

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Barbara Devlin



DEMETRIUS

A BRETHERN ORIGINS NOVEL

DEMETRIUS

BARBARA DEVLIN

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my husband Mike, because he's definitely my one true knight.

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DEMETRIUS

PROLOGUE

La Rochelle, France

The Year of Our Lord, 1302

Two road-weary travelers, a wide-eyed young couple returning from a pilgrimage to Santiago, sought refuge behind the trunk of a large tree and clung to each other. Given the woman was heavily pregnant, and the duo journeyed on foot, as was often the case with the poor but faithful, they could not evade the robbers, bent on thievery, who preyed on the vulnerable. It was for that reason Templar Knight Demetrius de Blackbourne had been tasked with ensuring safe passage of worshipers en route to La Rochelle, along the old Roman road that led to Talmont, where most devotees crossed the Gironde estuary and continued down the coast to Irún.

Sworn to an austere existence and a life of service, he engaged two masked bandits intent on mayhem. As one boothaler attempted a flanking maneuver, the other charged, and Demetrius struck down the approaching

malefactor with a single vicious sweep of his sword and then lunged at the second. As he made to sheath his weapon, a feminine shriek had him turning on a heel, just as a third assailant launched an attack against the husband.

Wielding a rudimentary battle-axe, of a sort, the assaulter crouched, as he prepared to pounce, and Demetrius had little time to react. With both hands, he grasped the hilt and swung hard and fast. The enemy loomed as the specter of doom, and he might have presented further peril, in light of his proximity, if not for the fact that he had no head atop his shoulders. In a peculiar dance, the body listed in the gentle breeze for what seemed an eternity, until it collapsed in a heap on its side.

“Gramercy, good sirrah, as thou hast, no doubt, spared us from an otherwise unpleasant fate.” The dusty gadling drew his bride from the ground. “But I am Hamund, this is my wife Josina, and we are grateful for thy intervention on our behalf.”

“I am Demetrius, and thy thanks are unnecessary, as it is my duty.” Demetrius dipped his chin, as he always found such praise a tad embarrassing and altogether dissonant, given he did naught more than fulfill the obligation of his oath and office. “Now, mayhap ye should take my horse and journey to La Rochelle, and I shall walk.”

“But—what of the criminals?” Josina frowned, as Demetrius lifted her to the saddle of his destrier. “Art thou not afraid for thy person?”

“What have I to fear, as I am reconciled with Our Lord and Savior?” He chuckled in the face of her naïveté. “And I am a Templar, thus I will not fall.”

“If thou wilt convey Josina to La Rochelle, I will follow at a stiff pace.” Hamund removed to the verge. “Perchance thou mayest return for me, anon, Sir Demetrius.”

“No, Hamund.” Josina appeared near tears. “How wilt thee protect thyself, as thou hast no means of defense? Wilt thou make me a widow? Wilt thou orphan our babe ere it is born?”

“Cease thy arguments.” Without ceremony, Demetrius grasped Hamund by the collar of his tunic and threw him atop the mount. “Ride for Vauclair Castle, and summon Sir Arucard.” With that, he slapped the flank of the horse, which bolted with its passengers.

Alone, Demetrius doffed his helm and rubbed his temples. To his chagrin, his magnanimous gesture just earned him a long and lonely stroll to the city, and he hoped to make it to the bastion before nightfall.

After about an hour, which he surmised based on the sun’s path in the sky, he paused for a brief respite and sat on a large rock. In that instant, he regretted not removing his leather bag filled with Adam’s ale, as the trek inspired great thirst.

“A pleasant eventide, Sir Demetrius.” A frail old woman, gray-haired and haggard, appeared in the lane, and he started. “Permit me to share my water with ye, as thou art parched from thy noble labors.”

“Who art thou?” For some reason he could not explain, he reached for his sword. “And whither didst ye come from, given we remain some distance from La Rochelle?”

“Rest easy, brave knight.” With a toothy grin, she cackled. “Thou hast rescued my daughter and her husband, and I would express my appreciation and discharge their debt.”

“But I am a Templar, thus I am owed naught.” Despite his trepidation, he accepted the skin. To his surprise, the drink was cool and refreshing, and he poured a measure on his face. “Thank ye, dear lady.”

“It is Yordana, great one.” She bowed. “And thou art but a man, so I will settle the account with a shiny and delicate bauble for thy wife, and thou wilt not deny me.” From her fitchet, she produced an extraordinary brooch such as he had never seen. “Yet I should warn ye not to underestimate the power of the precious gem, as it holds the gift of sight.”

Marked by an Egyptian influence, the strange item, fashioned of gold in an egg-shaped design, displayed four round rubies and a large oval-cut sapphire. Ornate craftsmanship bespoke the talents of a master

goldsmith, as intricate etching of a lotus blossom and a lotus in buds adorned the unusual badge.

“It is quite beauteous, Yordana.” Demetrius caressed the smooth edge and turned what he suspected was a rare artifact in his palm. “But, as I am a Templar, I have taken an oath to maintain spiritual purity and chastity, thus I shall never wed.”

“Ah, but what I know of thy future portends otherwise.” Yordana covered his hand with hers. “Thou dost have dark days ahead, Sir Demetrius, as thou dost call friend those who would smile to thy face and sink their sword in thy back. But fear not, as thou wilt not meet thy end on these shores. Rather, thou wilt rise again, and a mighty legacy is thine to claim, if thou wilt but seize it. And know thy bride-to-be is thy equal, in every measure.” Yordana squeezed his fingers. “Remember this, if thou dost recall anything of our meeting. Ye lady what dons this brooch of ethereal sight shall enjoy unfettered dreams of her one true knight.”

Hoofbeats rumbled the earth beneath his feet, and he peered up the road, spied his fellow Templars, waved a greeting, and glanced at Yordana. “The troops arrive—” To his infinite shock he discovered she had disappeared. He glanced left and then right, but the woman was gone.

“I have word of a weary wanderer who lost his way.” Arucard de Villiers, the Grand Prior of La Rochelle, chuckled as he reined in his mount. “And, oh, thou art weary, brother.”

“Very funny.” For a few minutes, he scanned the area and checked behind some dense foliage, but Yordana was nowhere to be found. “Didst thou see an aged matron on the route?”

“Nay.” Shifting in the saddle, Arucard arched a brow. “Wherefore dost thou ask?”

“Oh, it is naught.” As Demetrius collected his destrier, he noticed Hamund accompanied the knights. “Is thy wife in fine health?”

“Aye, Sir Demetrius.” Hamund dipped his chin. “And I must again express my appreciation of thy service, faithfully rendered, as thou didst deliver us.”

“It is my honor.” From his perch, as he heeled his stallion, Demetrius inquired, “Dost thou originally hail from La Rochelle, and is Josina’s family nearby?”

“Actually, Josina was born in Paris, but she has no surviving relations, as she was an only child, her father passed of a fever when she was but three, and Yordana, my bride’s mother, died six years ago.” Hamund brushed a lock of hair from his forehead and smiled. “We moved to this region because hither reside my parents and siblings.”

“A very sound decision.” For a scarce second, Demetrius pondered surrendering the peculiar brooch, but how could he explain the means by which it came into his possession?

Studying the intriguing piece of jewelry, Yordana’s words echoed in his ears: *Ye lady what dons this brooch of ethereal sight shall enjoy unfettered dreams of her one true knight.* As his position precluded the possibility of romance, and he preferred the singular status, it seemed sad to waste such splendor. Yet the brooch would languish in his keep, because Demetrius would never wed.



DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER ONE

The Year of Our Lord, 1313

The cold November wind blew in from the Thames, and Demetrius hunkered beneath a blanket, as he sheltered in his small tent. Tossing and turning, sleep did not come for him, even though he was tired after a sennight and three days on the road. Mayhap it was the purpose of his journey that rendered him restless and unable to relax.

It was only last month that he received the King's command to wed, and Demetrius dreaded the task. As a former Templar knight, he had been born to a life of devotion and service, and unlike his brothers in arms he preferred the simple existence. But his once illustrious order was no more, and he had sold his soul to England, in exchange for a new ailette, which bore the wind-star design of the Brethren of the Coast, a fledgling band of warriors sworn to protect the Crown.

The position suited him, as it seemed so similar to his previous existence—until the opposite sex entered the picture. Was it not enough

that Arucard took a wife? And Demetrius had no complaints regarding Lady Isolde, as she was a fine woman, but he simply had no need of such a creature.

His stomach growled, and he rolled to his side. Hungry, he peered at the tiny brazier, which he used whenever he traveled, and stared at the orange glow of embers. A loud rumble pierced the quiet, and he tossed aside the covers and foraged for his bag of brewets, his favorite fare, which Isolde had cooked prior to his departure from Chichester Castle. He suspected it was a consolation gift to ease the sting of his impending nuptials.

As he relished the thin slices of spiced beef, seasoned to perfection, he hummed his appreciation. “Ah, thank ye, Lady Isolde.”

“Hello?” an unknown person called, and Demetrius’s horse whinnied. “Thither is someone to offer a measure of respite for the less fortunate?”

“Hither am I.” Retrieving his sword, he untied the flaps of his temporary accommodation, and snow battered his face, as he spied a diminutive shadowy figure amid the gale. “Who art thou, and wherefore art thou on foot?”

“Oh, good sirrah, I am most grateful for thy company, as I lost my mount and know not whither I have ventured.” To his surprise, his unexpected visitor was a woman, and her velvety voice was soft and appealing to his ear. “Might I take refuge with ye, until the morrow? I promise, I will not disturb ye.”

“Of course.” Yet she already disturbed him. As would a chivalrous knight, he stowed his weapon, led her to his pallet, and tucked the blanket about her legs. When she drew back the hood of her cloak, rhyme and reason fled his brain, and he gawked at her beauteous visage.

With thick blonde hair, a heart-shaped face, and vivid green eyes, the lady was a vision, and the matrimonial state struck him as far more engaging, if he could ensure a maiden like her was part of the bargain. Alas, it was not to be, and he sighed, as he feared his bride-to-be had more

in common with the whore Morgan recommended to school Demetrius in connubial activities, and he shuddered at the mere thought.

“My, but that smells delicious.” His fascinating guest admired the brewets, and he reconsidered his assessment. “Did ye cook them?”

“I do not perform such toils, as that drudgery is women’s work.” After fetching another cloak, he huddled near the brazier, as the gale lashed the canvas, and offered her some food. “So what is a young maiden doing, alone, in this uninhabited area?”

“Can I trust ye?” She glanced at his sheath. “As it is a very great secret.”

“I give ye my word, as a Nautionnier knight, I will guard thy confidence.” How charming she was, as she blushed. “Thou art no criminal, are ye?”

“Oh, no.” With a nervous laugh, she averted her gaze. “But I am running away.”

“From what?” Ah, they were a pair, but he enjoyed no sanctuary.

“An arranged marriage.” His gut clenched, given her declaration, and a mighty frown marred her lovely countenance. “I have spent the better part of my years at the convent in Coventry, and I want naught more than to serve Our Lord, for the remains of my days. But my father died, and my brother, bent on attaining political prestige, negotiated a contract, which I rebuke.”

“Thine is a noble endeavor.” And how he approved of her uncommon sense, which mirrored his own. “I applaud thy fortitude and courage, to remain true to thy dreams, and I share thy partiality for a modest fate.”

In that instant, she smiled, and he would have sworn the sun shone in his tiny abode. “Pray, sir, what is thy name?”

“I am Demetrius.” Now a union with her did not strike him as so bad, as he could do worse. An image of the snaggle-toothed Matild flashed before him, and he winced. “And thine?”

“Thou mayest call me Lily, as do my friends.” She untied her cloak, revealing a swan-like neck and an ample bosom, not that he took much note, sampled the brewet, and moaned. “I should be honored to count ye as such, and this is delicious.”

“What is thy destination?” For some reason he could not fathom, he wished to know her plans, even though he it improbable they would ever meet again. “Given thou hast no means of travel, how wilt ye make the trip?”

“I know not, but I will not go back to London, and no one can force me.” Lily studied him, and he shifted beneath the weight of her perusal. “I intend to join the abbey at Rochester and, if they permit it, make my final profession of vows. Then I shall have what I have always desired, an austere life spent in service to the poor and hapless.”

“I am humbled by thy virtue, fair Lily.” In that he did not lie, as he might have found a rare equal to Lady Isolde, and yet his incomparable charge belonged to another. “Mayest I inquire after thy age, as thou dost seem quite young, despite thy wisdom?”

“I am seven and ten, sir.” She sniffed, and he spied tears, which she tried but failed to hide. “Far too old to be a new bride.”

“Wherefore canst thy brother not see that?” Demetrius snickered. “As thou art almost middle aged.” No doubt that falsehood would haunt him.

“Thank ye, and thou art truly the most intelligent man of my acquaintance.” And then Lily sagged, as a flower thirsting for water, and she yawned. “My, but I am tired.”

“Wherefore dost thou not rest, while I stand watch?” At her expression of skepticism, he chuckled. “Dear Lily, I will not harm ye, as I could have done so, already, if that were my aim. Wilt thou not trust me, as thou hast availed thyself of my hospitality, and I have asked naught of ye?”

“Well, I suppose I should sleep.” Her thickly lashed lids drooped, and she dozed almost as soon as she reclined on his pillow.

Captivated by the magnificent creature, he looked his fill while she was unaware, as never had he spent so much time alone with a lady of her estimation, and her mouth held him spellbound. The hours ticked past, as counted by the moon's journey across the night sky, and soon a thin sliver of shimmering gold appeared on the horizon.

Demetrius had just relaxed, when the rumble of hoofbeats brought him alert. Grasping his sword, he checked on Lily, but she did not stir. After shrugging into his heavy cloak, he untied the flaps, bent, and stepped outside.

The King's guard approached, and a familiar guise led the patrol. When Briarus, the Crown's faithful messenger and sergeant, waved, Demetrius responded in kind. The men drew rein, and Briarus extended his hand in friendship.

"Good morrow, sirrah." Demetrius considered his impromptu guest and realized he needed to divert his comrades, as he would not ruin the unlucky lady. "It is remarkably pleasing to see ye, but what manner of mischief brings ye beyond the borders of London, proper?"

"I am about the Sire's business, and it involves ye, Sir Demetrius, and a misplaced mate." Briarus untied his leather drinking bag. "But I have been searching these hills since last night, and I cannot return without my ward."

"*Sir Demetrius?*" Rubbing her eyes, Lily appeared in the opening of his tent, and Demetrius cringed. "Thou art a servant of the realm?"

"Great abyss of suffering, thou hast solved my dilemma, my friend. Wherefore didst ye not tell me?" Briarus signaled his soldiers, and they marched on the wayward waif. "At last, I can go home to a hot bath, a warm bed, and amiable companionship."

"Prithee, a moment." In a fit of insanity, Demetrius gripped the hilt of his sword, and the guards halted. "Wherefore dost thou accost an innocent? Of what is the harmless woman guilty, to merit such treatment?"

"Thou dost not know?" For a second, Briarus just stood there. Then, without warning, he burst into laughter. "Oh, this is too adventitious

to miss, and it will be the talk of the garrison, if I have anything to do about it.”

“What is so funny?” Confused, Demetrius scratched his chin. “And what, pray tell, is adventitious about thy arrest of a virtuous maiden?”

“Let me go.” Lily bit the wrist of one unfortunate warrior and kicked another in the shins, and he groaned and hopped. But Demetrius adored her spirit and fit of temper. “Thou wilt not succeed, as I refuse to assist ye in thy nefarious aims. Thou cannot force me to take a husband. I will fight ye to my last breath.”

“Wait.” With another guffaw, and an upraised palm, Briarus halted his men and said, to Demetrius, “Thou art truly ignorant of her personage, and the lady is similarly afflicted?”

