with her hands. Afternoon had given way to evening while she slept and the filigree of bittersweet had dwindled to the lone tendril she'd carried from Ketach Tor in her satchel. She cradled it gingerly in her hand and lifted the wilted flower to her mouth for a kiss before placing it on the table next to the queen's dagger. Still groggy, she shuffled out of her room and down the stairs. She found

Niamh in the kitchen, shawl wrapped around her shoulders as she prepared to leave.

Niamh gave Louvaen a quick smile. “I’m for home, Louvaen. There’s stew on the grate, along with tea. And bread on the table.” She set out a cup and fresh pot of tea. “Your father’s in the parlor reading. Do you want me to come by tomorrow?”

Though grateful for the offer of help, Louvaen shook her head. “You’ve your own affairs to attend to, Niamh. You’re always welcome of course, but if you stop by, do so to keep Papa company. I’ll be too busy to entertain him.” She suspected it wouldn’t take much to coax the Widow Cooper over when Mercer was the principal reason to visit.

Her suspicions proved correct when Niamh’s soft features lit up. She patted Louvaen on the shoulder. “Tomorrow then.” She waved as Louvaen called a thank you and disappeared into the parlor.

Louvaen ate her dinner and listened to her father’s and the widow’s murmurings. She couldn’t make out the words, but the affectionate tones were unmistakable. There was a short silence before the front door opened on a creak and closed on a click. Mercer entered the kitchen and settled into his customary seat at the table. She’d left the enchanted mirror with him earlier, and he held it in his hand, fingers tracing the delicate scrollwork on the back. “Feel better, Lou?”

“Much better.” The nap had restored some of her vigor and cooled her anger. She could think and plan without her blood boiling at the merest thought of Jimenin. The crying jag had eased the suffocating pressure in her chest, though she wanted nothing more than to leap on Sparrow’s back and spur

him back to Ketach Tor. She poured her father a cup of tea instead and gestured to the mirror. “Want to see her again?”

He passed it to her. “You don’t mind?”

“Of course not. It’s one of the reasons Ambrose gave me the mirror. Puts my mind at ease to see her and know she’s well.” She called Cinnia’s name and waited for the mist to clear. A small part of her hoped her summons might somehow reveal Ballard in the scene. She hoped in vain. Ambrose had been careful with his magic, enchanting the mirror to limit the spell’s scope only to Cinnia. Ballard would make certain he stayed far enough away from her and out of view.

The glass surface filled with the image of Cinnia, and Louvaen recognized the battered table in the Ketach Tor kitchen. Her sister sat beside Gavin, her lips moving silently as she read from the book in front of her. Mercer stared into the mirror, entranced. “I don’t like the circumstances that will bring her home, but I’d be lying if I said I won’t be happy when she gets here.”

Louvaen squeezed his hand. “She’ll have an entourage with her. You and I need to figure out where we’ll put everyone. Do you want to make a few plans tonight?”

He shrugged. “Why not? Finish your dinner. I’ll stoke the fire in the parlor. Bring the teapot.”

They sat side by side in the parlor and drank two pots of tea between them as they made plans for accommodating a much larger household. The fire had burned low in the hearth when Mercer gave a huge yawn and stood up. “I’m off to bed, Lou. You?”

Still worn out herself, she readily agreed. They bid each other goodnight at the top of the stairs, and Louvaen watched her father fondly as he scowled at his door before disappearing into his room. She'd wager he hadn't slept alone in his room since her return to Ketach Tor. He missed the comfort of his affectionate neighbor.

Once in her room she readied for bed. Falling asleep this time wasn't so easy. She stared into the blackness above her with dry, gritty eyes. Her thoughts flitted back and forth between ways to avoid Jimenin and the puzzle of Isabeau's curse.

Guided by the accepted truths that no curse could withstand true love or its kiss, breaking this one seemed simple. How very wrong they were. The nonborn Louvaen had broken one part with her declaration of loving Ballard. Cinnia had broken a second part by proclaiming her love for Gavin. The only thing left to breaking the third was for Gavin to remain the faithful son and not attack and Ballard: or vice versa.

They hadn't counted on the nature of the curse—almost sentient in its intent to fulfill its caster's will. It had reacted like a rat cornered, raising a flux that sent Ballard into paroxysms of madness and pain and transformed Gavin into an abomination. No matter Ambrose's powerful magic or the devotion of the women who loved them, the two men would have to save themselves and each other. Louvaen struggled to find hope in such an outcome when the next flux promised to reduce them both to creatures of unthinking savagery. That the two would turn on and destroy each other seemed inevitable.

Jimenin's worrisome deceptions were nothing compared to this disaster. "Such misery you have wrought, Isabeau," she said before drifting off to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Louvaen awakened to a foul-smelling hand clamped over her mouth. She swung her fist, surprising her attacker with a blow to the head that numbed her arm. He grunted and jerked away. Louvaen lunged from the bed, kicking and flailing as the man pawed the hem of her night rail. She fell against the table, knocking the wrapped dagger to the floor. Her hand closed around the hilt, and she landed one last kick on the intruder before bolting for the door. A thud sounded behind her—a body tripping over the chest at the foot of her bed—followed by a round of curses.

Ribbons of moonlight spilled through her father's open bedroom door, providing the only illumination in the hallway.

Louvaen's heart, already pounding in her chest, jumped to her throat. "Oh no," she whispered. "Papa." She sprinted toward the stairs, clawing frantically at the dagger. Wrapped and sheathed, it was useless to her.

She was balanced on the top tread when a tremendous force struck her from behind and sent her flying. Louvaen twisted, dropping the dagger to clutch empty air before her hands tore into cloth and lacings. A startled cry echoed hers, and the man who had sneaked into her room toppled down the stairs with her. Her head smacked the wall and then the edge of a stair as they pitched toward the first floor and crashed sideways through the banister before coming to a halt.

Dizzy and certain she'd broken at least one something, Louvaen kicked herself free of her attacker and staggered to her feet. He lay unmoving next to her dagger in a watery pool of moonlight. She lunged for the blade, snatching it close. The sinister click of a flintlock being cocked froze her in place.

"Hold, Louvaen or I splatter Mercer's brains all over your pretty parlor."

Had there ever been a voice more hated than Gabrilla Jimenin's? Louvaen braced a hand against the wall to steady herself and peered into the flock of shadows shifting and turning before her. She squinted in the sudden brightness of a lit oil lamp and spotted her father gagged and bound in one of the parlor chairs. His eyes were huge as he struggled against his bonds.

"What have you done to my father, you pig?"

Jimenin, his face bisected by the scabbed wound she'd given him that day, clucked and shook his head. "No need for

name-calling, mistress. I haven't done anything to him. I needed him quiet for a moment until you came downstairs." He eyed the destroyed banister and his unconscious henchman. "Not quite what I envisioned when I sent that idiot to fetch you. He was supposed to drag you down the stairs, not throw you down them."

Jimenin stood next to her father, a loaded flintlock resting casually in his hand and pointing just as casually at Mercer's head. He was armed with a sword and brace of pistols and was garbed in black traveling leathers. His men surrounded him—at least a dozen crowded into her small parlor; wolves waiting to do their leader's bidding.

Mercer inhaled a harsh breath when Jimenin jerked the gag down. "Lou! Are you all right?"

Jimenin snorted and mocking laughter filled the room. "It'd take a lot more than a tumble down the stairs to defeat that vicious tarleather you sired, Mercer. Look who's down and who's standing." He gestured to his still senseless minion and motioned to another. "See if he's dead. If not, rouse him. We need to leave soon." He pointed to Louvaen's covered dagger. "Put whatever that is on the floor and kick it to me."

She clutched the hilt tighter. She wouldn't hesitate if he'd asked for her night rail, willing to stand naked before a host of thieving lackeys than give up the one physical reminder she had of Ballard. "It's just a hairbrush," she lied, already mourning the inevitable loss.

"I wouldn't trust you with a wooden spoon. Hand it over." He emphasized his impatience at her stalling by nudging Mercer with the pistol.

She placed the dagger gently on the floor, a clear indication that what she held was far more precious than a hairbrush. One of Jimenin's henchmen handed the bundle to his master.

The don shook the dagger free of the silk. His eyes lit with an avaricious gleam at first sight of the sheath. "Far more interesting than a wooden spoon," he said softly. He handed the flintlock to the man who'd given him the knife and unsheathed the blade. Admiring murmurs from his men accompanied his low whistle. Louvaen's teeth ground together. He glanced at her, then at the blade before settling a longer stare on her. "This is either a gift from one warrior to another or one lover to another. Which is it, Mistress Duenda?"

"None of your business, you thieving gleet." The idea he'd guess her relationship with Ballard sent a crawling shudder down her spine.

He shrugged, sheathed the knife and tucked it into his belt. "No matter. I now have a fine weapon to add to my collection." He smirked at her growl and reclaimed the flintlock.

"What do you want, Jimenin?" Mercer addressed his captor for the first time since Jimenin had removed the gag.

The other man's smirk widened to a grin, flashing a mouth full of stained, yellowed teeth. "You know what I want, and you'll tell me how I can get her."

Louvaen rolled her eyes—the only parts of her that didn't ache after her hurtle down the stairs. By all the gods, would this never end? "Cinnia is married, Jimenin. Why can't you leave her alone? Leave us alone?"

“Because I get what I want, and a hasty marriage isn’t an obstacle. Especially when that sop de Lovet is her husband.”

Since this entire debacle began, Louvaen had dealt with Jimenin on her own and preferred it that way. Now she wished the “sop, de Lovet” was here so he could make Jimenin eat his own teeth. A thin, horrified gasp escaped her when he reached inside his doublet and pulled out the silver mirror.

“You’ve brought some exceptional items home with you this time. A dagger fit for royalty and a mirror blessed with magic.”

“You’re an idiot,” she said flatly. “The mirror has no more magic than my teapot.”

He trailed a finger across the rim where glass met silver. “Too late, mistress. I found your father bidding a most affectionate good night to the very accommodating Dame Cooper this evening. They had an enlightening conversation about this special bit of vanity right there on your doorstep.”

Louvaen cut a hard glance at her father who went ashen. “I had no idea, Lou! I never saw anyone out there.”

She took pity on him. They’d both underestimated Jimenin. “I wouldn’t have looked either, Papa.” Her lip curled into a sneer. “Decent folk don’t go sliving about in the dark, lurking at other people’s windows and doors to hear private conversations.”

Jimenin remained maddeningly impervious to her scorn, his face a gloating mask of triumph. “Summon her, Louvaen.” He dragged her name out in mocking syllables. She slowly raised a hand and offered him an unmistakable gesture. His answering scowl silenced his men’s muffled

laughter. He pressed the end of the flintlock's barrel against Mercer's temple. "Kill your father or betray your sister." The toothy smile returned. "Nasty choice isn't it, bitch?"

If she didn't think her enemy would savor the moment and relish in his refusal, she'd fall to her knees and beg him for mercy. Cinnia would never forgive her if something happened to their father. Mercer wouldn't forgive her if something happened to Cinnia.

"Raise the mirror higher," she said.

Mercer yanked on his bonds. "Louvaen, don't."

She had no choice. "Show me Cinnia."

The familiar mist clouded the glass before clearing. Jimenin turned the mirror away from her. His face flushed in the dim light, and he licked his lips. Louvaen recoiled. The gods only knew what her summons had revealed; what privacy and dignity she'd destroyed for her sister to save her father. She wanted nothing more than to slap the grin off Jimenin's face.