“Aye, in some respects.” Demetrius nodded and pondered how to liberate her from her predicament. “But I know she is called Lily.”

“Is that what she told ye?” Again, Briarus erupted in unrestrained mirth, as he hugged his belly. “Permit me to make the introductions.” Wagging his brows, the sergeant clicked his heels and sketched a mock salute. “Sir Demetrius de Blackbourne, may I present Lady Athelyna Des Moutiers, thy future wife.”

#

Pounding on the locked door to her chamber at court, and yanking on the knob, Lady Athelyna Des Moutiers rained unladylike curses on her captors, to no avail. No doubt the sisters at the convent would disapprove of such foul language, but Athelyna was desperate. After a few futile minutes of rebellion, she sank to the floor and hugged herself.

“What am I to do?” she asked no one. When she spied a window large enough to accommodate her, she stood and ran to the marble ledge. To her frustration, she peered at the bailey from a fourth floor vantage. Desperate, she studied the stone surface of the wall, searching for even the smallest foothold, as she would risk a fall in her quest to evade the vicar’s noose. “Thither is no escape.”

The telltale rasp of the lock, followed by the grate of the hinges, announced a visitor, and she squared her shoulders. When her sibling entered and shut the heavy oak panel behind him, she braced for a confrontation.

“Thou didst deliberately disobey my commands and bring shame upon our family.” Stretched to full height, Gerwald folded his arms and frowned. “Owing to thy intemperate behavior, everyone laughs at us, and I ought to beat ye. Wilt thou make a mockery of father’s memory?”

“Forgive me, brother, but I made no secret of my opposition to the marriage ye didst arrange, without my knowledge or consent.” Her mind raced, as she struggled to compose the perfect plea to sway him. “Although I have no wish to defy thy authority, since birth I have always known I was meant for a higher purpose than that of a wife, who functions as little more than an heir maker and decoration for her husband. When Papa placed me with the Carmelites, as an oblate, I dedicated my life to the Lord. While I have yet to make my final profession of vows, I have long honored the covenants of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and I cannot reconcile the austere existence with the requirements of the sacrament of holy matrimony.”

“But thou wilt, because I order ye to do so, and thou hast naught else.” Despite their years apart, how well Athelyna read his steadfast bearing. “In light of thy impending nuptials, I have ceased payment of thy dowry to the nunnery, thus thou hast nowhere to go. And if ye do not abide by the agreement I signed on thy behalf, I shall disown ye and turn thee out to suffer the consequences of thy stubbornness.”

“Thou would do that to me—thy sister?” Swallowing a sob, she suppressed impending tears, as it was no time to exhibit weakness, even as her dreams yielded to a slow and painful demise. “Thou would condemn me to a cruel fate because my ambitions conflict with thine?”

“I would ask the same of ye, given our futures are inextricably intertwined, and I shall enjoy political prestige with thy union to His Majesty’s knight. If thou dost rob me of my chance to advance at court, then I shall repay ye, in kind.” His once boyish charm ceded to an implacable visage, which portended doom. “As I inherited the estate and

title, and thou art my property, to do with as I deem appropriate, I shall dispose of ye like so much useless rubbish, if ye dost force my hand. The choice is thine.” Gerwald shrugged. “So, what say ye?”

“I submit thee dost offer no real alternative, brother.” Reality struck her between the eyes, and grim acceptance settled as a bitter pill in her throat. Uttering a silent entreaty for divine intervention, she waited for a sign. When no adventitious bolt of lightning struck her on the spot, she sighed. “As per thy decree, I shall wed Sir Demetrius.”

“Ah, thou hast made me very happy, and we shall put the unpleasant business behind us and never speak of it again.” All smiles in the face of her downfall, he drew a box from beneath his cloak. “Now I should present a gift from thy groom. I understand thee didst meet him. Notwithstanding the circumstances of thy acquaintance, which I might deem amusing had ye not flouted my prerogative, how didst ye find thy new lord and master?”

For a few minutes, she pondered the query, as she studied the carved wooden box. With hair as black as a crow’s feather, an olive complexion, chiseled features, and pale, silvery eyes unnerving in their clarity, her one-time ally possessed a quiet and unassuming nature, in startling contrast with his stature. Indeed, the man manifested a mountain in size, yet he had been thoughtful and gentle when she begged for his assistance, which he offered without request for recompense.

“In truth, I know not what to make of him.” After untying the blue ribbon, she lifted the lid and revealed a spectacular gold brooch nestled in a bed of red velvet. “*Oh*—how extraordinary.”

“What unusual markings, and the craftsmanship is masterful. And look at the size of the gems. It must be worth a fortune.” Peering at the jewelry, Gerwald snickered. “Thou must have made quite an impression upon him, in so little time. Did he touch ye?”

“How dare ye insult me with such nefarious claims.” In a fit of pique, she snapped shut the tiny chest. “I was raised in a convent, and I am chaste, in all things.”

“But ye were alone with Sir Demetrius before the King’s guards arrived.” Her brother’s expression sobered. “What happened between ye?”

“Naught beyond simple conversation, as he knew not my identity.” In vivid detail, she relived the brief exchange and their shared devotion to duty. When Athelyna stumbled upon Demetrius’s tent, she thought him a much prayed for deliverer. Instead, he was her downfall. “Yet he was nice to me, when he could have turned me away.”

“And he tried naught inappropriate with ye?” Gerwald narrowed his stare. “He sampled not thy wares?”

“Thou dost Sir Demetrius and I a grave disservice with thy offensive speculations, brother.” Nay, she fretted not in her husband-to-be’s company, as he gave her no reason to fear him. As for her relation, he presented an altogether different quandary. “Wherefore hast thou done this to me? Wherefore hast thou sold me in bondage to another man? What hath I done to ye, that thou dost treat me thus?”

“But I am blameless in regard to thy misfortune of fate.” He swaggered to her trunk and foraged through her personal belongings. With a scowl, he stood upright, strolled to the entry, opened the door, peered into the hall, and snapped his fingers. “Thou were born a woman, and that is no fault of mine. As thou hast correctly asserted, thy possibilities are limited to wife, mother, peasant, artisan, maid, nun, or whore, and the final determination of which must perforce yield to my inclinations.” A servant, carrying a burgundy velvet gown, scurried into the room. To the domestic, Gerwald said, “Dress Mistress De Moutiers for dinner with His Majesty, and plait her hair, as her current style is too severe to garner favorable notice.”

“Aye, sir.” The maid curtseyed.

“I am to sup with the King?” Athelyna came alert. “I am to make my debut at court?”

“Indeed, thy presence is requested at a feast in thy groom’s honor.” He snickered. “And do not be too angry, Lily. I selected Sir Demetrius because his reputation, as well as that of his allies, is impeccable, as I would not surrender ye to just anyone.”

“If thou art concerned for my well being, then wherefore dost ye forfeit me?” Was it possible her brother regretted what he did? Could she

persuade him to void the arrangement? “It is not too late, if thou dost lament thy actions. The sisters would take me back, mayhap with a reduction in my dowry, if thou dost need the money, and I should be forever obliged.”

“Nay.” And so her optimism dwindled to naught. “Thou wilt bathe and garb thyself as befits thy station, and thou wilt charm and entice Sir Demetrius, so I will take my leave.”

Ear-splitting silence fell on the luxuriously appointed accommodation, with its counterpane, draperies, and pillow coverings of matching rich blue damask. The hand-tooled mahogany furnishings bespoke wealth and power, in stark contrast with her modest room at the convent.

A small army of attendants conveyed an ancre and warm water to the washing area. Against her reticence, she complied. And as she shed her humble attire, so she abandoned her dreams. Naked, stripped of her dignity and her ambitions, she mourned as the maid polished and primed Athelyna for her date with destiny.

Anon, she gazed at her reflection in the long mirror, and the woman staring back looked naught like the aspiring nun. Bedecked in the new garment, which featured a scooped neckline that bared far more than she ever would have dared, a bodice laced so tight she could scarcely draw breath, long sleeves, billowy lappets, and a skirt that dragged the floor, she almost did not recognize herself.

Nervous, she wrung her fingers and paced, until the King’s guards came for her, and their fierce demeanor set her heart pounding. In the narrow stone passage aglow in the soft light from cresset lamps, she summoned courage and marched in rhythm with her attendants.

The corridor opened to a vast expanse, which led to a minstrels’ gallery and a huge landing. As she descended the grand staircase, she admired the pointed arches and columns featuring simple scalloped designs. But when the escort ushered her into the great hall, and a low murmur swept over the cavernous assembly room, Athelyna swallowed her panic, strode before the large dais, and curtsayed.

“Mistress Des Moutiers, we are pleased thee could join us.” The King caressed the stem of his goblet, as he studied her with unveiled interest. “Turn around, and let us have a look at ye.”

With all eyes on her, Athelyna shivered but obeyed and rotated. As she again faced His Majesty, she stumbled, but an enormous stranger offered support. “Thank ye.”

“Ah, Sir Arucard, our chivalrous knight.” The monarch smiled, and the hair on the back of her neck stood on end. “Mayhap thou would introduce Mistress Des Moutiers to her new relations.”

“By thy command, Sire.” Sir Arucard bowed and led her to a large table near the side wall. “Mistress Des Moutiers, allow me to present my wife, Lady Isolde.”

“So pleased to meet ye.” An elegantly garbed woman, not much older than Athelyna, dipped her chin. “Art thou hungry? I can have Arucard fetch ye a plate.”

“Better yet, perchance her intended should do the deed.” Sir Arucard chuckled. “Mistress Des Moutiers, permit me to make the formal introductions, as I understand ye unofficially met thy future husband, on the road to Chichester.”

“Arucard, do not tease her, poor thing.” Isolde took Athelyna by the arm. “Sit hither, by me, and ignore the men, as they might appear fearsome, but they have much in common with unruly children.”

“I am grateful for thy kindness.” In that instant, she locked gazes with her one-time supporter, and the contempt in his stare left her dizzy. “But I suspect Sir Demetrius is vexed, though I know not wherefore he is distressed.”

“If he is anything like my husband, I gather he is nervous about thy impending nuptials, but he will make ye a good and faithful spouse.” Isolde snapped her fingers. “Sir Demetrius, didst thou depart Chichester without thy manners? Thy lady requires food.” Anticipating vociferous rebellion and a sure beating, Athelyna stilled and uttered a silent prayer for redemption. Then the engaging noblewoman peered at Arucard. “My lord,

wilt thou bring me a portion of the apple muse, as I am quite fond of it, and I shall express my appreciation in thy most favored coin, anon.”

“I am thy idle scullion, lying in heightened suspense to fulfill thy every wish, my lady wife.” The giant winked, and Athelyna breathed a sigh of relief. “Come, Demetrius. Thou wilt discover for thyself, soon enough, as a mate thee art but a hapless servant in wait, and thy singular responsibility is to perform thy woman’s bidding.”

“I understand, brother.” To her surprise, Demetrius glared at her. “Unless thy bride doth have no use for ye.”

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DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER TWO

At the sideboard, Demetrius collected two trenchers and piled one high with a selection of seafood, various meats, vegetables, and fruits. Then he heaped a portion from all eleven desserts atop the other platter. As he turned and glanced at Lily—no, Athelyna, he contemplated her deceit, anger ignited in his chest, and he clenched his teeth.

“Thou dost look as though ye art displeased with thy bride.” With a broad grin, Arucard snickered. “Yet I find it curious that when ye recounted the tale of thy first meeting, thou didst neglect to mention her incomparable beauty.”

“What care I for her appearance, when it matters not in the grand scheme, as I have no wish to wed her or anyone else.” As Arucard cast a familiar expression of skepticism, Demetrius groaned. “Do not act surprised, as I made my feelings known, in Chichester. And the woman lied to me, which diminishes her appeal. Indeed, I do not find her the least bit attractive, as she doth not suit my taste.”

“I think ye dost protest too much, brother. And as thou hast little experience with the female sex, I submit ye know not what doth and doth not suit thy taste.” Arucard guffawed. “Given the King commands ye wed the lady, thou must reconcile thyself to thy fate, and I assert ye could do worse.” Then he gave Demetrius a nudge. “Talk with her, as I wager she is just as apprehensive about the morrow’s ceremony as ye, and thou should smooth the waters. Had I such an opportunity prior to my marriage, I would have done the same with Isolde, as we were complete strangers when we met before the archbishop.”

“Mayhap it would have been better for Athelyna and I, had we enjoyed a similar circumstance.” Just a glance at her inspired additional ire mixed with reluctance, and he frowned. “But I suppose thither is no avoiding the inevitable, so I will take thy advice.”

Yet naught required Demetrius do so with haste.

So he made the rounds of the cavernous great hall, nodding acknowledgements and shaking hands with notable members of court, delaying the woeful assembly, until Athelyna removed to one end of the long table. That was his moment to strike, as he would have an explanation for her falsehood, and it was with that question he would initiate a discussion.

In silence, he placed the trenchers before his curious bride-to-be and sat across from her. “Hither, I have brought ye some food, and I would have words with ye.”

“Sir Demetrius, wherefore didst ye not apprise me of thy estimable station, last night?” With her brow a mass of furrows, Athelyna leaned forward. “Thou didst seem so nice when ye introduced thyself, thus I find it difficult to reconcile thy omission with thy noble nature.”

He opened his mouth and then closed it, and for a few seconds, he pondered her query and rued the fact she had somehow deployed his defense. “Wherefore didst ye conceal thy name?”

“But I did no such thing, as my friends call me Lily.” Her crown of saffron locks shimmered as a halo, as she bowed her head and pinned him

with her green eyes. “I had hoped to count ye as such, until thou didst deliver me unto my enemies.”

“I did no such thing, as I told ye I was a Nautionnier Knight.” Offended by her accusation, he signaled a servant. “Bring me a flagon of ale.”

“Aye, sir.” The maid curtsyed.

“I thought ye referenced a traveling theatrical group, as never have I heard of such an order.” With high dudgeon, she thrust her chin in the air, and he thought it wise she refused to take a husband, as the not-so-lucky man would require an ocean of patience and understanding to indulge and tame her. “And I apprised ye I ran from an arranged marriage, so I comprehend not how ye can claim I hid anything from ye.”

“If that is true, then how did ye find me?” He pounded a fist to a palm. “Am I to believe ye just happened upon me, in the middle of a snowstorm?”

“Given I journeyed south, from London, and ye traveled north, to the city, on the lone serviceable road, I submit it was no coincidence but a certainty our paths, however unfortunate, would cross.” When the servant delivered the ale, Athelyna compressed her lips and met and held his stare. “Did ye expect me to aimlessly wander the countryside?”

“I anticipated naught whither thee art concerned.” Again, her fiery spirit surfaced, as evidenced by the lines of stress about the corners of her eyes and her white knuckles, and he relished her fit of temper, despite the fact she directed it at him. “And it is naught personal, but I do not wish to wed ye.”

“Then we are a pair, Sir Demetrius, as I have no wish to wed ye, either, and I declared as much during our chance encounter.” Then she scanned the area and sighed, as the musicians commenced playing. “I made no secret my life’s purpose is to serve the Lord, in a nunnery, but my brother terminated payment of my dowry, thus I have nowhere to go. Prithee, good sirrah, whither does that leave us, as I am not thy enemy, and I know ye art not mine?”

“Thou dost ask for my assistance in the matter?” Stunned by the developments, which did not unfold as he foresaw, given her arguments offered him no escape, he eased back in his chair and pondered their predicament. Slow and steady, an idea formed, which might spare them an ill-fated union. “Dost thou know the old abbey just beyond the environs, on the same route ye navigated last eventide?”

“Aye.” Lily nodded. “I know it well.”

“Excellent.” He leaned forward and whispered, “As thou hast managed to elude the guards, I presume ye canst do it again?”

“I am not sure, but I am willing to try,” she replied in a low voice. “What hast thou in mind?”

“Thou must make a midnight ride for freedom, and thy success or failure mayest save or doom us.” Demetrius checked his tone and the immediate vicinity, as no one could know of his hastily composed conspiracy. “But if ye can meet me at the abbey, I will escort ye to the convent at Rochester.”

“Thou would do that for me?” Tears welled in her green gaze, and he feared she might weep, thither and then. “What of thyself? Thou wilt suffer for my transgression, as His Majesty commands we marry.”

“But I will not take ye in protest.” He just stopped himself from informing her that he ventured before the altar under similar duress. “And the King will find me another bride. Given thy destination, it is doubtful anyone will ever discover thy fate, and I shall carry thy secret to the grave.”

“Thou art truly the best of men and a noble knight, and I am a better person for knowing ye.” Athelyna toyed with the brooch, which he noted, in that moment. “I must return thy precious gift, but I would not betray our plan, and we are surrounded.”

“Keep it, as a token of my esteem, and it may secure thy position in the convent, as it is valuable. But I should warn ye, it possesses mystical powers.” For some reason he could not quite fathom, Demetrius opened up to the fascinating creature and shared the inexplicable history of the

peculiar piece of jewelry. “So thou should take care when ye dost wear it, as magical dreams of thy true knight mayest plague ye.”

“What a fantastic tale.” Lily caressed the pin and studied it with unmasked interest. “And the old woman claimed she was the younger lady’s mother, who the son-in-law explained had passed to the hereafter?”

“Aye, and when I inquired after the item, upon my return to La Rochelle, as I was certain they mislaid it during the fight, the couple declared they had never seen it, and so the plot thickens.” In that instant, he recalled a portion of Yordana’s assurance: *Thy bride-to-be is thy equal, in every measure*. Did he make a mistake in offering to aid Athelyna’s flight? Was it possible she was destined to be his wife? “But I consider it a fitting contribution to thy cause, which I admire. Yet I would caution ye to remember, if ye dost wear it to sleep, thou shalt dream of thy one true knight.”

“What a tempting prospect.” How he adored the dimple just to the left of her perfect mouth, and he wondered how he had failed to note that charming detail during their previous exchange. With clasped hands pressed to her bosom, a marvel of anatomy he tried not to scrutinize, she gushed. “Oh, to think what heavenly visions I might enjoy.”

“Thou dost aspire to test it, when thou dost maintain ye art already bound to a higher authority?” Wherefore was he not surprised by her curiosity? “And art thou not wary of the brooch’s predictive abilities?”

“Thou dost presume the badge’s remarkable capacity is born of evil?” She shook her head. “Sir Demetrius, anything that prophesies true love must be of unimpeachable and righteous origins, and I refuse to believe otherwise., thus I welcome reveries of our savior, given I am already bound to Our Lord.”

“Then I leave the bauble in thy most benevolent custody, knowing ye will make fine use of it.” An invisible but nonetheless compelling weight lifted from his shoulders, and he breathed a sigh of relief, just as the musicians struck the first notes of an estampie. “Shall we treat ourselves to a dance, as my family gathers, and we should not rouse suspicion?”

“What a wonderful suggestion.” Lily jumped from her seat. Was it his imagination, or did she glow when she smiled? “It has been ages since I last engaged in such entertainment, as we are not permitted frivolous recreation in the convent, and I am not sure I recall the steps.”

“Just follow the group.” Demetrius grabbed her delicate hand and a tremor of recognition shivered from her fingers to his. For a scarce second, he studied her glorious green eyes and reappraised their scheme. As they joined the Brethren and Isolde, and formed a large circle, he admired Athelyna’s angelic countenance. “To the left, fair Lily.”

Laughing, everyone hopped vigorously. When the change in tone signaled it was time to reverse course, they bounced to the right. Little by little, he relaxed and found her enthusiastic attempts to mimic his moves quite endearing. But when she veered in one direction, and he in the other, they collided, and he caught her about the waist.

“Oh, I am so sorry, Sir Demetrius.” The blush of her cheeks only increased her allure. “I am not usually graceless, but I stumbled.”

“That is all right.” It was an odd but not altogether disagreeable sensation, holding Lily in his arms, and he luxuriated in her warm, soft, and feminine form. A foreign sensation ignited below his belly button, and he knew not how to master the strange but enticing excitement. Just as quick, he shook himself alert and set her apart from him, as he had no interest in the temptation she posed. And if he kept telling himself that, he might actually believe it. Before he yielded to the fledgling attraction, he raised his defenses. “Mayhap thou should retire, as thy brother is distracted, and I shall rendezvous with ye at the abbey.”

#

A vicious battle raged, sword clashed with sword, and an unknown champion protected a group of innocent pilgrims, beneath the glare of a brutal sun. With incomparable skill and speed the valiant knight charged numerous assailants, kicking sand in his wake and dispatching his enemies with lethal aim, until the enemy cowered in the shadows of the faceless warrior, but he was merciful. Anon, as he walked amid the bodies scattered across the dunes, the sweet stench of blood hung heavy in the air, and he doffed his gauntlets.

And then everything shifted.

The encroaching night sky signaled the advancing eventide, and the defender entered a tent. As he removed his armor, he revealed an intriguing mark etched into his flesh and barely visible in the soft light from the brazier. It was the Crusader's Cross, black in color, and marred by a distinct scar in the shape of a jagged spike.

Gasping for breath, Athelyna lurched upright in her bed, checked the room, and found herself alone. With the brooch pinned to the bodice of her thick cotehardie, she did not expect to discover the piece of jewelry actually possessed some mystical nature that foretold a startling reality, yet she could not deny the truth. It was just as Sir Demetrius said—she suffered baffling visions of an undisclosed mate. And to her amazement, her supposed one true knight appeared quite earthly in stature.

But what if she conjured the strange fantasy from reminiscences of the handsome nobleman's fascinating tale? No doubt the power of his narrative, coupled with his beauteous exterior, impressed upon her the source of her musing. And she could not yield her plans to satisfy the baseless deliberations spawned by an inanimate object.

Wiping the dampness from her forehead, she scooted to the edge of the four-poster. At some point since she retired, the wall sconces had guttered, but a fire burned in the hearth. Dressed for a midnight run for liberty, she leaped from the mattress, donned her wool cloak, and collected her sack of bundled clothing and personal items.

As she neared the door to her chamber, she glimpsed her reflection in the long mirror and halted.

The mysterious brooch sparkled even in the dim light, and she traced its oval shape. Was the dream, so vivid in detail, born of the peculiar bauble, and what was she to make of its inexplicable predictive powers? Was she destined to wed, in the traditional sense, the person at the center of the illusion?

For the first time since her brother took her from the convent that had been her home for years, she second-guessed her actions and ultimate aim. The large sapphire flickered, as though it winked at her, and she mulled the possibility that she should stay and fulfill the agreement Gerwald made on her behalf.

Yet, the puzzling reverie did not reveal the identity of her one true knight. Caution required her to contemplate the prospect that Sir Demetrius was not necessarily her fated husband. But deep down inside, whither she was always honest with herself, she had to acknowledge the fact that the man fascinated her.

Beauteous beyond compare, he garnered countless stares from envious ladies, and she struggled with unfamiliar and uncomfortable possessiveness during the festivity, which surprised her. Since she had no intention of marrying the handsome noble, such feelings were not hers to own. Determined to stay the course, she shrugged her shoulders, shaking off the indecision, tugged the hood over her head, tiptoed to the door, grasped the wrought-iron pull, opened the portal, and peered into the hallway.

In the dark, she hugged the wall and, drawing on memory, navigated the passage. When she arrived at the vast expanse, which featured massive mullioned glass windows through which the silvery glimmer of moonlight cast a mosaic of shadows on the stone floor, she paused and sheltered behind a large pillar.

A pair of halberd-bearing guards marched past, and she held her breath until they traversed the cavernous concourse. After a final check, she scurried from one support to the next, as she ignored the urge to rush, which might result in discovery. Little by little, she negotiated the maze of corridors that comprised the great castle, dodging formidable sentries who presented a very real threat to her escape and her neck.

At last, she shoved open a heavy exterior door, and the chilled night air penetrated her wool cloak as she moved with furtive steps into the bailey. After a glance left and then right, she scampered across the greens to the stables. The ear piercing shrill of some nocturnal creature gave her pause, but she remained resolute.

The scrape of the hinges had her glancing over her shoulder, but she spied naught amiss as she unlatched the gate. The lingering odor of damp earth mingled with straw and hung heavy in the stable, as she surveyed each stall. To protect His Majesty, in the event of an emergency, the stable master left a few horses saddled and at the ready, each night. That had been her saving grace in her previous quest for freedom, and she could only hope she would enjoy similar good fortune again.

Yet every successive enclosure offered naught but disappointment, which gnawed at her confidence, and she continued her search for the elusive but requisite transport. The prayed for blessing on four legs feasted on hay in a back corner, and she smiled.

“Hello, my pretty friend.” Athelyna approached the tall bay and scratched its forehead, and the lithe beast nuzzled her and whinnied. As she attempted to stow her pack, the horse shifted. It was then she realized she had company, and she turned to face her intruder. A sharp blow to the cheek rendered her senseless, and she dropped to the ground. A shadowy figure bent over her, just as she surrendered to the blanket of unconsciousness.



DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER THREE

As the sun rose on his wedding day, Demetrius studied his reflection in the long mirror, practicing various expressions intended to convey in a convincing fashion his surprise, shock, and dismay at being rejected and abandoned at the altar. Given his dedication to faith and honor, he struggled with such rehearsed dissemblance, but he had no choice in the matter, as his audience included His Majesty, and Demetrius could not fail.

Resolved to stay his course, he pondered Athelyna's current location and hoped she made it to her destination, safe and sound. Thus he had to play his part to perfection, in order to protect her, else the consequences could be fatal, should their hastily sketched conspiracy to flout the Crown be discovered. So he altered his countenance, as he deemed appropriate.

At first, he flinched, opened wide his eyes and mouth, and gasped. Just as quick, he scowled. "Thou dost look ridiculous, and no one will believe ye art genuine in thy distress."

Rolling his shoulders, he eased the tension investing his frame and made several attempts to compose the right mix of emotions. Varying between smiles and frowns, along with wild hand gestures for added authenticity, he thought he found a suitable combination and chuckled, until a pounding at the door had him jumping in earnest.

“Art thou ready to meet thy fate, brother?” Arucard peered around the edge of the heavy oak panel and grinned. “It is time to depart for the abbey.”

“Must ye appear so pleased by the prospect?” Demetrius scrutinized his dark blue velvet doublet trimmed in gold embroidery, the matching mantle, and the black chausses. Then he recalled his role in the dangerous game and grumbled a complaint, to which his fellow Nautionnier Knight laughed.

“In truth, I have been awaiting this day since I wed Isolde.” Then Arucard glanced at the table. “Thy trencher is empty.”

“Yea, what of it?” As a final touch, he donned the latest fashion, a livery collar of Esses wrought of gold, from which the badge of his new earldom hung. Of course, on the back had been etched the eight-pointed wind-star of the Brethren of the Coast, the order created to accommodate the exiled Templars.

“I mean no offense.” Arucard arched a brow. “But I chose to forgo a meal on the morn of my nuptials, as I did not wish to be ill and embarrass myself, because I was as nervous as a virgin on her wedding night.”

“But thou were a virgin on thy wedding night.” And Demetrius remained similarly afflicted, but he refused to share that bit of information. “Shall we remove to the Chapter House, as I would not be late?”

“After thee.” With an exaggerated flourish, Arucard bowed, and Demetrius just resisted the urge to kick his old friend in the arse.

A carriage bearing the coat of arms associated with his title conveyed him to Westminster Abbey. With a calm façade, he strolled the cloister walk, until he reached the now familiar double-door entry topped with a Portland stone tympanum. On the steps of the Chapter House, the

archbishop loomed as the specter of doom, but Demetrius reminded himself of the drama about to commence and swallowed his apprehension.

“Welcome, Sir Demetrius.” Archbishop Cobham flipped through the pages of a leather-bound tome. “Now that all parties are present, shall we begin?”

In that instant, Demetrius clutched his chest and, for a few seconds, sheer terror rang in his ears. Panic danced a merry jig down his spine, when his veiled bride, gowned in blue, the traditional color of purity, and escorted by her brother, marched forth. To Demetrius’s everlasting shame, he bent, vomited in the bushes, stumbled backwards, and fainted.

“Demetrius, canst thou hear me?” Countless minutes anon, Arucard’s voice came to Demetrius amid a haze of confusion. “Wake up, as thou hast a date with destiny.”

“Or the parson’s noose.” Morgan snorted. “Depends on his perspective.”

“I think it safe to say he declared his opinion on the matter, by his actions.” Geoffrey chortled. “Believe me, we will not soon forget this ceremony, and neither will he, if I can help it.”

To a chorus of laughter, Demetrius inhaled a deep breath, opened his eyes, and found himself surrounded by the Brethren, as he reclined on a bench in a small room. After a moment of utter befuddlement, he blinked, cleared his fogged vision, and sat upright. “What happened?”

“Mayhap we should leave ye with Arucard.” Snickering, Aristide elbowed Geoffrey. “Let us join the wedding party and reassure the bride that her groom remains very much alive and eager as ever to take his vows.”

“That will take some effort.” Morgan winked and exited.

“How did we come to this, brother?” Pondering his predicament, Demetrius scratched his chin and frowned.

“At the pointed end of a sword.” Arucard chuckled, studied the tip of his boot, and then cleared his throat. “And it is not so bad as thou mayest

think, once thou dost accustom thyself to the idea.”

“Thou dost say that now, but if memory serves, thou were none too pleased when faced with similar circumstances.” With a groan, Demetrius gathered his wits, stood, and paced the floor. How would he recover from the mess he made? “Eternal damnation seems an awfully high price. Surely it would have been preferable to die a warrior’s death.”

“Well, let us not be too dramatic.” Arucard smiled. “It just requires a period of adjustment on thy part.”

“Perchance this is punishment for Randulf.” In a flash, Demetrius transported to another time and place, vivid images played a tragedy in his brain, and he shook his head. “Never should I have left him in my wake.”

“Wait a minute, brother. Thou art no more or less to blame for his demise than any of us, and thither was naught we could do to save him.” Arucard pointed for emphasis. “As it is, we barely escaped with our lives, and only five of us remain. Would thou rather none survived?”

“I would have him hither.” Demetrius gazed at the ceiling and sighed, as Randulf’s screams echoed in a haunting refrain. “At the very least, I would trade places, as he was the better man.”

“Now thither I must take exception, as such comparison is as blancmange to brewets.” Leaning forward, Arucard propped his elbows on his knees. “Neither thee nor Randulf could claim such distinction, as thou art two drastically different beasts.”

“And yet I persist, and he is gone.” Choking on a lethal mix of anger and frustration, Demetrius speared his fingers through his hair, and then he fisted his hands. “So I am resolved to consider my situation a burden and my fate one of lifelong penance.”

“My friend, thou art not thinking clearly, as thy judgment is clouded by misplaced guilt.” Yet Demetrius had long suspected Arucard carried their comrade’s death as a stain on his conscience and invisible wounds that had not quite healed.

Of their set, Randulf had been the youngest and most good-natured Templar. Facing every day with a mischievous grin, a biting sense of

humor, and a wild streak to match, Randulf was forever garnering additional weapons practice for himself and his brother knights for a wide variety of infractions. Still, the lighthearted gadling was a favored son. Acting as marshalsea-in-training, Randulf had been especially close to Demetrius, and the two were as siblings.