He stared into the glass, hand gliding over the silver frame as if he stroked Cinnia's skin. "Now that's a sight to pump to." He mimicked his words by thrusting his hips forward.

"Shut your filthy mouth, you vile bastard." Mercer, goaded beyond his natural passivity, glared.

"Just complimenting your beautiful daughter, Mercer." Jimenin frowned at the glass, and Louvaen guessed the image had faded, leaving his own far less sublime reflection staring back at him. He tucked the mirror into his doublet near his

heart. “You’ll be summoning her again soon,” he told Louvaen. “I’ll want more than a brief glimpse.”

Not if she could help it. Magic or not, glass broke. If she couldn’t crack Jimenin’s head in two like she wanted, she’d do her damndest to make sure the mirror met a similar fate. Another thought occurred to her. No doubt if she was summoning Cinnia’s image with her mirror, then Cinnia or someone else summoned hers in the other one. If fortune favored her, they’d soon get an eyeful of her situation. Ambrose would take measures to shield Cinnia. She stiffened when Jimenin turned the pistol from her father to level it on her.

“How does it feel, mistress,” he taunted. “Being on the wrong end of one of these?” The earlier lust that made his eyes gleam now gave way to a flat hatred.

Her toes curled against the cold floor, the instinct to leap out of the pistol’s line of fire strong. Reason prevailed. He’d shoot her if she so much as twitched sideways. She raised her chin. “As any person in such a predicament might feel. The difference is I haven’t pissed myself. Did you?”

Jimenin’s expression froze at her mocking reminder of his own terror and how he fled her house when she’d threatened to shoot him. The flintlock wavered in his grip. Time halted, and every breath she inhaled and exhaled howled in her ears. Perspiration trickled down her sides. Never before had she so deeply regretted not keeping her tongue between her teeth. She’d compromised her survival, as well as Mercer’s by heaping contempt on an enemy who clearly held an advantage over her. A reluctant apology hung on her lips, bitter as wormwood.

He didn't give her a chance to apologize. He lowered the pistol, closed the distance between them and smashed his fist into her face.

Pain exploded in her head. She careened into the wall, ricocheting back in a shower of plaster. His second blow caught her as she pivoted and drove her to her knees. His boot to her ribs put her on the floor, where she promptly spewed up the blood filling her mouth.

She drew her knees to her chest, wheezing bloody bubbles as she fought to breathe. He'd taken her breath with that kick, and her vision grayed. One sweet gulp of air slid down her throat in an agonized gasp, followed by another and then a third until she no longer thought she'd suffocate.

Mercer's horrified cries buzzed in her ears, but Jimenin's voice rang clear. "Your turn, Mercer. Tell me where Cinnia is and how I can find her, or I'll kick every one of this bitch's ribs in and flense the skin off her bones while you watch."

Half blinded and nauseous from the iron taste of blood trickling down her throat, she struggled to raise her head and command her father to say nothing. A red tide of pain held her down, washing from her scalp to her throbbing jaw. Every breath hammered against her ribs. She lay there, listening while Jimenin threatened Mercer.

Her tears stung the split at the corner of her mouth when Mercer said in a broken voice. "Ketach Tor. The mirror is a beacon to de Lovet's home."

Louvaen hiccupped a goblet of blood. The gray shroud misting her vision darkened until there was only blackness and Jimenin's voice issuing orders. Even that faded to silence and the terrible pain finally eased.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



She woke bound to a tree. Something cold and wet spread along her hip, and her back scraped against rough bark. Every muscle in her body screamed; every bone creaked as she straightened from a seated slump and squinted at a dawn world from one blurry eye. She raised her hands to touch her face, only to discover them bound with leather cord. Her feet had been bound as well, bare toes peeping out from under the tattered hem of her night rail. They hadn't bothered with shoes, but her abductors had kept her from freezing to death by throwing one of her father's cloaks around her.

Memories flooded in—the parlor's wavering lamplight, the enchanted mirror which had become her bane, Jimenin's

lascivious expression as he peered into the glass. And most of all, the distorted image of his fist just before he punched her hard enough to shut one of her eyes and loosen a few of her teeth.

It was no longer the small hours, and they were no longer in her parlor. Pink morning light had replaced shadows, and she was surrounded by sentinel stands of newly budding birches and oaks. A cluster of horses grazed nearby, and the scent of smoke from a fire teased her nostrils. They were journeying to Ketach Tor.

She turned her head toward her father's familiar voice calling her name. For all that the gods and fortune had abandoned her, they had not deserted Mercer. Red-faced with cold, bedraggled and bound like she was, he nonetheless appeared unharmed.

Her swollen tongue felt glued to the roof of her mouth, and she hissed as her cracked lips split. "Water," she croaked. Lead weights hung on her lashes, and she closed her eye.

"Stay awake, Lou," Mercer urged. "Stay awake. I'll get you the water."

She raised an eyelid, intending to ask him how he planned to do such a thing since he was as tightly trussed to his tree as she was to hers. A pair of fine boots, their high polish dulled by mud, filled her vision. She lifted her head, blinking away dizziness, and met Jimenin's amused gaze.

"Nice to have you join us, Mistress Duenda. Sleep well?"

If her mouth wasn't robbed of every drop of saliva, she'd spit on him. He held out a cup, pulling back as she

reached for it.

“For gods’ sake, man,” Mercer snapped. “Show some mercy. Wasn’t beating her enough?”

Jimenin stared at Louvaen, and his mouth curved into a small smile that didn’t touch his eyes. “Not really. Killing her outright might be.” He pushed the cup roughly into her hands. “Good thing for you both I still need her.”

Her frozen fingers trembled, sloshing water against the cup’s sides. She wanted to guzzle it back but sipped instead, welcoming the cool relief that slid over her swollen tongue and down her parched throat. She tasted the salt of her blood but at least her mouth no longer felt like she’d eaten a plate of sand. Another cup or two would quench her thirst. Unfortunately Jimenin wasn’t in a generous mood. He snatched the cup from her grasp just as she emptied it.

“Enough pampering. We’re wasting time.” He motioned to one of his men to untie Mercer while he took care of Louvaen. He unfastened the ropes that held her to the tree, reserving one to noose around her neck. He freed her feet but not her hands and used the trailing length of rope from the makeshift collar to jerk her upright. She swayed and swallowed back a groan. Jimenin’s affections and her tumble down the stairs assured she was one giant bruise. “Ride peacefully or you’ll taste more of my fists,” he warned.

Despite the humiliation of being leashed like a dog, she remained silent and docile, offering no protest when he gave her only the privacy of a juniper shrub to answer nature’s demands. She did cry out when he tossed her roughly onto his horse’s back. His chuckle grated in her ears as he mounted behind her and took up the reins. “This is going to hurt,” he

said in tones so thick with anticipation, she fancied he grew hard against her back.

Her skin did its best to creep off her bones at the thought. He spurred his horse to a gallop, and Louvaen forgot her disgust at his proximity. He was right; it did hurt. Every time a hoof struck ground she imagined one of her ribs cracked loose. Each inhale was a stream of cold air and glass splinters that settled in her chest.

They rode until the sun grazed the treetops and the distant lament of wolf song serenaded them through the trees. Louvaen estimated if they continued at their current pace, they'd reach Ketach Tor by midafternoon the following day—if Ambrose's journey spell still worked. If not, she'd spend almost a week in Jimenin's foul company. Part of her hoped the spell had faded. Surely by then those at the castle would know they had enemies headed for their door and take precautions—namely spiriting Cinnia away from danger.

A dreary clearing much like the one in which she woke earlier in the morning became their temporary camp. Louvaen accepted another cup of water but refused the hard bread one of Jimenin's men thrust at her. Her stomach roiled at the thought of food and her jaw ached at the idea of chewing anything tougher than gruel.

“You need to eat something, daughter.” Mercer sat nearby, too far for her to cause trouble but close enough that he could speak to her without shouting.

“I'm not hungry, Papa. Besides, I wouldn't trust anything Jimenin or his ilk gave me. I'm surprised I'm not yet dead from drinking the water.”

“How do you feel?”

Like she'd ridden this far tied to Jimenin's horse's hooves instead of mounted on its back. Her father's pinched expression stopped her from counting off a litany of complaints. She shrugged. "I won't be dancing any reels these next few days."

"I told you, you shouldn't have returned to Montebianco."

She sighed. "I know, but we're here, and we need to make sure we stay alive long enough so I can cut that toad's heart out with my eating knife."

As if he heard her threat, the toad sauntered across camp, her mirror in hand, to where she sat tethered to a stake one of the men had driven into the ground. He tossed something at her. It struck her shoulder, bounced off and rolled drunkenly toward her foot—an apple, crimson and glistening. Louvaen's sore mouth watered at the sight, even as her teeth throbbed in warning. She turned a blank stare on her captor. "What do you want?"

Jimenin gestured to the apple. "They're not bad you know. Straight from your neighbor's root cellar."

"Pilfered no doubt."

He shrugged. "She won't miss them." He held the mirror up to her, making her squint from the sun's glare on the glass. "I've a need to see her. Summon her."

Her frightful reflection stared back—black eye, swollen face, split lip. Her fingers itched to snatch mirror out of his hand and crack the glass into a thousand shards. Jimenin was careful though and kept it well out of her reach. "Why? You'll see her in person soon enough."

His scowl warned she tried his patience. “The fairest woman of all. What man not blind wouldn’t want to look his fill?” The scowl deepened. “And because I said so. Now summon her.”

Louvaen’s frown mimicked his, but she did as he commanded. The mist arose, followed by a wavering vision of a stone wall that faded just as quickly back to the wispy miasma. Her heart stuttered to a halt for a tiny breath of time.

Jimenin shook the mirror before thrusting it in her face. “What’s wrong? Do it again.”

She called Cinnia’s name a second time, this time with gusto. The same thing happened—mist and a wall and mist again, but no Cinnia. If she didn’t think she’d die for the effort, she’d leap to her feet and whoop her joy. Someone in Ketach Tor had learned her fate, and Ambrose had done as she’d hoped. She offered her nemesis a bland expression when he turned on her. He leapt forward, thrust his hand in her hair and yanked until he pulled her head back, exposing her throat. Louvaen yelped, and tears blurred her sight. The thin edge of cold metal pressed against her flesh.

Jimenin’s breath cascaded over her face in rancid puffs, and his eyes glittered. “What did you do to the mirror, witch?”

She tried not to gag around her words. “Nothing.”

He pressed the blade harder against her throat. “Liar! Fix the mirror.”

“I can’t fix what I didn’t break, you slapskull.” Louvaen grabbed his wrist and glared into Jimenin’s flat eyes. “Either cut or leave me alone!”

He threw her from him. She sprawled in a heap and rolled away in case he decided to land another kick. Jimenin bellowed his frustration and stalked back to where his men gathered around the fire, watching him with wary eyes.

Her first victory since he'd broken into her house and abducted her and Mercer. Louvaen hid her face behind her tangled hair, not wanting him to catch her smile. She turned to her father and gave him a quick nod of assurance that she was fine despite this latest harrowing clash with Jimenin.

He came to her twice more; she summoned both times and failed to raise Cinnia's image in either attempt. The mirror was still a beacon and therefore still a problem, but at least it no longer offered Cinnia to his lecherous gaze. He gave up after that, but his inability to watch his prey in the mirror spurred him to a more grueling pace. They rode through the night. Louvaen's fatigue overrode her revulsion, and she fell asleep against Jimenin's chest. He woke her by shoving her off his horse with a brusque command she had to the count of ten to piss before he dragged her back. Dazed and breathless from her spill out of the saddle, she limped to the nearest bush, managing to return before Jimenin called out "Eight."