“My guilt is well-founded, and I do not deserve happiness. In my rush to stem the tide, I did not realize he had yet to cast off, and it was too late when I noted my error. I abandoned him to the king’s guard, and his loss is my shame.” As the full import of his history dawned, Demetrius scowled. “Mayhap it is fitting that I am required to marry.”

With an expression of astonishment, Arucard sputtered. “Thou dost equate matrimony with hell?”

“Wilt thou argue otherwise?” Demetrius mumbled.

“Well, in truth, it can at times be an abyss of suffering unique unto itself.” Arucard laughed aloud and slapped his thigh. “But if thou dost ever repeat that to Isolde, I will send thee to the glorious hereafter, posthaste.”

“Dost thou find sport in my misery?”

“I find sport in the absurdity of thy logic.” Arucard rose and came to stand before Demetrius. “Guilt is a powerful emotion, brother. It numbs thy senses and impairs thy vision, shrouding thy reality in a dense cloud of regret, which further impedes thy capacity to reap the rewards of life. Thou mayest as well be dead, as thou hast one foot in the grave, and Randulf, God rest him, would never wish that on thee.”

“What would thou have of me? Am I to marry Athelyna and spend my days in connubial bliss?” With fists resting on hips, Demetrius inclined his head, as the situation was far more grave than Arucard realized. “And what sort of name is that? Sounds like a rather nasty infection. Canst thou not hear the boys? ‘Poor bastard caught the Athelyna, and his most prized protuberance shriveled and fell off.’”

“By God’s bones, I will grant thee that.” Arucard surrendered to boisterous guffaws. “Wherefore dost thou not call the poor lass by a term of affection—one known only to her?”

Demetrius shifted his weight. “And wherefore would I do that?”

“To foster a true and lasting bond with thy mate.”

“And wherefore would I want to do that?” Demetrius shuffled his feet.

“Well, if for no other reason than to hasten conception of thy heirs.”

With a look of sheer terror, Demetrius turned white as a sheet and splayed his arms as he teetered precariously.

“Whoa, brother.” Arucard steadied his fellow Nautionnier Knight. “Have a seat before thou dost fall flat on thy face, and the fair maiden refuses to marry *thee*.”

“Babes—I forgot about that.” Demetrius cradled his head in his hands. “Back up, else I will ruin the shine on thy boots, as I fear I am going to vomit.”

“Is it safe to assume thou didst not avail thyself of a whore, as Morgan suggested?” Arucard grimaced, and Demetrius was tempted to remind his friend that he had rejected the same notion prior to marrying Isolde. “It might have put thy mind at ease for tonight.”

“No, it would not. Call me a lunatic, but if I am to risk everlasting condemnation, then I would join my body only with whom I have spoken the vows, per the sacrament.” Yet the prospect terrified him. Mustering a stance of unflinching determination, Demetrius compressed his lips. “I will have no other.”

“Then let us be done with it.” With arms crossed, Arucard retreated a step. “So thou mayest beget thy heir, as the King commands.”

“Am I to breed as a prized stallion put to pasture?” Demetrius grumbled with unveiled irritation. “Art we naught more than means to produce the next generation of mariners insane enough to undertake His Majesty’s bidding?”

“Thou dost make procreation sound so romantic, brother.” Arucard blanched. “Believe me, it is not a chore, though it doth require some effort to master from the start, but the work is good.”

“That is precisely what it is to me—drudgery.” Demetrius thrust his chin. “And I suspect we have merely exchanged one hangman’s noose for another. In short, it is naught more than the trappings of duty owed to an oath ill-pledged that I shall endeavor to persevere.”

“Oh, come now.” To Demetrius’s agitation, Arucard succumbed to a full-blown belly laugh. “As I have seen Athelyna, she is nice duty, if one can get it.”

“Then thou should take her to wife.” Of course, he did not mean that.

“Alas, I am in love with Isolde,” Arucard replied, with the hint of a smile.

“Be that as it may, I am obliged not to enjoy the experience.” Given his fears, he doubted he could physically manage the task, as a particular part of his anatomy had taken shelter.

“Thou dost forget thyself.” Arucard wiped a stray tear from his eye. “As I explained last night, thou must enjoy it, to some degree, in order to conceive a child.”

A knock at the door gave them pause.

“Oh hell, it is time.” Demetrius paled in an instant and swallowed hard. “Come.”

Morgan peered inside and cast a playful grin. “Ready to face the enemy?”

Once again, he tottered, and Arucard all but carried Demetrius to the chair. To Morgan, Arucard said, “Brother, we have a problem.”

“What is this?” Morgan closed the oak panel. “Didst thou not pay a visit to Matild, as I instructed?”

“She hath a goat-sized wart on her nose.” Demetrius flinched, as an image of the woman intruded on his thoughts. “And she is missing two front teeth.”

“Indeed, she is, and that is what makes her proficient in her most popular service.” Morgan clucked his tongue. “And wherefore would I care for a wart? Matild’s reputation precedes her.”

Demetrius snorted. “Thou must know I am not entirely comfortable with thy lustful embrace of English customs.”

Morgan wagged his brows. “As they say, when in Rome—”

“We art not in Rome.” Demetrius smacked a fist to a palm.

“And we art no longer Templars.” Levity aside, Morgan said, “Art thou still going on about Randulf?”

The room was as silent as a tomb.

Morgan glanced at Arucard, and he shrugged.

“Thither thou were not when he disappeared into the sea.” Demetrius closed his eyes. “Screaming for his mother, the lad went down with his ship.”

“And, apart from the screaming, he would have it no other way,” Arucard stated softly. “Randulf was a fine mariner and man, albeit a young one, and thy steadfast refusal to let him go doth no credit to his memory.”

“Arucard is correct.” Morgan cocked his head. “But if thou art truly unwilling to wed the lady, I shall be too happy to take thy place, as the woman is handsome and the title generous.”

Demetrius snapped to attention. “She is my bride—already promised.”

“And I suppose the earldom means naught?” Morgan rocked on his heels.

“I would have her without it, but the King gives me no choice,” Demetrius asserted without hesitation, as he coveted not wealth. “His Majesty seems intent on corrupting us.”

“Then wherefore art thou waiting?” Arucard inquired. “Do thyself a favor, brother, and leave the past to yesterday.”

Demetrius opened and then closed his mouth, as the problem was not so elementary. After a minute, he sighed heavily and mustered a smile. "All right. Bring on the archbishop, for I am to wed. But thou must promise me something."

"Whatever thou dost require, know ye shall have it." Arucard slapped Demetrius on the back. "Now, let us get thee to the altar."

"Wait." Demetrius halted in his tracks. "At the first opportunity, thou must help me compose a pet name, as *Athelyna* is not something I imagine myself uttering in the throes of passion."

#

Fidgeting beneath the heavy folds of her wool gown, Athelyna prayed Sir Demetrius had been struck by some foul but not fatal illness, that she might be spared a most unpleasant wedding, until she could design another escape. When the door to the Chapter House swung open, and her husband-to-be appeared, robust but less than enthused, her heart sank in her chest.

"Well, it is about time." Gerwald shuffled his feet, settled a hand to the small of her back, and thrust her forward. "Now put a smile on thy lips and do thy duty, else I shall disown ye."

To her shame, she stubbed her toe and tripped, but Sir Demetrius caught her with his hands about her waist. "Thank ye, my lord."

"Thou art most welcome." Then he frowned and gripped her chin. "What happened to thy face?"

"My brother dispensed much required discipline, after he caught me attempting to run in the night," she replied, in a low voice. "I have disgraced our name, and I am sorry I failed ye."

"Thou did not fail, so do not be sorry." With his thumb, he caressed the curve of her jaw. "It would seem the Lord wishes us to wed, else thou would have succeeded, and thus we shall never mention it again."

"I had not thought of it like that, and I am sure of naught." Then she considered the brooch, which she had pinned to the bodice of her garment,

and she reflected on the strange dreams. The archbishop cleared his throat, and she realized she had no choice. She would marry Sir Demetrius. “Shall we take our respective places?”

“Of course.” Was it her imagination, or did he pale at the prospect? “And fear not, dear lady, as everything will be all right.”

“Art thou trying to comfort me or thee?” Did her attempt at humor fool him?

“Both,” he replied, with a wink.

“Wait.” She gripped his arm. “If we art to live as husband and wife, I should know thy preferences.”

“Thou dost wish to question me now?” He quirked his brows. “Whilst the King awaits?”

“Aye.” In earnest, she nodded. “I would know something of ye, before I become thy property and lifelong servant.”

“But I must correct ye.” As the archbishop flipped through the pages of his prayer book, Sir Demetrius bent his head. “Thou shalt be my mate, not my property or servant, despite English law. Dost thou understand?”

“As I am thine to command, I shall not argue thy assertion, but I would have some sense of thy partialities prior to the ceremony.” So he did not approach marriage as did most men, and for that she was grateful. “As I know ye dost choose ale over wine, what is thy favorite food?”

“Brewets.” As the archbishop coughed, Demetrius shifted his weight. “And I would be most appreciative if ye learned how to prepare Lady Isolde’s special recipe.”

“I promise, I will do my best, though I should warn ye, I am no cook.” Then she recalled he coveted a bag of the pounded and spiced meat cutlets the night they met, and in silence she pledged to master the fare. “And what of thy preferred color?”

“Green,” he responded without hesitation.

The archbishop signaled, and she gulped. “Light or dark?”

“The shade of thine eyes.” In that instant, she decided she liked her mountainous groom, although he still scared her, to an extent. “Then thou should know, aside from wine, I love bryndons, burgundy, and roses.”

“Noted.” A strong gust of wind almost toppled her, and he offered his escort. “Now can we marry?”

Perched on an invisible but nonetheless perilous precipice, in her heart she bade farewell to the convent and her dreams. “Yea, my lord.”

And so Athelyna took her vows, amid a blustery gale and falling snow, on the steps of the Chapter House, repeating with care the sacrament that would forever bind her to the estimable knight. But was Demetrius her one true knight, as the brooch foretold?

When her new husband lifted her veil, she swallowed a shriek of trepidation and chided herself. But she cringed when he bent and pressed his lips to hers, sealing their nuptials with a kiss, and the modest gesture struck her as an ominous omen, just as the bells rang in a mournful toll.

“What a lovely ceremony, and now we are sisters.” Isolde produced a handkerchief and daubed Athelyna’s cheeks. “And fret not, as I wept at my wedding to Arucard.”

The full import of the events dawned, and Athelyna burst into tears.

“I see my brother’s charms have already impacted his bride.” Arucard chuckled. “But I wish ye glad tidings, Athelyna. No doubt, thou wilt need it.”

“Arucard.” Isolde elbowed her husband. “Do not tease her, else thou shalt find thy wife not so accommodating this eventide.”

Anticipating a sharp rebuke, Athelyna was stunned when the enormous and intimidating man softened his expression and tickled Isolde, who giggled and whispered in his ear.

“Art thou ready to depart for Westminster Palace, my lady?” Demetrius adjusted her cloak, in a gesture that impressed upon her the truth of his rightful ownership. In short, she was his to do with as he chose.

“The King hosts our wedding feast, and we do not wish to keep His Majesty waiting.”

“Of course, not.” Immersed in a new and foreign existence, in more ways than one, she rested her hand in the crook of his elbow, and he accompanied her to his carriage. “Whither are we to spend the night?”

“Well that did not take long.” Beneath her palm he tensed his muscles. “We are to share a luxurious accommodation in the official residence, at the Crown’s insistence, but we shall discuss that, anon.”

“Thither is something to discuss?” Terror weaved its subtle web about her spine, and she shivered.

“Art thou chilled?” Demetrius lifted her to the seat. “I can offer my cloak.”

“Nay.” She scooted to one side, but his massive frame occupied more than half the space, and his thigh brushed her skirts. “Rather, I am nervous, as I know not what to expect.”

“Then thou should follow my lead, as I suffered the pomp and pageantry before, when Arucard wed Isolde.” He squeezed her fingers, and she started. “If thou wilt but trust me, I shall endeavor to spare us any missteps and embarrassment.”

“But we scarcely know each other.” A rut in the road jostled her, and she almost landed in his lap. “And thou didst profess no desire to take me to wife.”

“And as I recall, thou didst share my sentiment, so thou art one to talk.” His nostrils flared as he gazed at her, and she cowered. “But the deed is done, and I am thy lord and master. Given thy strict upbringing at the convent, I suspect ye art proficient in following commands. Henceforth, thou shalt hold thy tongue until thou art given permission to speak.”

Now that stung, but she could not argue his point, as the law defined her as property and his authority reigned supreme over her. So she remained silent, as they negotiated the narrow streets of London.

Soon the caravan neared the palace, and they passed through the main gate and came to a halt in the bailey. In silence, Demetrius handed her to the drive, and together they followed the crowd into the massive royal residence.

In the Great Hall, musicians played an elegant tune, as the revelers piled high their trenchers, with tempting selections of fish, meat, and chicken and an array of boiled roots. To her dismay, her master prepared another ample portion for her and collected two goblets of spiced clarrey from an opulent fountain unlike anything she had ever seen, as she remained in his wake.

On the dais, the King rumbled with mirth, and merrymakers spread infectious cheer, yet Athelyna joined not in the celebration of her nuptials. As a dutiful bride, she held her tongue just as her husband bade. But inside she screamed at the unfairness of her situation.

“Thou dost not eat, sister.” Isolde sampled a bite of fish covered in a thick wine sauce, closed her eyes, and hummed. “Oh, pykes in brasey, my favorite. Thou should take a taste, as it is divine.”

As Demetrius had not yet granted permission to dine, Athelyna awaited his consent, for fear of inciting his temper. When Isolde studied Athelyna for a few minutes, she shifted beneath the scrutiny.

“Is something wrong, my lady?” Arucard inquired of his wife. “Shall I fetch ye a sweetmeat?”

“Wherefore doth our relation not speak?” The graceful noblewoman stared at Demetrius, who cleared his throat but responded not. “Sir Demetrius, hath thy mate been struck by some mysterious illness that hath rendered her mute?”

In that instant, Demetrius leaned to the side and whispered, “Thou mayest converse.”

“Thou *mayest* converse?” Isolde set down her glass, with a thud. “Did I hear ye correctly?”

Arucard winced. “Isolde—”

“Nay.” She shook her head. “Sir Demetrius, thy lady is neither slave nor servant, and thou wilt not treat her as such, else I shall never again cook another brewet in this lifetime.”

Athelyna feared she might swoon, as a heretofore-unknown ally defended her.

“Isolde, it is not thy place to intrude on their privacy.” Arucard peered at Demetrius and frowned. “My brother must define the terms of his union, as he sees fit.”

“Is that so?” Isolde exhaled and rolled her shoulders. “Well the same goes for my blancmange, if the lord of Chichester Castle allows such an affront to humanity and virtue to occur beneath our roof and to stain our conscience, and neither shall I participate in nor condone the indignity.”

Arucard grumbled and rubbed his temple. “Demetrius.”

That was it.

A singular invocation imbued with a wealth of meaning in a name.

Painful quiet fell on their little gathering, and Athelyna braced for her husband’s response, which she suspected might involve violence. Would he tumble the setting? Would he initiate a brawl?

To her unutterable shock, her spouse propped his elbows on the table and sighed. “My lady wife, I revoke my previous order.”

The swift reversal of fortune played as some divine comedy, and nervous anxiety bubbled forth as uncontrollable laughter, until she held her stomach and gasped for breath. Wave upon wave of mirth swept through her, and she yielded to the tittering spasms, which alleviated her stress. The tension investing her spine loosened its iron grip, and she relaxed.

“Art thou unwell?” With an expression of sympathy, Isolde clutched Athelyna’s fingers. “Dost thou prefer Adam’s ale?”