They made it to the tract of woodland containing Ambrose's journey spell in late afternoon. A belt of watery air splashed with ribbons of blue luminescence stretched from left to right, far beyond the visible horizons. Louvaen had crossed it on her trips to and from Ketach Tor. Both Plowfoot and Sparrow had panicked at the twisting, warping feel of being cast leagues from one place to another faster than the snap of fingers. Unaware of the spell's presence, the men advanced toward the ensorcelled wall. Only the horses sensed a

strangeness. They whickered to each other and pranced restlessly beneath their riders.

Louvaen wrestled with the idea of warning Jimenin about the journey spell. If she did, he'd demand to know why she hadn't told him before now, then interrogate her about her ability. She didn't like him learning that her mother's gift for sorcery allowed her to see magic when others couldn't. She stayed quiet and gripped the saddle's pommel in preparation for the transition from lowland forest to mountain woodland.

Her stomach hurtled into her throat before plummeting to her knees as they rode through the bespelled wall and into a blizzard's white howl. She held her seat even as Jimenin fought to bring his panicked mount under control. Their ordered party disintegrated into a chaotic throng of yelling men and bucking horses. It took several minutes of Jimenin's shouting and a few mad dashes into the trees before they found order. Louvaen peered into the snow-shrouded crowd, relieved to see her father had suffered nothing more than a scare. He sat pillion behind one of Jimenin's minions, staring at her wide-eyed.

In the gray gloaming Jimenin's face had taken on a feral look—lips peeled back from discolored teeth, pupils dilated so they darkened his eyes to a hollow black. He shook her. “What sorcery is this? Where are we?” The keening wind thinned his voice to a petulant whine.

Louvaen wiped snowflakes from her lashes and peered across the gorge to the structure perched on its spit of rock. She forgot the cold, the pain, the fear for her father and sister. Magic swamped her senses, and she gave a small sob. The flux had risen—not in slow tide but in a giant wave, battering

everything around it. Blue sparks shot through the air, joined by undulating rivers of the same light that washed the castle and surrounding land. The drawbridge was lowered and the portcullis raised. Either Ketach Tor stood deserted, or they were expected. She wanted nothing more than to leap off Jimenin's horse and race across the bridge. Somewhere in that battered fortress an equally battered man waited—completely mad, utterly inhuman.

At her silence, Jimenin pulled her hair. She hissed and pointed to the castle. “Ketach Tor,” she shouted above the wind. “You’ve reached Ketach Tor.”

He leaned into her, his mouth damp against her ear. “If this is a trick, I’ll butcher your father right here and toss the pieces into the ravine. Then I’ll turn my men on you. There are more than few here not so choosy as I. Any warm cunt will do. You’ll bleed to death in the snow—if you don’t freeze first.”

The shudder rising up from her toes to encompass every part of her body nearly toppled her from the horse. She congratulated herself for somehow keeping her voice steady. “The mirror’s beacon worked,” she said. That is the home of Gavin de Lovet.”

What he lacked in honor and morality, Jimenin possessed in leadership ability. In short order he’d gathered his men and ordered them across the drawbridge. They advanced slowly—Jimenin at the lead—and clopped over the bridge’s creaking wood. Huddled within her father’s thin cloak, Louvaen shivered and squinted into the snow flurries whirling around them. The weather hadn’t been so bad or so bitter when she left for Montebianco, and she wondered if

Ambrose had used his sorcery to strengthen winter's last grip on Ketach Tor.

They crossed over the bridge, through the barbican, and into the deserted bailey without incident. While the wind had quieted from a wail to a moan, the snow fell heavy. The castle loomed above them, a wall of stone wrapped in twilight. A murmur rose to her right, sibilant and rustling. All the hairs on her nape stiffened. She knew that hated sound, and if the horses didn't know it, they still recognized the threat of a predator. Jimenin's mount shied sideways, and his ears flattened against his head. The other horses followed suit. Louvaen peered into the shadows and shrank away.

Isabeau's malevolent roses had swallowed up half the bailey and nearly all the tower keep. Silhouettes of thorny vines snaked up the stones, spilling into the window of Ballard's bedchamber. Those on the grounds swayed from side to side, their dark blooms like snapping jaws. Jimenin's men made signs with their fingers to ward off evil and wondered aloud what black sorcery abounded in Ketach Tor.

"Hold your tongues and light some torches, you bunch of lobcocks," Jimenin ordered. "I'll not be chased off by some talking flower." The strike of flint and the hiss of sparks on resinous pinewood heralded coronas of light that revealed the bailey's dilapidated buildings and squirming roses. After a pause, Jimenin spoke. "Cinnia married for this?" he said in a sneering voice.

Louvaen was tempted to taunt him, to tell him the woman he so badly craved married de Lovet despite his apparent poverty because she loved him and would live in rags or alone before she'd surrender to Jimenin.

“Oh Cinnia,” he called out in a sing-song voice. “Come out, come out wherever you are.”

Louvaen held her breath as the flicker of candlelight suddenly appeared in a parchment covered window and the main doors creaked slowly open.

A slight figure holding the candle appeared in the doorway. Louvaen couldn't help it. She cried out at the sight of her sister, cloaked and hooded. “Cinnia, stay inside!”

Jimenin shoved the barrel of one of his pistols into her uninjured side. “Shut up,” he said. He addressed the approaching figure once more. “Come and greet us, fair maiden. Your father and sister are eager to see you.”

Cinnia picked her way daintily across the bailey. Louvaen squinted and leaned forward for a better look. An aura of cerulean light surrounded Cinnia. The candle flame danced in the frigid wind, and for just a moment Ambrose's face stared back at her from the hood's shadows.

Louvaen jerked in surprise, deaf to Jimenin's snarl that she keep still. She felt the change in her captor's breathing—quick, eager breaths and the speedy rhythm of his black heart—as the sorcerer drew close. The false Cinnia raised her candle, revealing the lovely face which had brought them all to this point and place. The brown eyes were solemn, the full-lipped mouth unsmiling but still seductive. “Here I am, Don Jimenin,” she said in sugared tones that were all Cinnia and nothing of Ambrose. “What would you have of me?”

Not yet sure of his triumph nor fully ensnared by his prey's beauty and proximity, Jimenin kept a firm grip on Louvaen and distance from Cinnia. “Where's your husband, girl?”

Her eyes filled with tears. “He is dead, sir.”

This Cinnia might be an illusion, but the grief was real. Louvaen choked back a sob. Gavin was dead. And if he was dead, then so was Ballard. Something inside her cracked—the scab of an old wound made when she lost Thomas. Ballard’s death reopened it, and the wound hurt a thousand times worse. She’d been with Thomas when he died; she’d been tied to a tree or strapped to Jimenin’s horse when Ballard had succumbed, destroyed at last by his own hand or by his son. The roses had told the tale with their conquering of the tower keep, but she’d held onto a slim hope that the two men might be saved despite the flux flooding Ketach Tor. They had failed to break Isabeau’s curse. She stared at Ambrose disguised as Cinnia, at the bleak despair in his ensorcelled eyes. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “So very sorry.”

Another realization squeezed the last bit of air out of her lungs. With Gavin dead, what had happened to the real Cinnia?

Ambrose blinked long, tear-soaked lashes and gave a wordless nod. He turned his attention back to Jimenin. Louvaen couldn’t see the man’s face, but the satisfaction in his voice was clear enough. “That makes things much easier for everyone.” He lowered the pistol from Louvaen’s side. “You’ll switch places with your sister and leave with me. No struggle, no protest and I’ll let your father live.”

“What about Louvaen?”

“We’ll see.”

Ambrose glanced at her, his gaze granite-hard and bright with a silent message: Be ready. Their short relationship had always been one of sparring insults and wary truces, but she’d

come to respect the wily sorcerer and gave him the trust he'd so valiantly earned when he walked amongst the enemy to save her. She inclined her head.

He bestowed a limpid look on Jimenin. "I will come with you," he said simply.

"Cinnia, please!" Her father cried from his place behind one of the henchmen. Louvaen wanted to tell him to be quiet, but her command might give away the game. There was also an unexpected boon to his protest. If Ambrose fooled Mercer with his illusion, he fooled everyone else.

The sorcerer dropped his candle in the snow and raised both hands to Jimenin. "How shall I ride?"

As if the question punched Jimenin awake, he shoved Louvaen hard to the side and reached eagerly for his newest captive. She flew out of the saddle and sprawled in a powdery drift. The horse blocked most of her view, but she caught Jimenin's shocked expression before he flailed and toppled out of his seat on the opposite side.

Ambrose roared in a deep voice wholly his. "Move, Louvaen!"

A flash of searing light burst across the bailey. Blinded, Louvaen scuttled on hands and knees away from the pounding of hooves as, for a second time, frightened horses bolted in every direction. A series of thunderous cracks added to the mayhem, and the agonized cries of the injured joined the chorus of equine squeals and whinnies. Somewhere in that chaos, Jimenin's men had either shot each other, shot their horses or gods forbid, shot her father or Ambrose.

The warning hiss of Isabeau's roses sounded dangerously close, and she flinched away, sliding along a patch of icy mud. The trailing ends of a horse's tail switched her across the cheek as one of the animals galloped by close enough to flutter her sodden night rail. She'd come a hair's breadth from being trampled—an ending she'd suffer any day over death by climbing rose.

As soon as her vision recovered from the blast of Ambrose's light spell, another followed, putting to rest her fears that someone had shot Ambrose.

"Hold your ground, you white livered rags!" Jimenin roared above the din. "Shoot the woman and the old man!"

Jimenin's threat held Louvaen silent, and she prayed Mercer would do the same. The heavy thud of a body hitting the ground made her jump. Hisses transformed into frenzied rustling as the fiendish roses latched onto a victim. A man's screams cut through the clamor, pitching into unearthly screeches that froze every drop of blood in her veins to sleet. The bailey went still. Even the remaining horses stood quiet. Only the ebb and swell of one unfortunate soul's dying shrieks pierced the hush.

Grateful for the mercy of temporary blindness, Louvaen resumed her crawl across the bailey to where she guessed the door might be. If she got inside, she could arm herself with one of Ballard's many weapons. A sword wasn't much use against a flintlock, but better than what she currently had, which was nothing. She halted once more when a plaintive howl drowned out the dying henchman's fading cries. Wolfish, savage, it was joined by another, different cry—more a roar that vibrated the earth beneath her feet.

Her vision cleared in time to watch a black shape hurtle out the door and into the bailey where it leapt onto the nearest man so fast, he had no chance to cry out before a set of gleaming claws split him from gullet to gizzard. A second shape followed, just as quickly. The gait was different, more of a spidery sprint than a lope. Like the first creature, it dove into the fray, attacking anyone it could reach. Amidst more screams and the thunder of pistol fire, Louvaen flattened herself to the ground. She searched frantically for her father and Ambrose—now undisguised—in the concealing snowfall and sighted both men huddled behind the carcass of a dead horse.