“Thank ye, but nay.” Suddenly ravenous, Athelyna scooped a morsel of fish, even as she snatched a piece of bread, which she shoved into her mouth. For the next few minutes, she digested more food in that one sitting than she had in the past two days. Before her body rebelled, and she

revisited the meal, she pushed back and reclined in her chair. “Thank ye, for thy kindness, Isolde.”

“Thou art most welcome.” Arucard’s wife folded her arms and arched a brow. “Thou shalt always enjoy safe harbor in my home. And when we return to Chichester, we shall discuss thy role in the household, as I would have ye never doubt thither is a place for ye.”

“As an oblate, I have longed to tend the people of this great country, and I assisted the physic, as a caregiver, at the convent.” Mayhap the circumstances were not as dire as Athelyna previously thought. “It would be my honor to serve ye, in the same capacity.”

“Then it is settled, and I will speak to my staff, upon our return.” Isolde offered a curt nod, as a formidable warrior on some invisible battlefield, and Athelyna reminded herself never to argue with the noblewoman. “Mayhap thou will rest easy now.”

“Indeed.” Athelyna laughed. “And I shall do my best to preserve thy good opinion.”

In that instant, the music ended, and His Majesty stood. “It is time for Lady Athelyna to retire, in preparation to receive Sir Demetrius. Guards, escort the bride to her accommodations.”

And so fled her calm.



DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER FOUR

“I am not ready for this.” Contemplating the impending consummation of his vows, Demetrius downed the last of his wine and waved for a refill. The mere contemplation of his loss of virginity, and thereby his purity, inspired naught but a violent shudder of raw terror. Had he not surrendered enough since the Inquisition? “Do not think me a coward, but I cannot do it, brother.”

“Easy, my friend.” After the servant poured a healthy quantity, which almost breached the rim, Arucard snatched the goblet from Demetrius’s grasp. “And if thou dost continue to consume such beverages, thou wilt ensure ye art physically incapable of performing the deed.”

“Then return my glass, as I would have an excuse for my failure.” He noted the King summoned the guards, which signaled the imminent dispatch to his accommodations and Athelyna, and Demetrius instead claimed Arucard’s drink and downed the contents. “We should have remained in France and burned at the stake, as loyal retainers of our faith,

which seems a far more preferable, not to mention less painful, fate at the moment.”

“Thou dost make too much of thy position, as our comrades were branded heretics, sexual deviants, and condemned to hell, thus I am happy with my match, as I love Isolde.” Arucard snickered and claimed his bride’s hand. “And only an inexperienced man would make such an erroneous statement, as thither is much to be savored in connubial intimacy and the sweet paradise manifested at the apex of thy wife’s thighs. If thou dost give Athelyna a chance, thou might grow a deep and abiding devotion between ye, which is incomparable in its strength and splendor. But, as thy bride is untried, it is safe to presume she brings low expectations to the marital bed, so just remember my counsel.” He counted on his fingers. “First, exercise patience. Second, be gentle. Third, talk to her, as polite conversation will put her at ease.”

“I vomited and fainted before a royal audience, and thou art worried about putting *her* at ease?” He quivered at the recollection, and he doubted his fellow knights would ever let him forget his shame. “Morgan was right. I should have permitted Matild to school me in carnal knowledge, as I know not whither to begin.”

“Thither thou dost have me.” Glancing from side to side, Arucard leaned forward. “May I make a suggestion?”

“When hast thou not?” Demetrius shrugged. “And, all things considered, I cannot afford to offend ye, as thou hast gone whither I fear to tread, so dispense thy advice, absent depreciative humor.”

“Grant thy bride, and thereby thyself, a deferment.” Tugging at the collar of his tunic, Arucard whistled. “Trust me, it was the best possible course of action, when I faced similar quandary. As Isolde and I were complete strangers on our wedding day, I vouchsafed a period of adjustment that we might become better acquainted prior to joining our bodies.”

“And it made a difference?” Various scenarios played in his brain, and he composed an entreaty that might sway Athelyna. “To be honest, the idea appeals to me.”

“I gathered it would.” With a grin, Arucard peered at Isolde, as she stood and made the rounds of the gathering. “And it made all the difference in the world with my bride. Believe me, thy lady is worth the wait, as was mine.” Then he sobered and gulped. “And hither comes the guard, so I wish ye a pleasant eventide, brother.”

“Oh, no.” Demetrius clutched the edge of the table, as the room seemed to spin out of control. Swallowing the fast rising bitterness in his throat, he lurched upright, composed himself, and addressed his escort. “Good sirrahs, let us away.”

Yet the brief stroll to his private apartment struck him as a death march, and the simple existence he cherished seemed to crumble beneath his feet, as pebbles on a path to destruction, with each successive step, until he halted before the heavy door to his quarters.

“I bid ye a satisfying night, Sir Demetrius.” Briarus chortled, as did a few soldiers, and Demetrius just rolled his eyes and took safe haven in his solar.

An eerie quiet filled the room, as a blaze crackled in the hearth. The portal to the inner suite was shut, so he took a moment to gather his wits and summon courage. Stiffening his spine, he walked toward what he considered his doom but veered to the right at the last second.

With palms pressed to the tabletop, he inhaled several deep breaths, as the floor seemed to rock beneath his feet. Considering his longstanding heritage, he sought a reprieve. At last, he sighed and sat in the large chair near the fireplace. Propping his elbow on the armrest, he cupped his chin in his palm and stared into the flames. Everything inside him screamed in denial of the future the Crown planned, and he clenched his jaw. “I cannot do this. I cannot yield that which I have upheld for so long, as already I have surrendered so much.”

As usual, Arucard offered sage guidance, and Demetrius decided he could linger and evade no more. Standing, he stretched tall and rubbed the small of his back. No coward, he resolved to discuss options with his bride, that they might strike an accord, given he had no expectancy of fostering a path to wedded bliss similar to that his friend found with Isolde. And he

had yet to divulge his great secret, his sin that might impair her path to salvation. So he would keep his suppositions low.

It was with that thought in mind that he pushed on the door, and it moved not. He thrust and shoved, but the thick oak panel did not budge, and he knocked. “Athelyna, it appears the portal is stuck. Wilt thou offer assistance?”

“Nay, it is not stuck,” she replied. “It is locked.”

“Wherefore hast thou banished me from my bedchamber?” Huffing a breath of frustration, he rested fists to hips and shifted his weight. “Grant entry, now.”

“I will not,” quick as a wink she replied.

“My lady wife, thou wilt obey me, at once.” When naught happened, he studied the ceiling and the ornamental woodwork, gave vent to a groan, and speared his hair. “Art thy ears impaired? Dost thou not speak English?”

“My ears work fine, Sir Demetrius, and I am fluent in the language, as thou dost well know,” she responded, in a clipped tone. “Mayhap thou canst sleep in the solar, as it hath been a trying day.”

“Thou art correct, in that it hath been an arduous time—” A feminine shriek silenced him.

“Thou dost consider marriage to me arduous?” she inquired, with an unmistakable sob of distress. “Have I thus encumbered thee?”

“That is not what I meant.” He winced, as it was too late when he realized he had just insulted his bride. “Prithee, take no offense.”

Mournful cries formed a foreboding audial tapestry, which echoed in the suite, and he searched for a way into the inner chamber. After several pleas for reason and composure, he ceded the battle and retreated to ponder the possibilities. Moonlight cut a silvery swath across the floor, and he peered beyond the mullioned glass and the second floor vantage. A stone ledge offered a fortuitous foothold and appealed to his adventurous nature.

A minute later, Demetrius perched on the narrow shelf and wondered what had come over him, as he slid to the next window. As he took another sidestep, he caught his toe on the uneven surface, wobbled precariously above the bailey, grasped the sill, and sucked in a breath. On a wing and a fervent plea, he admired the clear night sky and the shimmering stars, as he struggled to quell his hammering heart. “Thither must be an easier way to fulfill my duties.”

Once he reached his destination, he tugged on the panel comprised of small lead panes, whereupon he braced to climb over the sill, just as pain shot through his fingers from the heretofore-gentlewoman and her wicked bite, and he almost fell.

“Get thee gone, knave.” Athelyna pounded his hands. “I will not lie with ye, no matter what the King commands. If thou dost want me, thou must take me by force, and I will fight ye to my dying breath, vile cur-dog.”

“Sheath thy teeth, ill-tempered she-devil.” Lunging forward, he tumbled onto the floor. “And I have no intention of breaching thy maidenhead this eventide, so thou mayest dispense with such concerns.”

The termagant stilled.

“If thou dost speak with verity, then wherefore art thou hither?” Folding her arms, she scurried to the opposite side of the large, four-poster bed. “Despite English law, I rebuke thy claims of ownership, as I belong to no man. Now and forever, I am the Lord’s servant, and naught ye can do will change that.”

“Then we art in agreement, as I honor a similar vow.” Dusting off his garments, Demetrius sat on the edge of the mattress. “But the King issued a series of edicts, which binds us both to the same obligation, so we have little choice or options. First and foremost, we are to seal our nuptials with the consummation, the proof of which His Majesty will receive on the morrow. Second, we are commanded to produce a male heir, confirmed by the existence thereof. Third, we are to shadow Arucard and Isolde, in preparation to re-establish the Crown’s garrison in Winchester, which is no small task in light of last year’s events.”

“Oh?” With the barest whimper, she bit her lip. “And if I refuse?”

He slumped and sighed. “Then I suspect the Sire will have our heads on pikes, outside White Tower, by the noon hour.”

“What can I do to help?” To his surprise, she strolled about the footboard and eased beside him. “While I am amenable to thy suggestions, as I do not wish to die, I should warn ye, I am terrified, my lord.”

“As am I.”

“Truly?”

“Aye.”

“What shall we do?”

“I would delay the consummation, until we gain a better understanding of each other and find our way.”

“Thou art most wise.”

“Indeed?” In that instant, he peered at her, and she met his gaze. “Thou didst offer an altogether different opinion, not seconds ago.” Snickering, he rubbed his abused flesh.

“I owe thee an apology.” Her answering smile arrested him. “But I am unready and reluctant to be a bride, and thou didst but shout thy accord on the prospect, whence thee vomited and fainted, for all to see, just prior to our ceremony.”

“Thou wilt never let me forget that, will ye?” In play, he nudged her with his shoulder, and she giggled. “What say ye?”

“Nay.” Then she burst into laughter, which he found infectious.

Soon, they doubled over with unrestrained mirth, and the release of tension eased his black mood. For a minute, he delighted in her classical features and her halo of blonde hair. In any circumstance, he would consider her beautiful. From across a crowded room, as two strangers, she would snare his attention. Only they were not strangers. They were husband and wife.

“Athelyna, I am sensitive to the fact that forces beyond our control have landed us on the same perilous path.” Propped on an elbow, he

whisked a stray tendril from her face. “As we have taken the sacrament, we must honor our vows, but how and when we do so is for us to decide, as a couple. But if we are to survive, we must maintain the appearance of obedient servants of the realm, even after we journey to Chichester, as the Crown’s spies ply their trade far past the environs of London.”

“I concur.” She dipped her chin. “What dost ye propose?”

“If thou canst manage it, thou must play the part of attentive wife, to perfection, else we are doomed, while I must rule thee as would a man exercise authority over his lady.” Of course, his portion of the ruse was the toughest. “And although we will not yet join our bodies, we must share a single accommodation and a bed.”

“Thou dost ask much of me.” Athelyna swallowed hard. “May I have thy word, as a noble knight of His Majesty, ye will not violate me, against my will? Rather, thou wilt permit me to name the date of the consummation, when I am ready, given I suspect ye will reach that point before I.”

“Thou dost not trust me?” He tried but failed to ignore the insult. “Have I given ye reason to doubt me?”

“If we speak in candor, Demetrius, dost thou trust me?” Shifting, she rolled onto her side. “Prithee, I require thy honesty and would vouchsafe the same.”

“All right.” For a few minutes, he studied her, because his response could set the tone for their fledgling union and pact. “I want to trust ye, and that goal underlies my negotiations with ye.”

“And what of thy aim, regarding our marriage?” To his discomfit, she scrutinized him with equal fervor. “Dost thou believe in love?”

To Arucard’s credit, he warned Demetrius that such a topic could surface, as females were naturally inclined to the particular emotion, thus he composed a rejoinder in anticipation of the awkward occasion. Standing, as he desired distance, he unhooked his belt and doffed his sword.

“I am experienced with the benevolence of Our Heavenly Father, the endearment between a parent and a child, and the friendship which bonds

brother to brother.” In that he did not dissemble, as he kicked off his shoes. “Likewise, I am entirely unfamiliar with the emotion that blossomed amid Arucard’s relationship with Isolde. Yet, I am not averse to it. So it is my hope we might find a comparable commitment.”

“And if we do not?” She averted her stare, as he shed his tunic.

“Then I hope we find mutual affinity, that we may enjoy a measure of happiness.” Clothed in his hose and linen garments, he pulled on the burgundy velvet cover and paused. “Thou should rest, as we depart for Chichester on the morrow, and the journey will be arduous, given the winter storm.”

“If thou dost not object, I would sleep in my modest frock, for now.” Removing her slippers, she blushed.

“I do not object.” In silence, he offered thanks, as he was not sure how he would react to her nudity, and he had endured enough surprises that day. So he sank into the mattress, positioned his back to his bride, and drew the blankets to his chin. A few seconds later, Athelyna situated herself behind him.

Gazing at a spot on the wall, just visible in the dim light from the hearth, Demetrius pondered the tenuous entente forged by two complete strangers and frowned. If his wife failed in her respective charge, they would suffer the consequences, as a whole, and that knowledge kept sleep at bay.

Indeed, he knew not what tomorrow would bring.

#

A vicious battle raged, sword clashed with sword, and an unknown champion protected a group of innocent pilgrims, beneath the glare of a brutal sun. With incomparable skill and speed the valiant knight charged numerous assailants, kicking sand in his wake and dispatching his enemies with lethal aim, until the enemy cowered in the shadows of the faceless warrior, but he was merciful. Anon, as he walked amid the bodies scattered across the dunes, the sweet stench of blood hung heavy in the air, and he doffed his gauntlets.

And then everything shifted.

The encroaching night sky signaled the advancing eventide, and the defender entered a tent. As he removed his armor, he revealed an intriguing mark etched into his flesh and barely visible in the soft light from the brazier. It was the Crusader's Cross, black in color, and marred by a distinct scar in the shape of a jagged spike.

Athelyna jerked awake and gasped for breath. Confused by her strange surroundings, she rolled onto her back and focused on the decorative finial atop the large four-poster and mulled the curious vision, which mirrored previous dreams in both detail and intensity.

“Art thou all right?” Demetrius inquired, and she yelped.

“Apologies, as I forgot about ye.” Then everything came to her in a flood of awareness. The wedding. The reception. The pact forged in equal parts of trepidation and ambition. After rubbing her eyes, she noted his appearance, as he sat in a chair, in the corner. “Thou art garbed for travel.”

“As I remarked last eventide, we must depart for Chichester, with haste.” When he stood, she scooted from beneath the warm blankets and shivered. “The storm increased during the night hours, and we have a great distance to travel before this eventide, so I suggest ye clothe thyself appropriately.”

From her small sack of belongings, she pulled two sets of hose, a heavy wool cotehardie, and a surcoat. No, she did not usually wear both gowns at the same time, but a glance out the window revealed whipping winds and snow, so she cared not for fashion but for utility.

In a few minutes, after cleaning her teeth, washing her face, and smoothing her plaited hair, she shrugged into her thick, hooded mantle, while her husband stripped the bottom sheet from the mattress. “My lord, art thou muddled?”

“Nay.” From a sheath he produced a sharp dagger, cut his finger, and smeared blood on the pristine white material. “The King requires evidence of our secured vows, in fulfillment of his command, and I intend

to satisfy His Majesty, that we might survive our first directive.” Then he draped the cover near the fireplace. “Gather thy personal belongings, as we shall leave this place, as soon as the cloth dries sufficiently enough to serve our purpose.” Scanning the area, he grabbed a large sack from the floor, collected various items, and secured his pack. “Thither is food in the solar, if thou art hungry.

“Thank ye.” In the outer chamber, she found bread and a light sop, along with some dried fruit, and she set forth two trenchers. “Wilt thou not join me?”

“Aye.” Given his size, she suppressed a shiver of apprehension when he neared, as Athelyna suspected he could break her like a sprig if he chose to do so. “Is something wrong?”

“Nay.” Adopting the role of dutiful wife, she served him an ample portion. “I am trying to accustom myself to our new life.”

“That reminds me.” Demetrius snapped his fingers. “When I deliver the sheet to His Majesty, I want ye to wait for me in the bailey, whither Arucard, Isolde, and our brothers gather for our departure.”

“Am I not summoned to the Great Hall?” Had she embarrassed him? Had she committed some grievous error, which led him to exclude her? “Art thou ashamed of me?”

“Wherefore dost thou think such things?” Frowning, he wiped his mouth with a napkin. “Arucard told me of a similar ceremony, the morrow after he wed, and I would spare ye the embarrassment Isolde endured, as thou art a modest lady. I would preserve thy gentle nature, which I admire.”

“Thou dost act for my benefit.” Again, she misjudged him and vowed not to repeat the mistake. “In future, I shall rely on thy right and true wisdom.”

“Art thou certain?” Arching a brow, he grinned, and she discerned he teased her. “Thou didst bite me, last night.”

“Well, I cannot make ye any promises, but I shall try.” As she recalled her pitiful assault, she laughed,. “And I am sorry about that. Did I hurt ye?”

“Thou didst leave me with a unique remembrance of our wedding. See?” To impress his point, he held up his hand and offered a pout she found rather endearing. “Thou hast damaged the skin.”

“Shall I soothe it with a kiss?” The words were spoken before she realized what she said, and she squirmed. “That is...what I meant was—”

“My lady wife, when the time is appropriate, and we enjoy a more familiar relationship, rooted in the bonds of friendship, I shall avail myself of thy generous expression.” Like a flash of sunlight on smithy-forged steel, the silvery gaze through which he viewed the world no doubt inspired many a breathless sigh at court, and as he stared at her, she could not escape the lure he presented, though she understood it not. “Until then, we shall limit our contact to that which is necessary to maintain the ruse, and if I do otherwise, pray, thou must tell me.”

“Art thou always so noble, Demetrius?” In light of all she had heard of arranged unions, she counted herself fortunate, as he could take her with or without force, despite her preferences, and the law supported him. “Wherefore dost thou indulge me?”

“Because I am no heathen to assault ye.” He drained the last of his ale from his glass. “My conviction is such that I cannot abide the violence visited upon women in this land, which I have witnessed for myself.”

“Oh?” After collecting some fruit, she folded the meager fare in a handkerchief, for later. “When did ye observe the sad sight, and what were the circumstances, if ye art of a mind to share the details?”

“I would have thy discretion, but it involved Lady Isolde.” The palpable melancholy in his guise gave her pause, and she struggled to reconcile the devoted couple she had just met with the abuse that often marked an arranged marriage, which did not bode well for her. “Despite my service and years spent defending pilgrims, never have I beheld the brutality inflicted upon Isolde.”

“So Arucard beats her?” At the prospect, Athelyna gulped. “They seem so happy.”

“Thou dost mistake my words, as Arucard would never strike Isolde.” Demetrius cleaned his trencher of the last drop of the thin sop and cleared his throat. “To my everlasting astonishment, she was betrayed by those who should have championed and defended her, a father and a brother.”

“What?” A chill shivered over her flesh, and she hugged herself. “Wherefore would—”

A loud pounding on the door had her jumping, but her husband pressed a finger to her lips, quieting her. “Shh.” In an instant, he grabbed his sword and approached the portal. “Thither who goes?”

“It is thy savior, come to deliver ye from thy night of toil and strife.” The high-pitched tone did not disguise the intruder’s identity, as he knocked on the wood panel. “The King commands thy presence, Sir Demetrius, and it is never advisable to keep him waiting.”

“Quick, collect thy belongings.” Her husband snatched his bag and the sheet, while she retrieved her small sack. “Remember, when I divert to the audience with His Majesty, thou must continue to the bailey, whither Arucard and Isolde assemble.”

“Aye, my lord.” Tension invested her shoulders, her gut clenched, and she balled her hands, as he opened the door.

“Ah, good Briarus.” Demetrius chuckled. “And how art thee this fine morrow?”

“Well rested.” The King’s guard snorted. “But I would wager the same cannot be said of thee.” He swiped the soiled bed cloth and displayed the stain. “It appears ye enjoyed an eventful night, and how did thy wife sleep?” The insufferable rabble had the audacity to wink at her. “Or did she, given the lady blushes?”

“That is enough.” Stretching to full height, Demetrius scowled. “Do not embarrass my bride, else I shall separate thy head from thy neck.”

“What is a bit of fun between friends, sirrah?” Now Briarus elbowed Demetrius. “And if thou dost inflict violence upon a servant of the realm, without permission, Sire will do the same to ye. Wilt thou widow

thy beauteous young bride, when thou hast just sampled all she has to offer ye?”

If possible, Athelyna would have shriveled into naught, on the spot.

“Allay thy fears, as I would not surrender my charming wife for naught in the world.” Her husband offered his escort, and she clutched his arm. Beneath her grip, his muscles flexed, belying his serene exterior, and she swallowed her trepidation. “Shall we, my dear?”

“By thy command, my lord.” As prearranged, she dipped her chin and acquiesced. “I follow thy lead.”

“Well, well.” Briarus snickered and rocked on his heels. “I am impressed, Sir Demetrius, as it appears ye hath tamed thy wild mare. Mayhap all the Lady Athelyna required was a good ride to break her.”

A series of none-too-polite rejoinders danced at the tip of her tongue, but she held her peace, when Demetrius covered her hand with his. The narrow passage opened to the now familiar balustrade, and the soft glow from cresset lamps cast their silhouettes in shadows on the stone floor. In silence, they descended the grand staircase and veered right. With her heart pounding in her chest, she flinched when they paused outside the Great Hall.

“Prithee, take Lady Athelyna to the bailey.” Demetrius reclaimed the hastily constructed evidence of the consummation. “I will be along, anon.”

“But His Majesty requests the lady’s presence.” Briarus rested fists on hips. “Do not place my neck in peril, Sir Demetrius, as I am rather fond of my head.”

“Do as I say, as she is *my* wife.” Without ceremony, Demetrius stomped into the large gathering chamber. “And given thy ugly face, thou should welcome the change.”

“See to the woman.” Briarus peered over his shoulder. “While I will ensure Sir Demetrius survives his audience with the King.”

Puzzled by their ferocious expressions, she shuffled her feet, in abidance with her husband's directive, but could make no sense of their behavior. Wherefore did everyone speak as though His Majesty had naught more to do than confirm her loss of maidenhood? Was it truly that important?

In the bailey, a nasty gale howled, a bitter chill cut through her wool clothing, and she pulled the hood of her cloak over her head and located Isolde, who waved a greeting, amid the small crowd toiling in preparation to depart.

"Good morrow, sister." Isolde kissed Athelyna's cheek. "I am so glad Demetrius opted to spare ye the Crown's favored game, which posits the loss of thy virtue as a pawn to be mocked." She draped a blanket atop an impressive stallion. "They paraded me about like a broodmare, in a shameful display to which no lady of character should be subjected."

"Isolde, art thou ready?" Despite his smile, Arucard intimidated Athelyna, due to his immense size, but she had trouble reconciling his enormity and stern countenance with the tenderness he lavished without restraint on his wife. "I do not want ye catching a chill."

"Thou wilt keep me warm, my lord, so thou need not worry." To Athelyna's surprise, Isolde perched on tiptoes and kissed her husband. "Now lift me to thy saddle."

"I love it when ye doth issue orders." After nipping her nose, Arucard set Isolde astride his destrier and then turned to Athelyna. "Shall I assist ye?"

"Nay, but I thank ye for thy concern." Retreating a step, she swallowed hard and summoned her wits. "I should wait for Demetrius."

"Thither is no need, as I am hither." Welcomed relief enveloped her, when her spouse appeared at the rear, given she imagined various horrid fates. "Will the lady ride with me, as Isolde does with Arucard?"

"Oh, I am quite capable of managing on my own, but I am grateful for thy care." Shielding her eyes from the driving snow, she glanced at the happy couple, as Arucard situated Isolde in his lap and tucked his cloak

about her. Then he covered her with an additional blanket, and Isolde all but disappeared from sight.

The small caravan set forth in the winter storm in a slow but steady pace, and Athelyna knew not what to expect. But as they rode beyond the environs of London along the road that led south, toward the coast, she could not help but wonder what tomorrow would bring.

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DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER FIVE

It was a long, slow, and painful journey through blinding snow, and Demetrius adjusted the hood of his mantle and drew a kerchief over his mouth and nose. Safe beyond the boundaries of London, he relaxed, as the threat of discovery, regarding the conspiracy he plotted with Athelyna, subsided in direction proportion to the ever-growing distance between himself and His Majesty.

If only he could deal with his wife in similar fashion.

Still, the passing countryside did much to soothe his troubled soul, and he was troubled. Shrouded in white, the rolling terrain manifested a resplendent vista that never failed to speak to him on some mystical level, and in its grandeur he took solace.

“Brother, we must stop.” To his left, Arucard drew rein. “Thy bride requires thy assistance.”

“What?” Wherefore could he not forget about her? But a glance to his right revealed his lady, encrusted with ice and slumped forward, in danger of falling from her horse, and he sidled near and drew rein on her mount. “Whoa.”

In that instant, she jerked awake, and he noted her chafed cheeks and watery gaze. Without ceremony, he peered at Arucard, frowned, slipped an arm about Athelyna’s hips, and lifted her to his lap.

“My lord, what are ye doing?” At first, she pushed and shoved him, but he deflected her pitiful resistance, shook off the snow from her cloak, and tucked her beneath his heavy outer garment. “Prithee, this is unnecessary, as I can manage on my own.”

“Cover her with this blanket.” Geoffrey unfolded a swathe of wool, which Demetrius draped about her. “Morgan, tie down the mare.”

“Aye, I have it.” Morgan secured the riderless steed and returned to the procession.

“Take my extra pelt, as I am quite comfortable.” Aristide tossed the animal skin over Athelyna’s legs. “From hither I can see the poor thing shivering.”

“Thank ye, brother.” Of course, her violent shudders, in accompaniment with her chattering teeth, all but screamed her chilled state, despite her protests otherwise. As would a dutiful husband, he tightened his hold. “Better?”

“Much.” Nuzzling his chest, she hugged him about the waist. “I am sorry to cause ye so much difficulty, my lord, but I underestimated the severity of the storm and overestimated my capacity to withstand it.”

“My lady, thou art no difficulty.” Borrowing from Arucard’s example, Demetrius pulled her close and swaddled her as he would a fragile babe. An image of torn and bloody flesh flashed before him, and he flinched. In detail, he recalled Isolde’s battered and bruised body, after her father beat her almost to death, and he winced. The mere thought of a similar fate befalling Athelyna inspired strong emotions, in an altogether different direction, none of which he could master. For some reason he

could not explain, the urge to protect her burned bright as the sun within him, and he kissed her forehead. “Thou art my wife, and thy welfare is my responsibility, which I take in solemn consideration.”

“Be that as it may, I am grateful to thee.” Even half-frozen and exhausted, he found her beautiful. “Thou art warm, my lord.” Yawning, she closed her eyes and drifted to sleep in his embrace, and her trust humbled him.

So they continued the journey in relative peace, until eventide approached, and Arucard commanded they establish a temporary lodging for the night. But Demetrius remained in the saddle, while the others set up his tent, as Athelyna dozed, and Isolde insisted he not disturb his bride. Yet it bothered him to sit idle, as the others toiled.

“Demetrius, thy accommodation is prepared.” Arucard stepped into position, and Demetrius gave his wife into his brother’s safekeeping and dismounted, only to reclaim Athelyna. “Hither, convey thy charge to thy shelter, whither Isolde awaits ye, whilst I tend thy destrier.”

“Thank ye.” He turned but paused. “Arucard, I would help ye, once I settle my wife.”

“Nay, as thither is naught for ye to do but the obvious.” The leader of the Brethren shook his head and surveyed the encampment. “This is a difficult period of adjustment for ye, and no one knows that better than I. Trust me, it will take some time to become accustomed to thy new life, as a couple, but it will go much easier for both of ye, if ye doth not fight it. Thou must be patient, and never forget she is thy priority, in all things.”

“As always, thou art wise.” He dipped his chin. “I shall do my best to follow thy right and true example.”

“Then thou wilt make her a fine husband.” Arucard smiled, and a measure of mutual understanding passed between them. “Send Isolde to our tent, as I would not have her overtire herself. Given the weather, we cannot risk illness on the road.”

“Of course.” With that, Demetrius carried his woman to the diminutive home away from home. He bent and pushed through the untied

flap, whither Isolde spread pelts atop the straw-filled mattress, which rested upon the traveling frame. “Arucard requests thy presence.”

“And I shall abide his command, once thou hast removed thy lady’s damp garments, and I have delivered a meal of hot broth and bread, which thou must ensure she eats.” Isolde fluffed a pillow. “Set her hither, and take off her cloak, shoes, and hose, whilst I fetch the food.”

“I am sorry she is not available to be of use, that she might ease thy burden.” None too gently, he yanked Athelyna’s shoes. Recalling Isolde’s delicious fare, which she cooked on the maiden journey to Chichester, he envied her strength and capability, in comparison with Athelyna’s apparent frailty. “Instead, she hath added to thy tasks.”

“Hold thy tongue, as I do not appreciate thy meaning. Art thou so judgmental, given ye hath known her for but a couple of days? Wilt thou criticize her without knowing the full circumstances of her upbringing?” The hurt in Isolde’s expression manifested a vicious reproach, which he heeded. “For as long as I have known ye, thou hast always been a kind and generous man. Wherefore art thou so uncharitable towards thy wife, when thou art the soul of compassion with strangers? As her mate, thou art her lone champion. Without thee, she hath naught. Wilt thou leave her so vulnerable to attack?”

“Thou dost speak the truth, and I am duly chastised.” How he detested it when Isolde spouted unquestionable wisdom, as she did just then. “I am new to the marital state, and I have only thy example to follow.”

“Thy lady and I are two different beings, and thou wilt do well to remember that.” Isolde bent and collected the cloak and hose, which he had strewn upon the wool rug, but she stopped, wiped her brow, and sighed. “It is not easy to be a woman in this world. In many respects, it is a crime punishable by a life sentence of labor and strife, without a proper advocate to fight on her behalf. I am not her rival, and she is not mine, but I will defend her if ye will not, so do not give me reason to usurp thy authority.”

“I stand corrected.” Just then, Athelyna opened her eyes, glanced at him, and yawned. “Art thou unwell?” he asked.

“Nay.” She shook her head and peered at Isolde. “If thou wilt give me but a minute to compose myself, Lady Isolde, I should be too delighted to assisted ye with whatever thee dost require.”

“Nonsense.” Like the mother she had become, Isolde stacked the clothing and walked to the flap. “Get beneath the covers, before ye dost take ill, and I shall return with thy sup.”