Across the bailey turned battlefield Jimenin and his men fought their attackers as they tried to escape through the gate. One of the beasts pivoted, and in the moon's light she caught the lambent glow of sulfurous eyes, bristling fur and the squashed face of a giant bat. Louvaen cried out. Gavin lived. If the son lived, then maybe the father did as well. She hunted for the other creature and found it busy turning one of Jimenin's lackeys into a pile of separate body parts. Blood splattered in every direction, and another pair of eyes gleamed in the semi-darkness. Ballard. Or what was once the master of Ketach Tor.

This brutish thing bore no resemblance to the man she'd grown to love, just as the bat-wolf animal held no trace of Gavin. The terrible anguish in Ambrose's gaze earlier had not been because they were dead, but because they were still alive.

Her waking nightmare took a worse turn. The real Cinnia appeared at the doorway and darted into the bailey. Louvaen screamed and lurched to her feet. Forgetting caution,

she raced toward the door waving her arms. “Cinnia! For gods’ sakes, get back inside! Get inside!”

In that moment, the world slowed and the sounds of fighting faded. She saw Cinnia’s face, tear-streaked and pale, her gaze fastened solely on Gavin. She glimpsed movement from the corner of her eye. Jimenin turned, that hollow stare changing from terrified to malevolent. He sprinted toward them, the pistol in his hand raised and aimed at Cinnia. Louvaen lunged at her. The click of the flintlock’s trigger cracked in her ears, and she flinched in anticipation of the accompanying flash and muted boom of the lead ball flying out of the barrel to strike her sister.

Nothing. The world sped up again, and the gods answered desperate prayers. Jimenin shouted frustrated curses as the pistol misfired. He half-cocked it but never got the chance to full-cock the hammer. Just as he took aim at Cinnia a second time his eyes widened, and he staggered forward. His arm fell limply at his side, and he crashed to his knees before falling face first into the mud and snow. A warrior queen’s knife protruded from between his shoulder blades. Mercer stood behind him—breathing harder than a winded horse—sagging features dark with a grim triumph.

The shock of seeing her docile father dispatch their most hated enemy didn’t stop Louvaen. She limped to the fallen Jimenin and carefully pried the pistol from his still fingers. She reached for Mercer’s hand. “Come away, Papa. Hurry.” She tugged on him, holding him upright as he stumbled beside her in their bid to reach Cinnia.

The cursed pair of father and son savaged their last opponents, leaving only Louvaen, Cinnia, Mercer and

Ambrose to their non-existent mercy. Unfortunately, neither she nor Mercer were fast enough. Before she could take two steps, Gavin loped across the bailey and crouched between her and Cinnia. The hackles on his hunched back bristled in warning, and he snarled through an impressive set of fangs.

She and Mercer froze. Louvaen full-cocked the pistol she'd plucked from Jimenin's dead hand. If Gavin charged them or turned on Cinnia, she'd have no choice but to shoot. He did neither, but the fur along his back rose at every flinch and twitch they made. Louvaen watched him pace back and forth, and an idea took hold. He protected his mate. Somewhere in that bestial brain, the human Gavin remembered Cinnia, remembered the beloved wife and sought to guard her from those who might do her harm. Across from her, Cinnia's gaze remained riveted on her cursed husband.

"Gavin," she crooned. "My darling boy, come back to me."

Louvaen blinked away tears at the longing in her sister's entreaty and the befuddlement in Gavin's beastly face as he struggled to understand its lure. What in the gods' names were they supposed to do now?

She clutched her father's arm and leaned to whisper in his ear "Back up slowly, Papa." Maybe if they weren't so close, Gavin would concentrate his attention less on them and more on Cinnia. She, of all people, had the greatest chance of reaching him.

They halted when every hair on Gavin's fur-covered body stood on end. His yellow eyes blazed, and his lips curled back from his fangs as he stared at something behind them. In the moonlight, Cinnia's face blanched white.

“Careful, Lou,” she warned in a low voice. “De Sauveterre is behind you.”

Forewarned, Louvaen pivoted slowly and almost bit through her lip trying not to scream.

Every child grew up with stories about the sloe folk—those dark beings born of men’s evil thoughts, their suffering and their rage. They prowled at night—lurking behind curtains, at the edge of windows and under beds—ready to snatch disobedient children from their home and devour them whole. In childhood, the eleven-year old Louvaen shared a bed with the three-year old Cinnia. Many a night she’d stayed awake long after their bedtime, one of their mother’s washing bats clutched in her hands in case she had to fight off a sloe-kin looking for a midnight snack. She and Cinnia had grown to women and consigned those night horrors to childhood memory. Never in her blackest dreams did she imagine they were real or that she might face a one as an adult.

When last she’d seen him, Ballard’s changes had been startling. She’d given a fanciful twist to the bittersweet woven through his hair and around the newly minted horns sprouting from his scalp by comparing him to one of the nature gods of old. His eyes, though, made her wary. The last flux had permanently transformed them from the darkest brown to the yellow of pine sap with the pupils of a serpent. She’d plucked the bittersweet, caressed the patches of skin made bark and kissed the reptilian eyes closed. Beneath the curse’s physical distortions he was still the patient, noble man she’d fallen in love with.

This was no man. The bark previously dotting his body in patchwork designs engulfed him now, turning him as woody

and fissured as an old oak. Tufts of bristling hair burst through the bark in random spots. The twisting scars etched into his torso, neck and face had erupted and hardened, sliding up into his scalp until they twined with the spiking horns and topped his head in a crown of gnarled root and antler. His arms and legs had thinned and elongated, as if he'd somehow survived the tortures of the rack with bones stretched like branches, ending in enormous knuckled hands and feet tipped with black claws dripping gore.

Worst of all, he stared at Gavin from a distorted face empty of recognition. Skeletal cheekbones curved beneath hollowed out eye sockets housing radiant pinpoints of white light instead of eyes—light as cold and distant as stars. He growled, a strange scraping noise neither animalistic nor human but something otherworldly. Louvaen shuddered at the sight of the split mouth with its black tongue and rows of spear point teeth. This was not a woodland's monarch, but its demon.

“Ballard,” she said.

“No Louvaen, not any longer.” Ambrose spoke across the clearing between Gavin and Ballard. Like Mercer, he'd left the safety of the horse barricade and inched his way closer to them. Shadows played across his morose features. He stopped when Ballard turned glowing eyes on him. The demon's teeth snapped together in challenge, savage as any wolf trap. He returned his attention to Gavin and repeated the action.

Gavin's answered with a snarl, far less preternatural but just as threatening. One taloned hand swatted the air, and he stamped a foot in the mud in warning. Cinnia spoke softly

behind him, still in the soothing voice that pleaded he remember who he was, remember his father.

“My love, you are Gavin de Lovet. This is your home; we are your family. Your father stands before you—the man who loves you, who protected you from Isabeau’s curse.” She wheedled and cajoled ceaselessly, earning the swivel of his large bat-like ears as he listened to her and kept a jaundiced eye on the chimera who clawed the ground with his fingers and chattered strange noises from a ligneous throat.

Louvaen chanted “Remember, remember” to herself in a whisper. Gavin was the final key to breaking the curse. As a coarse brute driven by aggression and blood lust, his chances of recalling the person he’d been were improbable, yet he’d instinctively raced to Cinnia, guarding her from those he considered a threat. Somewhere in there, a spark of the man burned. If anyone could feed the flame, it was his wife. A chance still existed to save one if not both men.

She gripped her father’s hand so tightly her fingers went numb. They watched as Gavin closed his eyes for a moment, shook his head and opened them to reveal irises as green as spring. A strangled cry caught in Louvaen’s throat as he stared at Ballard and garbled out two words distinct enough for them to understand. “My father,” he said and dropped to his knees.

The same booming snap and concussive wave that had struck the castle when the two sisters declared their love for father and son now bounced across the bailey. Mercer stumbled against Louvaen who canted sideways and nearly fell as a breaker of dizziness slammed into her. The bailey distorted into a warped landscape, as if she gazed through a thick pane of wavy glass. Curses, shouts and inhuman cries

rose around her, along with the hissing of Isabeau's bloodthirsty roses. She struggled to stay upright and clear her already compromised vision. Gavin remained on his knees, clutching his head and rocking back and forth in Cinnia's arms. That same distortion cascaded over him, changing him from beast to man and beast again. Like Louvaen, Ambrose struggled to remain standing. He held out his arms to balance himself and shook his head several times.

The distortion faded and the roses' sibilant chorus died. Louvaen clutched her father and peered into his eyes. "Are you well?"

He nodded before exclaiming in a breathless whisper "Merciful gods, Lou. Look!"

She followed his gaze and gasped. The bat-wolf creature was gone. In its place, Gavin slumped unconscious in Cinnia's arms. Louvaen whipped around to find Ballard. Her jubilation shattered when she found him unchanged. Still the abomination wrought by his long-dead wife's hatred, he swayed and clawed at his gnarled crown.

Her voice broke on a sob. "Let him go, Isabeau. I beg you."

There was no letting go, even with Isabeau's power crushed. Ballard had shouldered the curse's damaging effects for too long. Broken, it still held him in thrall. She refused to relinquish hope. Unlike Cinnia, she was not a tranquil woman with a comforting mien or soothing voice. Nor was she Ballard's wife, but if her sister's methods had been successful with Gavin, the same might be successful with Ballard. She had to try; she had nothing else.

“Ballard,” she said softly. “Do you remember me, forest king? I remember you, just as you ordered.” She released her father to tap a finger against her chest. “The shrew, the scold, the fishwife. Who will make me gentle if you don’t come back to me?”

Time marched by with an old man’s shuffle. Ballard blinked at her, the radiant eyes never darkening or showing a glint of recognition. His skin remained bark; the teeth stayed sharp and his legs and arms thin and stiff as leafless branches. Tears spilled down her cheeks.

Mercer touched her arm. “It’s too late, Lou.”

“Shoot him, Louvaen.” Ambrose’s stern command cracked across the bailey. She jerked and glared at him from her good eye. The flintlock rested in her grip, nearly forgotten and still fully cocked. “Shoot him,” he repeated. “And grant him the mercy he deserves.”

The pistol’s weight cramped her hand. “Just a little more time,” she implored. The curse was broken. If they waited a few more seconds...

Gavin moaned in Cinnia’s arms. Ballard crouched, snaking that black tongue across rutted lips. The jagged twigs distending from his elbows and shoulder blades quivered, and the fur tufts hackled. Behind her Cinnia screamed as he sprang forward, lunging for the helpless Gavin.

“Now, Louvaen! Ambrose roared. “Shoot him!”

She raised the pistol. Half blind and shaking from the cold, she aimed at the leaping monstrosity and pulled the trigger. Light burst from the pan in a shower of sparks. She turned her face away from the bright powder flash as the pistol

fired. She caught only a glimpse of a hurtling dark shape flung backward. A grunt and a thud from something hitting the ground followed.

The gun slipped from her fingers, barely missing her toes as it fell.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Louvaen stared numbly at the still figure huddled in the snow like so much deadfall. The tears she'd shed had dried, and she stood rooted in place as Ambrose sprinted past her, cloak flapping behind him as he sank to his knees beside his fallen master. Cinnia called her name, but she ignored her, along with the biting cold, her father's gentle murmurs and the absolute silence from the thorny tapestry of roses. Only her voice echoed in her head, accusing, relentless. *"You killed him. You killed him."*

"Louvaen, I need you." Ambrose's voice cut through the accusations like a sharp blade."

She bristled, outrage incinerating the numbness. She'd played executioner once. She wouldn't do it again. "I'll not shoot him a second time, magician."

"Quit arguing, woman! Come!"

Despite wanting to run away and screech her grief until she was hoarse, Louvaen joined Ambrose where he knelt by Ballard. Shock made her stagger when she looked down at her lover—naked, gaunt, bloody—and very much alive. More blood ran crimson in the snow around him and streamed through Ambrose's fingers where his hands wrapped around Ballard's thigh. She'd aimed for his chest and shot him in the leg. The sorcerer scowled at her.

"Don't just stand there like an imbecile," he snapped. "Help me." She dropped next to him, gawking so hard at Ballard's face that she was barely aware of Ambrose's bloodied hands guiding hers to Ballard's leg. "Press tight to slow the bleeding," he instructed. She followed his direction while he tore a strip of cloth from his cloak and tucked it around the wound. "Good thing you aren't as precise with a pistol as you are with your kicks," he said.

He motioned Mercer over. "Louvaen's father?" The other man nodded. "I'll want your help in a moment. Stay with Louvaen for now. I need to see to Gavin and bring Magda from the bower. She's guarding the other women and is the healer here." He strode to where Cinnia huddled with Gavin.

Mercer settled next to Louvaen. "You might have told me, daughter." He stroked her hair. "Did I miss two weddings?"

"No. I'm still Thomas Duenda's widow."

“And Ballard de Sauveterre’s mistress?” Her silence answered his question, so he asked another one. “Do you love him?”

Louvaen leaned down and brushed her lips across Ballard’s forehead. “Oh yes.”

She inhaled sharply when Ballard’s lids twitched open. Dark and liquid, his eyes stared at her with a puzzled expression that sharpened for a moment. He wet his dry lips with a pink tongue and swallowed. “You’re a dangerous woman to love, Louvaen Duenda,” he said in a raspy voice. His eyes glazed over before rolling back, and he slipped into oblivion once more.

All the tears she thought dried or frozen inside her spilled down her face. She laughed and sobbed while her father patted her lightly on the back. Magda and Ambrose found them that way, and the housekeeper coaxed her to her feet.

She raked Louvaen with a glance. “Girl,” she said. “You look like you’ve been kicked by a mule. Go to the kitchens and wait for Clarimond. She’ll take care of you once we get Gavin and the *dominus* inside.

Louvaen balked. “I want to help.”

“You’ll help by staying out of the way. Now do what I say.”

Louvaen knew when she was defeated. With a last lingering look at Ballard, she trudged to the kitchens and found them a shambles of overturned furniture and broken crockery. The table had been flipped to its side and shoved against the wall. Shards of a shattered wine crock littered the

floor, and she picked her way carefully through the ruins to right a chair and sit down. Gavin or Ballard must have vented their rage in the kitchen before they burst into bailey. Louvaen slumped in her seat, exhaustion sweeping through her now that she no longer acted under the feverish impetus of desperation. Clarimond found her sliding half out of the chair and rescued her from a thump to the floor.

“You’re in a sorry state, mistress. Stay put, and I’ll get you settled straight away.”

Louvaen sat limply in the chair while Clarimond swept up the crockery pieces and set water to heat. She washed Louvaen’s bloody hands and bathed her face, clucking in sympathy at her blackened eye and bruised mouth. The clucking changed to an indignant sputter when she stripped Louvaen of her muddied night rail and saw the welts and purple contusions stippled across her left side. “A bath will be painful, mistress,” she warned.

She shivered. “Please, I need to bathe.” She’d stand in an ice storm if it meant she could wash away Jimenin’s touch. Her skin still crawled at the memory of the hours spent against him in the saddle.

Clarimond had gentle hands, but Louvaen thanked the gods when the bath was over. Her knees knocked together; she needed to sit before she fell. The servant dressed her in one Cinnia’s shifts and tossed a blanket over her shoulders.

“Come mistress,” she said and nudged her toward the great hall. “Your room is unchanged. You can rest. I’ll bring you a warm drink once you’re in bed.”

They stepped into a whirlwind of activity. Mercer helped a semi-conscious Gavin upstairs while Joan ran past

them for the bailey, arms heaped with bandages. Louvaen waved her father on when he halted at the mezzanine, bowed under by Gavin's weight. "Go on, Papa," she called out. "I'm well."

She paused, drawn to the hall's open door and those who tended Ballard outside. Clarimond gave her a slight push. "They've done this before, mistress. As soon as I know something I'll tell you."

Resigned to waiting, Louvaen nodded and climbed the stairs. She was drunk with fatigue by the time Clarimond tucked her in and turned her attention to lighting the hearth. She barely heard the door close behind her before she fell asleep to the image of bright blood on snow and the echo of a pistol shot.

The scrape of a chair across the floor woke her, and she discovered Cinnia, gilded in streamers of watery pink light, sitting by her bed. She placed a hand on Louvaen's shoulder to keep her from sitting up. "You need to rest, Lou."

Louvaen shrugged her off. "What time is it?"

"A little after dawn. You slept the whole night."

Her stomach lurched. She only meant to sleep an hour or two. She yanked the covers off, startled into full wakefulness by the sudden draft of cold air hitting her body. "Where's Ballard?" She swung out of bed and stood, only to stagger. Her head swam, and her side throbbed.

"You are the most stubborn woman I know." Cinnia left her seat and pushed Louvaen into it. "Must I tie you to the bed?"

“Yes.” She’d shot her lover last night. She should be at his bedside. Her heart pounded in her chest at the thought she might also stand at his graveside before this was over.

Cinnia sighed. “De Sauveterre is in Ambrose’s room right now. Magda’s taking care of him.” She shrugged at Louvaen’s questioning gaze. “Those nasty roses took over the entire solar, including his bedchamber. I’ll be glad when we rake them out and burn them.”

Louvaen remembered how the roses had hissed and writhed in a murderous frenzy the night before and then went abruptly silent at the snap of the curse’s last binding. “Are they dead? The roses I mean.”

“Quite.” Cinnia draped one of the blankets over Louvaen’s shoulders and handed her a cup of lukewarm ale. Her brown eyes watered, and she raised a hand to trace a ghostly outline of her sister’s features. “Oh Lou, your poor face.”

Louvaen shrugged and sipped her drink. She thought her face a vast improvement from the previous night. This morning she’d been able to open both eyes. “Tell me what happened while I slept.”

“A lot of running up and down the stairs for things Magda needs to tend de Sauveterre. Ambrose has been wearing a path in the floor between his chamber and Gavin’s.

“And Papa?” Louvaen would never forget the expression on his face after he’d stabbed Jimenin. One more reason to hate the vile tarse. He’d forced her gentle father to kill.

Cinnia took her empty cup and set it on a nearby table. “Well enough considering. He’s in the kitchen right now with Joan and Clarimond. They’ve taken him under their wings while you’ve slept and I’ve been with Gavin.” She grinned, her eyes sparkling. “Gavin’s himself, Lou. Exhausted but that’s all.” She grabbed Louvaen’s hand, squeezing her fingers. “The curse is truly broken.”

Louvaen kissed the back of her sister’s hand. She was overjoyed for Cinnia who now had a chance to live a happy life with a man devoted to her and to whom she was equally devoted. Her joy, however, carried the taint of envy. She wanted the same with the master of Ketach Tor. Cinnia’s news made her even more determined to see him.

“Help me dress,” she said and stood a second time, more slowly.

“Lou, I don’t think...”

“Don’t argue with me, Cinnia. If it were Gavin in his father’s place, you wouldn’t be lounging in bed either.”

With that, Cinnia bowed to her sister’s wishes. She dressed Louvaen in one of her frocks, scowling at the too-short hem. “You look like you pilfered a child’s wardrobe.” Her scowl deepened. “I can’t believe they brought you here without shoes!”

Considering Jimenin had almost brought her here without teeth, Louvaen wasn’t too indignant about her lack of footwear. “Give me a pair of your woolens. They’ll keep my feet warm until I can borrow shoes that fit.”

They debated briefly over her hair, a spectacular snarl of elf-locked mats.

Louvaen dodged a brush-wielding Cinnia. “It’ll take too long. I’m not attending a royal ball to lure a prince! Just help me pin it up.”

They bickered the entire way to Ambrose’s rooms as Cinnia tried to mother her and Louvaen resisted the mothering. She raised her fist to pound on Ambrose’s door.

“I’ll do it.” Cinnia pulled her away. “Your ham-fisted methods will guarantee he won’t let you across the threshold.” She knocked—three light raps. There were a few quiet moments before the door opened and Ambrose stared at them stone-faced.

Unfazed by his lack of greeting and forbidding stance, Cinnia smiled sweetly. “Good morning, Ambrose.”

Louvaen, desperate to see Ballard, met Ambrose’s gaze. “Please, Ambrose.” Like Cinnia’s knock, it was a simple, restrained request. To her surprise he nodded and stepped aside.

They passed him and entered a cozy antechamber redolent with the scents of spice and candle wax. The room was a magpie’s nest of tables crowded with scrolls and grimoires, glass vials and bottles full of liquids or dried bits of macabre oddities. Small heaps of herbs shared space on a sideboard with mortars and pestles of various sizes. Garlands of garlic and dried violets hung from hooks in the ceiling. Coals glowed orange in a corner brazier, and from that black latten rose undulating wraiths of pungent smoke tinged blue with magic. They had entered a sorcerer’s lair.

Any other time and Louvaen would have trampled Cinnia trying to leave. Now her only concern was getting through the second door near the brazier.

The sorcerer motioned for them to follow as he led them to his bedroom. He allowed the women ahead of him into a room reeking of blood, unguent, beeswax and tallow. Even at this early hour, the chamber was brightly lit by oil lamps and candles, and a fire crackled in another bigger brazier covered by a grate on which a kettle and cauldron heated. Magda bent over the grate and tossed a handful of herbs into the cauldron.

The housekeeper skipped the customary greeting and pointed to the bed. “There’s a stool for you. You can talk to him, but he won’t answer. He hasn’t moved, even when I dug the ball out of his leg.”

Louvaen flinched at Magda’s words.

Ambrose’s bed was a smaller version of Ballard’s—high built with a canopy and brocade curtains on three sides to hold in the warmth. Those had been shifted to the corners, giving her an uninterrupted view of Magda’s patient. He lay along one side of the bed, bundled in covers except for one leg equally swathed in bandages from upper thigh to just above his knee. A circular patch of blood stained the linen where she’d wounded him. He breathed deeply, the covers over his chest rising and falling in slow rhythm. She claimed Magda’s seat next to him so she could hear him breathe and assure herself he still lived.

She had never known him as a ruddy or swarthy man—and winter had washed them all pale—but he was ghastly against the pillows. The curse had given his skin a wan cast. Even with it broken, he still sported the pallor of a man who courted death. Dark smudges bruised the thin skin below his eyes and deepened the valleys beneath his cheekbones. His lips were bleached of color, contrasting with the shadow of a

new beard. The runic scars were gone as were most of those that mirrored the roses' thorny vines. The few remaining had faded to blend with the ones he'd carried home from the battlefield centuries earlier.

"He looks almost as he did when Gavin was a child still tied to my lead strings." Magda stood beside her, staring fondly at Ballard. "I've physicked him through worse things than this. Tournament is as deadly as war." She sighed. "He's always been strong, but I don't know what the curse has done to him after these many years. Made him stronger or weaker?"

Louvaen caressed his scruffy cheek, cool beneath her touch. "I meant to kill him," she said.