“By thy command.” Athelyna bowed her head. Alone with him, she wiped a stray tear. “I have brought shame upon ye, and I apologize.”

“The shame is mine.” Wherefore could he not reconcile himself to his fate, given he spoke the vows? Mayhap Arucard employed the right approach, and Demetrius would do well to trudge the same path, yet something inside him resisted what everyone thought inevitable. “Now do as Isolde bids, before ye get us both in trouble, as she is formidable, especially when crossed.”

“But I heard what ye said, and I would make ye proud.” Given the distressed look on her face, he could have kicked himself. “As thou hast asserted, I am thy wife. Regardless of my previous wishes to join the convent, I am married and must honor my vows.” When he drew back the covers, she hesitated, frowned, and shuffled beneath the blankets and animal skins. “Despite what happened today, I swear I am no delicate flower. If thou wilt but give me a chance to prove myself, I can be of use.”

“The fault is mine for thy deteriorating condition, as I should have insisted ye ride with me.” Indeed, he had considered the option but decided against it, as he did not want her so near.

“In that, we are in agreement.” Bearing a tray with a large bowl, a trencher filled with chunks of bread and strips of dried beef, and a steaming mug, Isolde sniffed in unmasked reproach and then deposited the items on a small table. “Thither is enough food for both of ye. Now I should retire, as Arucard grows impatient.” At the flap, she halted and pointed. “Also, I brought ye a small container of yarrow salve, which thou should rub onto Athelyna’s cheeks, as it will soothe her wind burned flesh.”

“Gramercy, good lady.” Clutching the blanket to her chin, Athelyna wiped away another tear. “I am in thy debt, which I shall repay in full at the

earliest opportunity.”

“Pass a pleasant night, get plenty of rest, and remain in satisfactory health, and we shall consider the debt paid.” Isolde offered his wife a gentle smile. “If thou dost take ill, thou wilt delay my return home, and I long to see my daughter.” She strolled to the exit but halted. To Demetrius, she said, “Secure thy humble abode, as the storm grows strong, and I fear the gale would threaten thy temporary quarters, despite my husband’s adept anchoring.”

“Then I will spare not a drop of the broth, and I would follow any suggestions ye might have to avoid sickness.” He favored Athelyna’s uncommon logic and acquiescence, when she could have protested. “Again, I offer my gratitude, Isolde.”

“And I wish ye uninterrupted sleep, my lady.” After she departed, he tied tight the flaps of his double belled wedge tent and turned to his bride. “Now, I must feed ye.”

“But I am quite capable of managing myself.” Athelyna shifted and grimaced. “First I should remove one of my gowns, as it is a tad restrictive.”

“Hither, I should assist ye.” Moving swift and sure, he eased back the pelts and covers. “Permit me to loosen thy laces.”

“All right.” In seconds, he swept off the heavy wool surcoat and then slackened the cotehardie. “Oh, that is much better. Thank ye.”

Rather than carry his wife to the food, he lifted the tray and dragged the table to a convenient position beside the bed. A large chunk of bread beckoned, and he tore a smaller piece, dipped it in the hot broth, and brought the morsel to Athelyna’s mouth. For an instant, she just stared at him. Then she covered his hand with hers and ate from his grasp.

The subtle brush of her flesh to his gave him a strange sensation, not altogether unpleasant, and he smiled. “Careful, else thou wilt take another bite of my finger.”

“I am sorry about that.” Despite her apology, she grinned, which he decided he liked. “But, in fairness, I knew not what to expect of ye, and I

was afraid. Art thou truly a virgin?”

“Aye.” And it unnerved him more than he wanted to admit. “As I explained, my conviction is such that I have abstained from all carnal activity. Thus I benefit from our deferment, too.”

“Art thou anxious?” She sipped the steaming brew and licked her lips, a heretofore-innocuous affectation he found suddenly appealing, and he could not explain the peculiar stirrings below his belly button. “Because I must confess I am terrified by the prospect of the consummation.”

“It would seem we are a pair, as I, too, am anxious.” Then it occurred to him that he had access to an ally. “Mayhap thou might discuss the matter with Isolde, as she faced similar circumstances, not so long ago, and she seems quite happy with Arucard. Thither art no signs of permanent damage.”

“What a wonderful idea.” Then she quirked her brows. “Thou dost not suspect Isolde will be offended by queries of such a personal nature?”

“Given the noises originating in their tent, at this moment, I think not.” As usual, Arucard and Isolde played a painfully familiar tune, which bespoke their felicitous union.

“Is that what that is?” With an expression of wonder, Athelyna blinked. “I thought some poor wounded beast had wandered into the encampment.”

A particularly lusty howl, human in origin, rose above the wailing winds, and his wife flinched. In silence, of a sort, they finished their meal, and he removed the table to its previous spot, along with the dishes.

And so he confronted the moment he dreaded. The tiny frame of his traveling bed was about half the width of the luxurious four-poster they shared on their wedding night. After removing his boots and tunic, he sat on the opposite side of the mattress. As before, his bride gave him her back, and he stretched long and did the same.

A half-smothered shriek had him glancing over his shoulder, only to discover her gone. “Athelyna, whither art thee?”

“I fell to the ground.” She popped up, and he reached for her.

“Art thou injured?” Once he resituated her, he scooted closer to the edge of the mattress.

“Nay, my lord.” She fluffed her pillow, and he returned to his prior orientation. Their precarious perch shook, as she shuffled beneath the sheet. When she bumped her bottom to his, he toppled to the rug.

“Oh, dear.” His lady sat upright, and he noticed the brooch pinned to her bodice. “Husband, perchance we should face each other, as we rode atop thy destrier?”

“Of course.” He nodded, but inside he trembled at the thought, so he sought distraction, as he maneuvered next to her. “Thou dost wear the bauble.”

“Aye.” As he wrapped his arms about her and pulled her close, her hand brushed the ridge of his man’s yard, and jolting heat shot through his crotch. “Thy gift is precious, and I shall treasure it always.”

“Hast thou had any visions, in keeping with the lore?” Nay, he had no interest in the jewel, and he placed no credence in such folly, but he craved diversion, as she flexed her fingers, extending an innocent but nonetheless potent caress that animated his one-eyed horse with a vengeance.

“Some,” she replied with a yawn. “But I have yet to make any sense of the dreams.” Incomprehensible mumbles signaled she slept.

Humbled by the trust she invested in him, as she rested in his embrace, Demetrius found slumber hard won, and his last thought centered on the discomfiting realization that he desired his wife.

#

Four days anon, Athelyna slipped from the warm bed she shared with Demetrius, careful not to disturb him, gathered her garments, donned her clothing, washed her face, cleaned her teeth, and rushed to the makeshift field kitchen, as had become her habit.

A brisk winter breeze brushed the wool skirt of her surcoat, a crescent of mighty oaks swayed, and she shivered and thrust her hands into her fitchet, as she gazed at the dark skies. The storm that plagued the onset of their journey had, at long last, abated, but clouds filled the heavens, cold air cut like a knife, and snow blanketed the earth, which turned the roads into a hazardous path and slowed their travel.

When she entered the tent, she found Isolde tarrying over a steaming pot. “Prithee, dear friend, how is it ye art always hither, when I rose before dawn?”

“Well, my husband has a rather robust appetite, especially in the morn, thus I am always up with the sun.” She handed Athelyna a wooden spoon. “If thou wilt stir the sop, I shall prepare the bread, as Arucard wishes to depart as soon as possible, that we might regain lost ground.”

“Something smells delicious.” Arucard bent, entered the small structure, smiled at Isolde, slipped an arm about her waist, drew her near, and kissed her—at length.

It was not the open display of affection that shook Athelyna so much as the intensity of the exchange. Never had she glimpsed such unreserved devotion, and the couple gave her hope for a future she had not thought possible. But she had not the courage to enact a similar scene with Demetrius.

At last, the tender twosome parted, but Isolde rubbed her nose to Arucard’s and said, “I love ye, my handsome knight.”

“Ah, my sweet wife, I love ye, too.” With that, the imposing warrior thrust his face to the curve of Isolde’s neck and growled, and she giggled.

“Arucard, we have not the time to sate thy hunger, so thou wilt make due with sustenance.” Isolde gave him a nudge. “Now sit, and I shall serve ye, but do not distract me, as I have dozens of men to feed.”

“By thy command, my lady.” He sketched a salute and winked. Then his stare settled on Athelyna, and she bowed her head. “Good morrow, Athelyna. Is Demetrius awake?”

“Nay, my lord.” She filled a bowl and handed it to Isolde. “He dozed when I left him in our quarters.”

“That is not right, as the husband is supposed to vacate the bed before the wife.” To Athelyna’s dismay, he chuckled. “I must have words with him.”

“Thou wilt do no such thing, else ye mayest room with the guards, as poor Athelyna is new to the marital state, and she hath no need of thy interference.” With a humph, Isolde brought a mug of hot tea to Arucard, along with a trencher of bread. “Eat, and spare our sister thy vast knowledge of women, oh great Nautionnier. As thou hadst thy share of mishaps in the early days of our union, so thou art no one to talk.”

“Thou dost mock me?” Arucard snorted and smacked his wife’s bottom. “I seem to recall ye had no complaints in our tent.”

“And thou didst take thy time about it.” She tossed a napkin in his face. “Now cease thy carping and finish thy meal, as I long for our Roswitha, and I wish to arrive in Chichester, that we might celebrate Christmastide with our family, in our home. If thou dost wish to keep me happy, then make it so, else I can guarantee no one will be happy.”

Holding her breath, Athelyna braced for a sharp rebuke and wondered how she might protect her friend. Without a response, he downed the sop, snatched another chunk of bread, saluted, claimed another kiss, complete with a loud smack, and marched from the tent.

“Isolde, thou art the bravest woman of my acquaintance.” Suppressing a shiver, Athelyna swallowed her trepidation. “For a minute, I thought he might beat ye, for thy defiance.”

“Arucard—beat me?” Isolde set out stacks of trenchers and bowls. “Never would he strike me, because he loves me, and such barbarity is not in his nature, which he assured me from the onset.”

“Didst thou know him, prior to thy nuptials?” Curiosity blossomed, and Athelyna could not resist the query. “Were ye friends?”

“Nay.” With a half-smile and a soft expression, Isolde averted her gaze. “I met Arucard on the steps of the Chapter House, just prior to our

nuptials.”

“Dost thou mean ye had never seen him, until thy wedding?” At the very least, Athelyna had enjoyed amiable conversation with Demetrius during the night she spent with him, in his tent, so he was not necessarily a stranger. “Thou hadst not even spoken, via written correspondence?”

“Aye.” Isolde wiped her hands on an apron and returned to her task, filling bowls with the thin soup. “In fact, I knew not of my impending marriage until the eve of the ceremony, so I had little opportunity to ponder my fate.” With the ladle mid-air, she paused and snickered. “May I confess a secret?”

“Oh, I wish ye would.” Desperate for an ally, Athelyna sought a bond with the estimable noblewoman.

“When I first spied my husband, I almost fainted from fear of him.” To Athelyna’s amazement, Isolde burst into laughter. “That sounds so absurd, given our relationship.”

“But I would argue otherwise, given his size.” Athelyna sidestepped close to her friend, peered at the entrance to the tent, and whispered. “Much like Demetrius, thy spouse is rather intimidating in stature.”

“Only in stature?” Isolde arched a brow, and together they collapsed in good-natured mirth.

“So I have not offended ye?” Still, Athelyna perched on a precarious precipice. “Thou art not displeased?”

“By thy honesty?” Isolde waved and clucked her tongue. “Not at all, my dear, as thou art correct. But I submit ye will change thy mind, when ye dost become better acquainted with thy man, Arucard, and the other knights of the Brethren, as I submit they have much in common with wayward children.”

“And thou art content in thy situation?” She thought better of her intrusive query and retreated a step. “Forget I asked, as I impinge on thy hospitality.”

“No apologies necessary, as I have naught to hide.” With a steaming pot in her grasp, Isolde filled numerous mugs with tea. “But if that is thy way of inquiring as to whether or not I have any regrets regarding my marriage, the answer is simple. Thither is naught to lament, as I found salvation, contentment, and unfailing love, despite those who conspired against me. And while my enemies sought my demise, which they concealed in such lofty terms as honor and duty, to their own ends, I savor paradise. The same fate awaits ye, if thou wilt but seize it.”

“I do not follow.” Athelyna searched her mind, but she could make no sense of Isolde’s statement. Thus far, Demetrius showed no inclination to form a connection rivaling that between Arucard and Isolde. From Athelyna’s current position, it seemed unlikely she would ever win such bliss. “What can I do? And I cannot imagine ye might have enemies.”

“Thou might be surprised, as evil often lurks in the most unexpected places,” Isolde stated with a frown and more than a hint of melancholy. “And art thou not a woman of faith?”

“I am most devoted.” Perplexed, she scratched her cheek. “Wherefore dost thou question my constancy?”

“Thou hast taken the sacrament.” Isolde shrugged. “Thou hast made a pact with God, and thou must honor it, unless thou would break thy oath, sanctioned not only by His Majesty but also by Our Lord.”

“Nay, I would not.” Not since she stood on the steps of the Chapter House had she thought of her circumstances in such simple terms. Then she glanced at the brooch, which she pinned to the bodice of her cotehardie. Thus far, she had focused on the strange dreams, which had yet to reveal the personage of her one true knight.

But did it matter?

“Thou dost woolgather, Athel.” Isolde inclined her head and smiled. “May I call ye Athel? I contrive pet names for everyone in our family.”

“I like that.” She giggled and clutched Isolde’s wrist. “So what am I to do? How can I foster an abiding affection with Demetrius?”

“Well, thou must learn my recipe for cameline meat brewets and sambocade cheesecake, as he is partial to the fare.” Isolde tapped her chin. “And thou must perform all the services for which a good wife is responsible, such as sewing and washing his garments, bathing him, keeping thy shared quarters neat and clean, satisfying him in the marital bed, birthing and raising his heirs, running his household as chatelaine, and supporting his endeavors. In thy spare time, thou must minister to the community. Given thou were an oblate, I presume ye art educated in much of thy tasks.”

“Oh, dear.” Athelyna’s knees buckled, and Isolde retrieved a chair.

“Hither ye should sit.” Isolde offered a mug of tea. “If I had something stronger to offer ye, I would do so, but the wine and the firkin of ale is already packed, yet no one knows thy distress better than I, as I walked in thy shoes not too long ago. And all is not lost. Thou need only take charge, and thou hast me to help ye. By the King’s command, I am to train ye for thy mission, in service to the realm.”

“But I am not afraid of hard work, and I am fine with most of the functions ye mentioned.” Athelyna gulped. “It is the production of heirs that is unutterably foreign to me.”

“No worries, as I am an expert in that arena and can extend sage advice to see ye through the worst of it.” Isolde prepared a tray, poured two mugs of tea, ladled sop into two bowls, and heaped chunks of bread into a trencher. “If thou dost follow my counsel, thou wilt find similar happiness. Now take thy husband his meal, and serve it with a kiss.”

“A kiss?” Athelyna blinked.

“A kiss.” Isolde dipped her chin and grinned. “And deploy thy tongue. Then assess his reaction. If he doth show no signs of interest, then thou must be patient with him, but I doubt it will come to that.”

“And if he responds?” Athelyna was not certain, but she supposed she might dread his active participation even more.

“Enjoy thy benefits as a wife.” Isolde arched a brow. “Believe me, thither art worse things in this world.”

“That is a matter of opinion.” She collected the light repast and trudged through the snow, back to her tent. When she slipped through the flaps, she discovered Demetrius garbed and waiting at the small table. “Good morrow, my lord.”

“My lady.” As she neared, he stood. “I could have fetched my own food.”