"Well you're a piss-poor shot, my girl." Magda smiled at Louvaen's stunned expression. "You did what needed doing," she declared. "Besides, Ballard's spirit would never rest if Isabeau had bested him, and he killed his son."

"I'd prefer he kept his spirit in his body a little longer so he can share both with me."

Magda patted her shoulder, and her features grew dour. "I'll not sweeten the bitter, Louvaen. I got the shot out of his leg, along with bits of bone, but the muscle is shredded. If he lives he'll limp for the rest of his days."

Louvaen traced Ballard's nose, passing over the bony bridge to the flared nostrils and down to his lip. Warm breath drafted across her finger. "He isn't feverish."

"Not yet, but he will be. I've poured feverfew down his throat until I just about drowned him. Still, wounds like that almost always poison."

Her words proved prophetic. Over the next four days, fever ravaged Ballard. The deathly pallor of his skin served to highlighted the flush dusting his cheekbones. Louvaen worked frantically with Magda, Ambrose and Gavin to change bed sheets stained with the blood and pus that soaked through the bandages. The room sweltered and stank of rot, and she helped Gavin hold him down while Magda scooped a spoonful of maggots into the wound so they'd feast on the ragged edges of dead flesh and infection.

The housekeeper and the sorcerer brewed teas and mixed elixirs. When they weren't pouring them into Ballard's mouth, they were splashing them over his swollen leg, dousing the putrid laceration. Ballard thrashed in delirium, hard enough once to pitch himself out of bed and halfway onto Magda who'd been standing over him. Gavin rescued them both. Fully recovered from the curse, he lifted his father off Magda and deposited him gently back on the bed. He spoke to Ballard in a steady voice, and the older man quieted even as the fever raged.

On the fifth day, when the red streaks radiating from the wound had retreated and the blood trickled clean, Magda announced Ballard would live. She grinned at Louvaen, who stared back at her owl-eyed. "You've another chance to take a crack at him, Louvaen, but wait a while. I'm too knackered to tend to him."

Gavin, unencumbered by the sleep deprivation that numbed Louvaen, whooped his elation and yanked Magda into a rib-cracking embrace. She wheezed out a protest and finally cuffed him on the side of the head until he let her go. He did the same to Louvaen—who hung limply in his arms—before bolting out the door, crowing Cinnia's name.

Louvaen stared after him before turning to her companions. “Are you sure?”

Ambrose shrugged. “How can anyone be sure of such a thing? But the fever’s gone and the wound is clean. He looks worse than a skinned rat, but he’s alive.” He drew a worn Magda into a much gentler embrace and kissed her mouth. “We are all in your debt, woman.”

Louvaen closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, Magda had sagged into Ambrose’s side, asleep on her feet. She didn’t hear Louvaen’s fervent “May the gods bless all your days, Magda.”

Ambrose tucked her closer to him and half carried her to the door. “I’m taking her to her room. I don’t think she’s slept in a sennight.” He glanced at Ballard resting peacefully in the bed. “Can you stay with him? I’ll send one of the girls or even your father to take up sentry duty so you can sleep as well.”

She shook her head. “No need. I’m not sleepy, and I don’t want to be anywhere else.”

“As you wish.” He paused at the chamber’s threshold. A tiny smile played about his mouth, and a gleam of admiration brightened his eyes behind his spectacles. He nodded once. “Well done, harpy,” he said in tones usually reserved for Ballard.

Recognizing the respectful salute, she curtsied low and returned the sentiment. “Well done, spitfrog.”

After they left, she dropped down on the stool they’d each occupied at some point during Ballard’s ordeal and stared at the man who refused to die. Four days of fever and delirium

had taken their toll, sculpting the skin tight to his facial bones. His beard, dark and salted with gray, covered the lower part of his face, hiding most of his gaunt cheeks. He wasn't so pale as before though, and his lips were no longer chalky.

She took his hand, noting the pink nail plates with their white crescent moon tips. Perfectly normal nails. He needed a trim, but she'd no longer have to use hoof nippers. Louvaen raised his palm to curve against her cheek. "It's just the two of us in here now, my lord. Magda broke her back to save you, and while I've never killed anyone, Ambrose is convinced I'm a murderess. Please do us all the courtesy of not dying on my watch." She kissed each of his fingers before notching them with hers. Ballard didn't waken, and Louvaen spent the next few minutes counting his breaths. For her, they were the most extraordinary music set to the finest rhythms. She could listen for hours.

They were soothing enough to put her to sleep. She woke to find herself hunched on the stool, her head propped on her folded arms where she rested them on the mattress. Something touched her scalp, exploring from crown to nape and back again. Louvaen straightened and discovered Ballard watching her from heavy-lidded eyes. His hand slid down her hair to her shoulder and over her forearm.

"Hello, my beauty."

She blinked. "Ballard?" His lips twitched into a ghost of a smile. Louvaen leapt to her feet and pressed her hand to his forehead. His skin was cool and his gaze lucid. Her hands fluttered over him—his head and chest, shoulders and blanket-covered torso. The questions cascaded off her lips in a

waterfall. “Are you in pain? Do you want me to get Magda? Are you thirsty? There’s willow bark tea.”

For a man who had just kissed death on the cheek before sending it on its way, he was fast. He caught her hand. “No tea,” he said firmly. He gentled his hold, and his pale features took on an arrested expression. “Gavin?”

That single-word question held a mountain of fear and an ocean of hope. Louvaen’s grin threatened to crack her face. “He’s fine, Ballard. The curse is broken. Gavin is and will remain himself.”

His eyes closed once more, long lashes like soot marks on his cheeks. His grip nearly broke her fingers, but she swallowed her gasp and squeezed his hand in return.

When he opened his eyes again, his gaze pinned her in place. “You shot me.”

Everything inside her stilled—her heartbeat, her breathing, her blood flow. She stared at Ballard and stayed silent.

“Remind me to teach you how to use an arbalest. You’ll have better luck next time.” He winked.

Her knees gave, and she plopped back down on the stool. “There will be no next time,” she declared. Her heart resumed beating albeit at a much greater pace. “You don’t have another four hundred years to forgive me.”

He tugged insistently on her hand until she sat on the bed, her hip pressed to his side. “There’s nothing to forgive.” He kissed her wrist, sending hot tingles up her arm. “Except maybe your bad aim.”

She frowned. “You’re not the first to make that point, though I’d challenge any of you to do better while half frozen and half blind.”

His eyes narrowed as he assessed her. Louvaen wanted to turn away but remained where she was as his gaze tracked the bruising that mottled her face in fading shades of lavender and yellow. His mouth flattened to a grim line. “I didn’t see when he struck you, but I saw the result in Cinnia’s mirror.” He growled low in his throat. “I should have been there. I’d use his guts for bowstring and turn his hide into a scabbard for one of my swords.”

Louvaen believed him. Cinnia had told her earlier of his rage when he learned what Jimenin had done to her, how he’d almost ridden across the drawbridge on Magnus before Gavin and Ambrose literally netted him off the horse. They had to use brute force and magic to subdue him. Hours of cursing, death threats and abuse on his cell door passed before he was calm enough to listen to reason.

“If it’s any comfort, my father exacted revenge when he planted the queen’s knife you gave me between his shoulders. Papa saved Cinnia’s life and mine.”

He quirked an eyebrow at her revelation and grunted his approval of Mercer’s actions. “And here I thought your battle spirit came from one of your mothers.”

Louvaen smiled at the memory of Abigail Hallis. Her stepmother would have stabbed Jimenin and shot Ballard without a second thought if it meant protecting her children.

Ballard patted the mattress on the side opposite his injured leg. “Come lie next to me.”

She balked. “You can’t tell me your leg doesn’t hurt.”

“Only as much as having a hot coal sewn to my thigh would hurt.” He chuckled at her scowl. “You beside me will make me think of other things.” She still hesitated and he stared at her, unsmiling. “Did you fall in love with the forest king and now want nothing to do with the man?”

She pretended to study him. “I very much liked the bittersweet blooms, and the horns were an interesting touch.” Her finger outlined the edge of his jaw, pausing to rub the coarse hairs of his beard. “You’re almost too pretty now.”

He laughed weakly and lifted the blankets, exposing a bare hip and long leg. Louvaen toed off her borrowed shoes and slid in beside him fully dressed. Ballard gathered her close, and she rested her head on shoulder, luxuriating in the familiar ecstasy of his body pressed along the length of hers. She’d have to abandon him soon to fetch Gavin, Magda and Ambrose. They’d use her guts for bowstring if she waited too long in telling them he was awake.

They lay quietly together until Ballard raised his hand to the candlelight, turning it one way and then another. “It’s been many years since my hands looked like this.” He ran his thumb across his fingertips and the blunt distal edges. “The flux hit so fast this last time, we weren’t prepared. I held on long enough to help Ambrose lock Gavin in his chamber—not that it did much good in the end. I didn’t reach my cell before I changed. Ambrose had to trap me in the buttery. I don’t remember anything else after that except you holding a pistol and fire in my leg. What happened?”

Louvaen wasn’t thrilled at the idea of revisiting those nightmarish events in the bailey, but he had a right to know

and if she didn't tell him, someone else would. He listened without interruption when she recounted her trip with Jimenin to Ketach Tor, Ambrose's clever illusion of Cinnia that even fooled Mercer and the mayhem that exploded thereafter. She didn't dwell on the screams of the man torn asunder by Isabeau's roses or the savagery with which he and Gavin had dispatched the remainder of Jimenin's troop. He must have heard the horror in her voice, because he grew rigid against her.

"I won't lie, Louvaen," he said flatly. "As a man I would have slaughtered those men with the same violence I did as a beast. The only difference is I'd have used sword and axe instead of teeth and claws. Such is the way of battle and protecting your own."

She raised herself on an elbow to peer into his face. His eyes flashed a challenge and an unspoken message. *This is part of who I am.* She smoothed one of his eyebrows. "I'm not judging you, Ballard. I nearly blew your leg off, and I love you."

His features softened and his gaze caught fire. "Do you? Even now, after what you've seen the curse do to a man?"

Louvaen kissed the tip of his nose, moved down and captured his lips for another lingering kiss. He moaned against her mouth. She offered another quick peck before drawing away. "Oh that's nothing," she said. "I put up with your wizard insulting and trying to poison me all winter just to be near you. If that isn't love, I don't know what is." She grinned as he broke into a hearty laugh.

He pulled her back down to him. The curse had recognized her sincerity the first time she'd uttered the sentiment to a sleeping Ballard. True Love's Kiss didn't break the bane; true love and the courage to admit it did. Well, that and the odd twist of her being nonborn. Good thing she, not Cinnia, had fallen in love with Ballard.

"You don't ask if I love you." Ballard's voice vibrated under her cheek.

"I don't need too. You said so, and I believe you. Besides, I know you love me." He'd shown her in countless ways, proclaimed it in many different words.

"You're right, I do. I must; I spent all winter preventing my wizard from turning you into a toad."

Louvaen heard the laughter in his voice and would have cuffed him lightly on the arm if she hadn't caught a glimpse of his eyes. They were cloudy with pain and perspiration sheened his forehead. She ignored his protests and slid out of the bed. "You're hurting, Ballard; I can see it. There's willow bark tea, but I think you need something stronger. I'm off to get Ambrose." She captured his hand and gave it a squeeze. "I'll be back soon."

She had her hand on the latch when he called out to her. "Louvaen, send Gavin to me."

Reluctant to leave him but unable to give him the relief he could find in one of Ambrose's concoctions, she headed to Magda's rooms. She met the sorcerer in the corridor. Louvaen tossed aside polite greetings, familiar enough with Ambrose now to recognize his appreciation for brevity. "He's awake, in pain, and asking for Gavin."

Ambrose gave her quick nod and strode past. “Gavin’s in the kitchens with your father and Cinnia,” he tossed over his shoulder before disappearing into his chambers.

The three hailed her appearance with offers to sit and inquiries about Ballard. She uttered only half of Ballard’s request before Gavin bolted out of the kitchen.

“He’s been worried and frightened for his father.” Cinnia patted the space next to her on the bench. “I don’t think he quite yet believes they’re no longer curse-bound.”

Louvaen dropped down beside her. “I hardly believe it myself.”

Mercer slid a pitcher of almond milk to her and Cinnia brought her a cup. “He’s mending?”

She emptied her cup and poured another dram. “Yes, though I sent Ambrose to him. That leg will be an agony while he heals, but at least he’s healing.”

Her father glanced at Cinnia before settling a steely gaze on her. “That’s good to know, because we need to talk.”

Louvaen paused with the cup halfway to her mouth. Mercer and Cinnia watched her like hawks on the hunt. Her skin prickled and she set the cup down with a thump. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” Cinnia’s candied smile boded ill. “Papa just doesn’t want you living with him anymore.”

Mercer scowled at his younger daughter while Louvaen’s jaw dropped. “You’ve obviously been spending far too much time in your sister’s company,” he said in a voice guaranteed to wither flowers.

Cinnia blushed. “Sorry.”

He patted Louvaen’s hand and gave her a sheepish look. “What Cinnia is trying to say—in a surprisingly Louvaenish way—is when I return home, you don’t need to accompany me.” He coughed as her eyes widened even more. “You’re a capable woman, Louvaen. More than capable.”

“Overbearing.” Cinnia shrugged at the twin glares she received.

“You’ve taken care of your sister and me for a long time, and while Cinnia has rebelled against it, I came to expect the coddling—relied on it even.” Mercer’s gaze fell away, and he stared hard at the scarred tabletop. “I’m a weak man made stronger by the women I keep close, but that weakness has robbed you of a life these past years. Except for the short time you were married to Thomas, you devote your days to caring for me and playing mother to your sister.”

Stung by her father’s rejection, Louvaen took a steadying breath. “I tried to be a good daughter,” she said in a thick voice.

He flashed her a startled look, and his face softened at her distress. “My beautiful, ferocious child,” he said softly. “You are the best of daughters and always will be. But it’s long past time for me let you go. I’ll be fine on my own in Montebianco.”

“With the Widow Cooper next door,” Cinnia added.

Mercer lowered his head into his hands. The heavy weight in Louvaen’s chest evaporated in an instant, replaced by a slow burn. Her eyes narrowed on her father. “Wait a moment. Are you throwing me over for Niamh Cooper?” She

stood to loom over him, outraged. “Well?” She whirled away from the table. “You’re tossing me out of the house—my house, mind you—so you can diddle Niamh Cooper in the parlor?”

“Don’t take that tone with me, Louvaen.” Mercer rose from his chair as well and exchanged glare for glare with his indignant daughter. “I’m still your father. Show some respect.” He gestured to the seat she vacated. “Now sit down, be quiet and let me finish.” He pointed a finger at Cinnia who leaned away. “You do the same.”

Louvaen sat, still affronted but also shocked into obedience by her father’s uncharacteristic dominance. She wasn’t the only one. Cinnia gaped at him, slack-jawed.

Mercer took a breath, struggling to regain his customary mild manner. “I’m too old to be diddling anyone anywhere other than a comfortable bed. Your parlor’s sanctity will remain intact.” Louvaen couldn’t help herself. She sputtered with laughter, and Mercer smiled in return. Their amusement dispelled the tension between them, and he continued in an easy voice. “It is your house—a comfortable one I’ve grown to like. With Cinnia and Gavin’s help, I’ll be more than glad to purchase it from you. If you don’t want to sell, I’ll search for another house.”

Cinnia nodded. “With Jimenin dead, Papa doesn’t need to leave Montebianco. Gavin and I decided to stay in Montebianco for a while. I’ll be close enough to make sure Papa doesn’t beggar himself with another bad trading scheme.” A sly grin curved her mouth. “Plus, he’ll be close enough to help Niamh if she needs without getting in her way. The neighborly thing to do of course.”

Louvaen cut her a look. “Of course.” She turned her attention back to Mercer. “I’ll give you the house, Papa, but there’s a question of some importance here—at least to me. Where will I live now that you and Cinnia have evicted me?” She was still reeling from his announcement that he didn’t need her anymore.

He sat silent, considering her question. “There is a man upstairs for whom I wholeheartedly believe you’d fight to the death. Cinnia told me of de Sauveterre and your relationship with him.” Cinnia raised her chin in challenge at her sister’s accusing scowl. “Don’t admonish her,” he continued. “She didn’t volunteer the information until I asked.” His lined face drew down into deeper ruts, and sorrow bowed his mouth. “Louvaen, I lost two wives I loved very much. As you know from your own widowhood such a grief never dies. I suffered the heartache because for a short time Gull and Abigail were mine. Not everyone is as fortunate as I was—as Cinnia is and as you are. The only things for you in Montebianco are a house and memories of the dead man who once lived there. Are you willing to walk away from de Sauveterre just to play nursemaid to me?”

She sat nailed to the bench, made speechless by her father’s words and the bleak picture he painted of her days if she returned to Montebianco. She licked dry lips. “De Sauveterre hasn’t offered for me.”

Beside her Cinnia shrugged. “So? That didn’t stop me. I offered for Gavin, and anyone with a pair of eyes can see his lordship is sprung on you. I’d wonder if you actually shot him in the head instead of the leg if you offered and he said no.”

Mercer choked into his cup. “You never cease to surprise me, Cinnia,” he said once he caught his breath.

Not nearly as surprised by Cinnia’s remarks as Mercer, Louvaen stared into space. For one brief, glorious moment—in the warmth of the stables—Ballard had leaned his forehead against hers and asked her to stay. They both knew she’d refuse, but he would have married her that night if she’d said yes. There was no reason to believe his feelings for her had lessened. Hers for him were just as strong. Only the expectations of tradition made her pause, and those were poor reasons at best.

“If there’s to be a wedding, will you stay long enough to witness it?”

Mercer coaxed her up from her seat and drew her into an embrace. He felt fragile in her arms. “I missed Cinnia’s. I won’t miss this one.”

They embraced a second time before Louvaen strode toward the great hall. Cinnia called to her. “Are you doing the deed now?”

She paused and shrugged. “Why not? He’s probably stewed to the eyebrows from one of Ambrose’s vials of swill. No time like the present.” She left the kitchen, the sound of her family’s laughter following her.

Ambrose’s bedchamber had become a crowded meeting hall. Gavin commandeered the stool by the bed as Ambrose argued with Magda over who should brew the next tincture. Joan and Clarimond stood sentry on either side of the bed, one fluffing the bolster and pillows while the other smoothed the bedcovers over Ballard. The master of this domain reclined

against the pillows, glassy eyes and a vacant smile sure signs that he was indeed stewed to his eyebrows.

They all turned to stare at Louvaen. Her bravado in the kitchen faded. She had once rejected Ballard's request to stay with him at Ketach Tor because of her father. What if he rejected her? Did she gather the tatters of her dignity around her and walk away? She frowned. He better not reject her or she'd smother him with one of his pillows! "May we have a moment?"

Magda exchanged a telling look with Ambrose before shooing Gavin and the girls out of the room. The sorcerer followed last. He paused beside her, eyeing her grave countenance. "Whatever grim news you're about to drop on his head, can't it wait?"

"No."

"Louvaen..."

"Ambrose," she said in a harsh whisper. "If you must know, I'm plighting my troth." Her cheeks went hot at his rounding eyes and climbing eyebrows. "Now go away."

The wizard's lips thinned to a tight line—one made from smothered laughter instead of anger. His shoulders started to shake and his eyes glinted. He finally resorted to covering his mouth with his hand to muffle his laughter. He was still chuckling when she bodily shoved him out of the bedchamber and slammed the door behind him. She snapped her skirts straight, turned and glared at Ballard.

He simply smiled at her. "You came back, my beauty." He turned the blankets back. "I've saved a place for you."

Louvaen skirted a basket of bandages and a tray of ointment to stand at the foot of the bed. “I wish to say something.”

He lost his easy smile, and the dreamy-eyed look vanished, replaced by a stare sharp as a bird of prey. His shoulders tensed and his gaunt features thinned a little more. “What is it?”

She clasped her hands behind her back to hide their trembling. Her words tumbled out of her mouth in a breathless rush. “I’ve no wish to leave Ketach Tor again, Ballard. I want to be your wife and bear your children. Will you wed me?”

The ensuing silence threatened to suffocate her. Louvaen clenched her teeth so hard her ears throbbed.

Ballard stared at her for an additional century until a wide grin stretched across his face. “Queen uncrowned,” he said. “I thought you’d never ask.”

She shrieked when he tried to rise and leapt across the bed, tackling him into the pillows. He fell back with an “umpf!”

“Are you mad? You can’t just jump out of bed like that.”

He trapped her against his chest with a heavy arm across her hips. “In case you didn’t notice, my lovely shrew, I’m not the one leaping about.” He eased her to his side. “I knew I could lure you back one way or another.”

He tilted her chin and kissed her. Louvaen sighed into his mouth, tasting warmth and softness and a cloying sweetness. A conversation teased the edge of her memory, and

she broke the kiss with a frown. “Ambrose said only his poisons tasted sweet.”

Ballard winced. “He lied.”

She reared up. “I’ll kill him.” The memory of that foul tasting brew he gave her after she almost drowned still made her tongue curl back into her throat.

“No you won’t.” He dragged her back down. “You’ll stay here with me. If I have to be trapped in this bed, so do you.”

She tugged on the ends of his hair. “Not until you answer my question.” He’d stripped away any doubt that plagued her with his reaction to her proposal, but she still wanted to hear a definitive “yes.”

He tapped his lip with his finger as if pondering the most profound of questions. “Surely there are men in Montebianco far more suited to you than a scarred lord of diminished lands and no recognition. What about the butcher?”

“Married, with thirteen children.”

He whistled. “Impressive. The baker?”

“Widowed. Four times in six years.”

Frown lines furrowed his brow. “That’s either suspicious or unlucky.”

“Very.” Delighted by the game but impatient for it to end, she took up where he left off. “The candlestick maker is a woman who, wisely I might add, has chosen not to marry or bear children but to only take the occasional lover. I don’t wish to be an occasional lover.”

Ballard chuckled. “You realize any children I might sire won’t look like Gavin?”

“You realize any children I bear won’t look like Cinnia?”

“If I cared about such a thing I would have married Cinnia.” He kissed her right eyelid and then the bruised left, a butterfly’s touch along her lashes. “You’re a bold one, Louvaen Duenda.”

“I’d challenge gods and queens to make you mine, Ballard. Conquer a kingdom or two if necessary.”

He didn’t smile at her declaration. His fingers followed her scalp line, passed through the locks that had come loose from her haphazard braid. “You’d find me outside the kingdom gates, my belongings at my feet and a note pinned to my cloak for you that read ‘Better you than us.’ They’d be wrong. Far better for *me*. The answer is yes. You didn’t even need to ask.”

Louvaen grinned, her heart pounding joyously under her breastbone. “I wasn’t planning to. I intended to *tell* you that you were going to marry me, but I thought I should at least be courteous considering your delicate state.”

Ballard gaped at her for a moment before chuckling. He tucked her against his side. When the laughter stopped, he bent his head to steal another kiss from her. “Kiss me, you bloodthirsty scold. And don’t bite my lip.”

She was gentle as a lamb.

EPILOGUE



From the highest window in the keep, Ballard gazed upon the forests and fields of his expanding demesne and waited for his wife to summon him. A westerly breeze blew in the green scent of clover, along with the peppery musk of pine and ash that heralded the coming summer.

Summer was Louvaen's favorite season. She blissfully ignored the heat, the swarms of midges and the pungent scent of rotting flax that sometimes wafted across Ketach Tor from the nearby sodden fields.

"It's the earth's gift to a spinner," she once told him. "I'll take the perfume of wet flax over the stench of roses any

day.”

The air hadn't smelled of roses in almost four years. Those in the bailey had died with the curse. None had bloomed again once he and Gavin brought Isabeau's shrouded bones out of the family crypt and buried her on her old dower lands in a field of pasque flowers. They had stood over her newly covered grave, wished her spirit a long overdue peace and walked away. Neither he nor Gavin visited the grave, though he'd heard his softhearted daughter-in-law sometimes traveled from de Lovet lands to his and laid white roses over her resting place.

The creak of an opening door behind him marked the arrival of his sorcerer and brought him out of his musings. Ambrose's robes whispered dusty spells as they brushed against the floorboards. He paused before he reached the window. “*Dominus.*”

Ballard's pulsed raced. “Is it finished?”

“More or less.” Ambrose's voice took on a worried note. “She's asking for you.”

He abandoned his view of the land and faced his magician. The man wore a look of dread. “She's still raging then?”

Ambrose shook his head. “No. Quite calm—for a viper. Be careful.”

A pointless warning. Three years of marriage and he'd learned to be wary of his wife. He gestured to the nurse in one corner of the room. “Give him to me.”

She rose at his command, carefully cradling a swaddled bundle that twitched and snuffled. He lifted the baby from her

arms and gently unwound the blankets to reveal a pink-skinned creature with curled fists, a cap of fine black hair and bright infant blue eyes which would soon change to gray or darkest brown. Ballard's hands, dark and battle-scarred, spread over the boy's small body as he turned him enough to view his back.

For countless generations, children of Ketach blood bore a sickle-shaped mark above their buttocks. Ballard had it, as had his father and grandfather before him. Smooth but not unblemished, this child's back revealed the truth of his paternal heritage. The rosy mark stretched between the two tiny indentations on his lower back. Most definitely his son—not that he'd reiterate it to the boy's mother. Ballard valued his head.

“You can give him to Gavin to foster when he's older. I don't like these new traditions of the boys staying with their parents. Spoils them. Gavin was fostered until the curse struck. He can foster his brother and do a good job of it.”

Ballard disregarded Ambrose's suggestion, bewitched by the infant's fine features and the tiny hand that clenched one of his fingers and held tight. Unlike Ambrose, he didn't miss the old fostering tradition. Gavin would make an excellent mentor, but he and Cinnia had children of their own now. He doubted Cinnia would be any more willing to send them to Ketach Tor fostering than he was to send this child away from home. Louvaen's flat refusal was a certainty.

The baby's eyes blinked and slowly focused, catching Ballard's gaze and holding it for one eternal moment, stripping him down to the bare essence of his spirit. For the second time in his memory something extraordinary moved within

him, awakened and stirred—that ferocious instinct to claim and protect. The instinct went far beyond the powerful compulsion to guard Louvaen from harm.

He bent and brushed his lips across the baby’s forehead. This child was his by blood and spirit; not the heir of Ketach Tor and its lands but still part of its legacy. He would thank Louvaen on his knees for giving him so gracious a gift.

He looked to Ambrose who watched him with an inscrutable gaze and then to the nurse who smiled. “This is Thomas de Sauveterre,” he proclaimed in a soft voice. “Son of Ballard; son of Dwennon; son of Udolf; brother of Gavin de Lovet; child of Ketach Tor.”

“Proclaimed and recognized.” Ambrose bowed. The nurse curtsied.

Ballard swaddled his son once more and tucked him into the crook of his arm. He was eager to leave this chamber and carry the boy to the woman who had labored to bring him into the world.

The bower where Gavin had been born and where Cinnia once slept smelled of soap and newly laundered sheets sprinkled with dried lavender and pennyroyal. During her pregnancy, Louvaen had been in the bloom of health, even in the early weeks when she woke him each morning to the serenade of retching in a basin.

As the nausea passed and her belly swelled, he’d been like a man possessed—lusting after her until Magda threatened to drown him in the fish pond if he didn’t quit interrupting Louvaen at her work and dragging her off to their bed.

He'd been grim and sick with fear when her pains struck, and he carried her to the bower. She'd panted and stiffened, digging her fingers into his clothes with each cramp. He'd kissed the top of her head. "What can I do, Louvaen?"

Her gravid belly had tightened before his eyes, and she bared her teeth in a white-lipped smile. "Bring me my spinning wheel. I'll spin you a mail hauberk."

He stood sentry in the corridor after Magda chased him out of the chamber with her abrupt "Woman's work. Get out." Ambrose had managed to lure him to the solar where Ballard proceeded to worry himself into a sweat from the litany of agonized groans echoing down the hall and memories of Isabeau's fatal blood loss.

When the groans changed to screams, he raced for the bower. Ambrose and two retainers barely stopped him from kicking the door down. Louvaen's screeching oaths to deal him several forms of excruciating death made him blanch. He shook off his captors and cracked the door open enough to peek inside. Something slammed into the wood, sending shards of broken pottery through the opening. He shut the door and spun to face the other men. Ambrose stood before him, arms akimbo, an "I-warned-you" expression on his face. The two retainers grinned.

One offered a bit of sage advice that lessened some of Ballard's terror. "It's a good sign when they're threatening to rip your entrails out and feed them to the hounds. You worry when they're praying or quiet."

Now, wan and tired, Louvaen reclined in the bed, propped up by pillows and swathed in a gown big enough to swallow her whole. Dark circles ringed her eyes, and damp

tendrils of hair stuck to her temples and neck. Ballard thought her the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

Her eyes, a cool slate instead of the hot ash he'd glimpsed earlier in the day, glittered with excitement. She wore a wide smile as Ballard limped to her beside, little Thomas cradled against his chest.

"Your son, Louvaen." He eased the baby into her waiting arms.

She peeled back the swaddling and glided her fingers over his round belly and limbs. She counted his toes and laughed when he pursed his lips and blew spit bubbles. "You sire lovely children, Ballard."

He chuckled. "We'll see. He'll sport an impressive nose no doubt."

Louvaen sniffed. "A face with character, my lord. The most interesting kind." She pressed the tip of her finger to the baby's lips. "Magda said he'd want to eat soon. I haven't the first idea how to go about nursing him."

Ballard floundered. Unless his son could gum a chicken leg or a slice of mutton, he had no idea what to do either. "Should I get Magda?"

Louvaen shook her head. "Not yet. She says we'll know when he's hungry and she'll help me then. I'm guessing that means he'll howl the roof down around our heads." She patted the empty space beside her. Ballard sat gingerly, ready to dodge a blow. She gave him a puzzled look. "What's wrong?"

He found it difficult to reconcile the peaceful woman beside him with the screaming, wailing, pitcher-hurling demon

of a few hours ago. “Do you remember what you said earlier?”

She eyed him as if he were a touch dim-witted. “Ballard, all I remember was trying to shove a cannon ball out of my body while Magda pinned my ears back with the order to push.” Her brow furrowed at his relieved exhalation. “What did I say?”

He stroked Thomas’s crown, admiring the soft hair. “Nothing horrible. Only that you were going to castrate me, decapitate me, dismember me, drench me in boiling oil, douse me in hot pitch, and set me alight.”

Louvaen gaped at him. “I didn’t say those things.”

The door opened and Magda strode in, a stack of blankets in her arms. She set them on a nearby table. “No, you bellowed them. Everyone three provinces south of here heard you.” She approached the bed and gazed at the baby. “Much handsomer now that he doesn’t look like someone tried to squash him in a haystack.” She reached for him and grinned when Louvaen instinctively clutched him closer. “Hand him over, Louvaen. He needs a sponging. I’ll take him to the kitchen. The fire is built high; he won’t get cold. I’ll bring him right back. You can use the time to extract gifts, promises, and apologies from his father.”

Louvaen held Thomas out to her. “I think he’s beautiful.”

Magda set the baby against her shoulder and patted his back. “He’ll be even more so when I return him to you. I’ll send Clarimond up with bread and broth. You need to eat and get your strength up.” She left the bower with a frowning Louvaen staring after her.

“Why is it I do all the work, and everyone else gets to hold him?” She turned her scowl on Ballard and promptly ruined its forbidding cast with a wide yawn. He was willing to wager half his treasury she’d be asleep before Clarimond returned with the food or Magda with the baby. She blinked sleepily at him. “What did you name him?”

The week prior to her taking to childbed, they had agreed he would choose the name if she bore a boy, and she would choose it if she bore a girl.

“I don’t trust you not to call her something silly like Aurora or Buttercup or Snowdrop,” she told him. “And if you named her Briar Rose, I’d have to kill you.”

When Magda came to tell him Louvaen had birthed a son, he’d already chosen a name. He carried no jealousy for Louvaen’s first husband. She’d spoken fondly of him and with great respect. He trusted his wife’s judge of character, and by all accounts Thomas Duenda had been an exceptional man. After all, he’d chosen Louvaen for his wife. Ballard could think of no better name for her son.

“Thomas,” he said. “His name is Thomas.”

The silence grew as she stared at him for long moments, the gray of her eyes deepening to charcoal. She finally spoke. “You must live another four centuries, Ballard, as must I. Any less and I’ll feel cheated of loving the finest man I’ve ever known.”

Ballard dragged her into his arms and buried his face in her hair. “My beauty,” he whispered in her ear. “If we lived a thousand years I’d still feel cheated.”

Louvaen pulled back far enough to cup his jaw. One slender black eyebrow arched. ‘I will be a shrew until the day I die.’

“Just promise me you won’t curse me once you expire.”

She swatted him on the arm. “Of course not. My ghost will just nag you into eternity.”

He’d happily accept that fate. He ran a thumb over her soft lips, watching as her eyelids drooped lower and lower. “Kiss me, shrew, before you close your eyes and dream of a handsome prince.”

They exchanged several drugging kisses before Louvaen slid down in the bed and laid her head on Ballard’s shoulder. “Ballard,” she said in a groggy voice.

“Hmm?”

“Princes are dull. I’d be bored to death traipsing off to royal balls and in a foul mood because I would be cinched into a scratchy gown and wearing the latest fashionable shoes—something ungodly painful and foolish like glass slippers. I’d rather dream of a Green Man with horns or a margrave with pretty scars and a lovely body.”

Ballard grinned and kissed the top of her head. “And if you wake up to find one in your bed? Will you run screaming for help?”

She gave an indelicate snort. “Hardly. I know a good thing when I see it. I’d swive him cross-eyed.”

His shoulders shook with silent laughter. He gathered her close as he could without crushing her. “I love you, Louvaen de Sauveterre.”

“I love you too, forest king.”

~END~

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