“Ah, but it is my duty to tend thy needs.” She rolled her shoulders and prayed for calm, because she was about to make her move. “Art thou hungry?”

“I am, indeed.” How handsome he looked, in his black breeches, crisp white shirt, and dark blue tunic, which only intensified his silvery eyes. After arranging their meager feast, she faced him.

Time suspended, as she studied his angular cheekbones, high forehead, and thick black hair. Isolde was correct. Thither were worse things in life than sharing the world with a man as beauteous as Demetrius de Blackbourne, and he was Athelyna’s husband. He was hers.

Framing his jaw, she perched on her toes and pressed her mouth to his.

For a few seconds, he did naught, and her confidence faltered. But then he rested his hands to her hips, shifted, and brushed his flesh to hers, and she could have cried. Slowly, so as not to frighten her shy spouse, she parted her lips and prodded him with her tongue. At that point, everything melded into some unfamiliar but enticing sensation.

Gasping for breath, she separated from him, but the reprieve was short-lived, as he took control of their sweet exchange. New and tempting emotions blossomed, and she gave herself to the alluring experience. Fire simmered in her veins, obliterating her hesitation.

And then Demetrius broke their oh-so-sumptuous interlude and set her at arm’s length. Before she could say anything, he took two steps back, reached for a chair, bent, missed the seat, and landed on the ground.

Well, that was definitely a sign.

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DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER SIX

The sun sat low on the horizon, as Arucard signaled the caravan to search for a suitable camp for the night, and Demetrius scanned the area, assessing various advantages in the surrounding terrain. Nestled in a blanket, asleep in his lap, Athelyna rested against his chest, and he took care not to disturb her as he heeled the flanks of his destrier and rode ahead of the line.

A sennight had passed since they wed and departed London, and while he presumed they would form no lasting bond until they reached Chichester, and perhaps anon, it had become apparent his bride had other plans. And much to his surprise, from him she garnered no complaints or opposition.

Fascinated by and obsessed with her lips, he craved the gentle kisses with which she favored him at every turn, to the extent that he could not sleep without first indulging in her tender caresses. A thousand times more succulent than his cherished brewets, and far sweeter than a sambocade cheesecake, his wife presented temptation such as he had never known, and he seemed powerless to resist her.

So he bowed to her lead and constructed no defenses, not that he needed any from the weaker sex. But she won his regard with a singular devotion to duty and an uncanny conjecture of his every necessity. Indeed, whatever he required, she presented the essentials before he could voice a request, and her ability to service even the most minute demands, sans argument, unnerved him, because she left him with no reasonable justification to hold her at a distance.

“Hello, my lord husband.” As he gazed upon her cherubic countenance, she cupped his cheek and drew him close. “Thou art lost in thought and dost appear too serious. Mayhap I should not intrude on thy reflection, but I would claim what I am owed, after I brought ye a lovely meal this morn.” And she covered his mouth with hers, as she hugged him about the waist.

In the past, the elementary practice struck him as a rather mundane ritual, as a welcome or a farewell, innocent in nature, often with a much-cherished parent. So when his bride employed the habit, he anticipated an innocuous exchange, a harmless action born of duty to foster fellow feeling. That was not what he received, in return, especially when she mingled her tongue with his, as she did just then, and his arse still smarted, along with his pride, from that initial connubial activity.

As always, his one-eyed dragon woke from slumber, and he shifted in the saddle, given the discomfit of unyielding leather. But thither was something altogether humbling about the trust his bride invested in him, as she relied on him to protect her, without reservation, during their journey, and he loved holding her in his arms, almost as much as he treasured her habit of twining their fingers, when they strolled the encampment.

“Art thou comfortable, Athel?” When he employed the name Isolde devised, his lady squealed with unmasked delight and nipped at his neck and ear, which left him clenching his gut against spontaneous release.

“I am always warm in thy embrace.” She smiled and glanced at the sky. “It grows dark. Are we to stop soon?”

“Aye.” In that instant, Demetrius spied a glade sheltered by a thick copse of trees, which he counted a fortuitous distraction, and he waved at Arucard. “Thither looks hospitable.”

“Halt.” Arucard drew rein. “Let us break our journey hither, and make haste to set up the tents, with additional anchors, as the winds art strong, and it appears we are in for another rough night.”

“If thou wilt put me down, I will construct the kitchen with Isolde, that I might feed ye.” Once again, she pressed close, chest to chest, kissed him, and slid from his grasp. As she reached the ground, she slipped on the snowy surface, lost her balance, and clutched his ankle. “*Oh.*”

“Careful.” Before he realized he had moved, he leaped from his mount and held her upright. As usual, she leaned into him, their hips bumped for the briefest moment, and he traced the gentle curve of her jaw. “I should be vexed if thou dost injure thyself.”

“Thou art my hero.” When she nuzzled his palm, his loins erupted in flames, and he gritted his teeth. “Now I must cook something special, to express my appreciation of thy gallantry.”

“Then I should construct our temporary dwelling, that we might dine in comfort.” For a scarce second, he maintained his calm façade, but the beast raged, and Demetrius could not ignore the call of his body. But what could he do about his problem?

“Thou dost tarry.” Arucard smacked Demetrius on the back. “I have dispatched the men to prepare thy quarters, and we should secure the horses.”

“Brother, I need thy counsel on a private matter.” Demetrius checked the immediate vicinity, as he would not air his difficulty for the delectation of his fellow knights. “And I am loathe to bother ye, but I cannot endure another night of such suffering, as I fear I might devolve into madness.”

“Art thou ill?” With a countenance of genuine concern, Arucard studied Demetrius. “What is it? Thou canst tell me anything.”

“When thou first married Isolde, and prior to thy consummation, did ye fight a losing battle with thy anatomy?” He glanced left and then right. “That is to say, did ye wrestle with an uncompromising and downright unpredictable man’s yard?” Painful silence rode in the wake of his query,

until Arucard broke and surrendered to a series of guffaws. “Never ye mind, and forget I asked.”

“Wait.” With a final snicker to which Demetrius might have taken exception, had he not required his friend’s assistance, Arucard peered over his shoulder and then shuffled his feet. “Tell me the truth. Hath thy one-eyed horse become unusually high-spirited and blithe since ye wed Athelyna?”

“Thou dost grossly underestimate my pain, as it is the worst torment ye can imagine.” Demetrius struggled with the affliction at that very instant. “Indeed, I could bounce groats off my man’s yard, and I know not how to subdue my most insouciant protuberance, as it seems to have a will of its own.”

“Brother, I do not have to imagine it, as I survived it, myself.” Arucard rolled his eyes and shook his head. “And the early hours proved particularly traumatic, as I often woke with an unwelcomed surprise in my braies, such that Isolde once inquired as to whether or not I had an accident in our bed. Believe me, it was the loneliest, most humiliating campaign I have ever fought, but thither art ways to relieve thy anguish.”

“How?” He flexed his thighs in anticipation of relief. “What can I do to ease the tension?”

“I suggest ye embark on a stroll in the woods, far enough from the encampment to ensure solitude, and then ye should take thyself in hand and choke thy fire-breathing dragon.” Arucard chuckled. “And in the morrow, when thy capable wife fetches thy morning meal, make quick use of a fortuitously placed brazier and see to thy needs in thy shelter. Trust me, it is a great way to start thy day, it is the only thing that keeps me from ravishing Isolde, it will do the same for ye, and ye will thank me.”

“Art thou certain?” The prospect rattled him, as he had no experience in the questionable behavior. “Forgive my ignorance, but I know not whither to begin.”

“Thither is not much to the practice. Just polish thy longsword.” Arucard shrugged. “Given thy circumstances, which I suspect art dire, else never would ye have broached the subject, thou dost require no skill.

Yanking thy Franciscan monk's bald head, back and forth, a couple of times should prove successful and alleviate thy discomfit. But if thou dost have difficulty, just envision thy wife's visage, pretend she dotes upon ye, and that should suffice."

"I cannot believe how far I have fallen, in search of some sense of normalcy in this game called marriage." The company constructed the quarters with remarkable effectiveness, which seemed the perfect opportunity to make his move, so Demetrius dipped his chin, disregarded Arucard's mock salute, and trudged into the thicket.

The ice and snow presented a hazardous trail, amid the coppice, and twice he lost his footing and almost ended up on his arse. But at his rear the voices dimmed, so he chose a spot shielded by a large oak. After a quick survey of the area, he removed his gloves, untied his breeches and braies, and drew forth his stout and stubborn man's yard.

A cool breeze had him tightening his buttocks, and he shivered as he initiated the deed. To his chagrin and consolation, on the second tug of his firm flesh, he found completion, and his seed burst forth in rapid-fire spurts that left him gasping for breath and leaning against the tree for support.

Thither was a time when he would have considered such behavior forbidden, as the church frowned on the practice of self-gratification. But Demetrius harbored an ugly secret, which he shared with no one. Not even Arucard, Demetrius's closest confidant, knew of the foul reality. At some point, someone would discover his game, but he would not reveal it on a whim. Instead, he concealed the truth, and it festered deep in his soul. For a moment, he stared at the sky and heaved a sigh of relief, as delicate flakes danced on an ever-strengthening gale, so he righted his clothing and returned to the encampment.

"Thy accommodation is secured, Sir Demetrius." Grimbaud Van Daalen, one of Arucard's most trusted lancer's, dipped his chin. "I spread a rug, lit thy brazier, situated thy table and chairs, and set up thy bedframe and mattress."

"Thank ye, sirrah." Demetrius locked forearms with the guard. "Thou art a good man, and I wager thou art eager to see thy wife and newborn son, upon our arrival at Chichester Castle."

“I would be lying if I indicated otherwise.” The young father grinned. “And I envy thy good fortune, given thy bride travels with ye, as I miss my sweet Isotta.”

“Well, we should reach the coast in the next few days, so thou wilt enjoy a happy reunion soon enough.”

“I pray thou art correct, as my bride will be quite irritated if I miss our babe’s first Christmastide.” Grimbaud rubbed the back of his neck. “Isotta was rather annoyed by our journey, so close to the holiday, and I promised to make amends for my absence.”

“I am sure whatever ye dost manage, thy lady will be appeased.” And in that instant, Demetrius thought of Athelyna. “Now I should assist Arucard with the horses.”

“Then I wish ye a pleasant eventide, Sir Demetrius.” Grimbaud bowed and rushed toward the guard’s tent.

As Demetrius approached the Brethren, Arucard smiled. “Well that did not take long.”

“Shut up.” Demetrius drew a blanket from the wagon and draped it over his destrier.

“Whither is thy woman?” Morgan wagged his brows. “I am surprised ye can tear thyself away from her, as thou hast played the attentive husband like a past master.”

“Mayhap Athelyna wears the breeches in the family.” With a hearty guffaw, Geoffrey elbowed Aristide. “What say ye, brother? Hath our comrade shrunk since his wedding?”

“Indeed.” Aristide clucked his tongue and scratched his cheek. “He appears to have declined in a particular aspect.”

“In that I will not argue, but it is not so bad as ye might think.” Demetrius gazed at Arucard and arched a brow. “Of course, they will learn when it is their time to marry.”

And so all humor ceased.

After feeding and watering the animals, wherein Arucard shared additional recommendations, Demetrius walked back to his small abode. The wind whipped and howled, and when he slipped through the opening, he was disappointed to discover Athel had not returned. Then it dawned on him that he could arrange the sheets, blankets, and pelts, as he waited for her, so he set about the task. As she preferred the thicker pillow, he fluffed the cushion and rested it on her side of the bed, just as she summoned him.

“My lord, art thou hither?” She sneezed. “Pray, untie the flaps, as I bear our sup on a tray, and I fear I shall blow away.”

“Hither am I, now come inside, my lady wife, before ye catch a chill.” He parted the canvas until she passed, and then he tethered the laces. “The storm rages, once again.”

“I know, as we had a terrible time keeping the blaze going, so we could heat the blancmange.” With a dusting of snow on her cloak, she bent, set the meal on the table, stood upright, and fiddled with the clasp on her outerwear. “Oh, my hands are too cold, and I cannot unhook the fastener.”

“Let me do it.” In seconds, he set her free and draped the damp garment over the back of the chair, to dry. As she uncovered their trenchers, he loosened the laces of her surcoat. “Lift thy arms.”

“Thou hast become quite skilled at removing my clothing, my lord husband.” A ghost of a smile played on her lips, and her cheeks boasted a charming shade of pink. “Mayhap I should employ ye as my maid.”

“And perchance thou mayest sleep in thy linen chemise, as I shall keep ye warm.” Her playful tone signaled it was time to advance her knowledge of his body, as Arucard suggested.

“Of course, I shall indulge my knight, as an obedient wife should.” Abiding his request, she permitted him to strip away the heavy wool apparel, until naught remained but her intimates. Then she shivered. “Oh, it is cold.”

“Get thee between the covers, while I serve ye.” As on prior occasions, he situated the table to enable him to dote on Athel, and he

should have enjoyed what appeared to be a relaxing eventide, yet something nagged at his conscience, when he joined her. “May I ask ye a question?”

“I am thine to command.” Opening her mouth, she accepted the portion of blancmange he fed her.

“Wherefore hast thou changed thy mind in regard to our union?” In a flash, he recalled their heated exchange in the Great Hall on the eve of their ceremony. “Thou were against our marriage, yet now thou dost sing another tune. Art thou happy, Athel?”

“If I may offer ye candor, I would simply say that as I have taken the sacrament, I must honor our pact with Our Lord and the responsibilities invested therein. To do less would be akin to committing the most grievous sin, and I would not jeopardize my soul to satisfy a girl’s dream. Regardless of my onetime aspirations, those goals must perforce yield to the oath I swore before the archbishop.” He held a goblet to her mouth, and she sipped the wine. “It is my duty to obey ye, in all things, and I pledge to do so, until death do us part.”

“Well said, my lady.” While he maintained a relaxed demeanor, inside he pondered her response.

In silence, they dined, emptying the trenchers and consuming the wine and ale. After guttering the candles, he restocked the brazier, shed his tunic and breeches, and climbed into bed. As usual, she turned into him, and he faced her. And although he had planned to initiate an exploration, of sorts, of their respective bodies, his enthusiasm had waned.

When Demetrius spoke his vows, he had no interest in fostering an emotional attachment to Athelyna. Rather, he intended to guard himself from her, to hold her at a distance. Instead, she captured his attention, in a way he could not comprehend, and he wanted more. The problem was he had no idea what that meant.

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A vicious battle raged, sword clashed with sword, and an unknown champion protected a group of innocent pilgrims, beneath the glare of a brutal sun. With incomparable skill and speed the valiant knight charged

numerous assailants, kicking sand in his wake and dispatching his enemies with lethal aim, until the enemy cowered in the shadows of the faceless warrior, but he was merciful. Anon, as he walked amid the bodies scattered across the dunes, the sweet stench of blood hung heavy in the air, and he doffed his gauntlets.

And then everything shifted.

The encroaching night sky signaled the advancing eventide, and the defender entered a tent. As he removed his armor, he revealed an intriguing mark etched into his flesh and barely visible in the soft light from the brazier. It was the Crusader's Cross, black in color, and marred by a distinct scar in the shape of a jagged spike.

Athel jolted awake and alert. An inventory of her surroundings conveyed that she remained in transit with her spouse. Just as quick, she stroked the brooch, which she removed only to secure it on a fresh chemise.

The quiet predawn hours offered precious time for reflection, in the peaceful solitude of the tent, before the guards proceeded to break down the camp. As always, she attempted to discern the significance of the vision that visited every night, without fail. Given her oh-so-modest knight refused to bare his back in her presence, she had yet to make a thorough examination of his torso, for the diverting mark.

Yawning, she stretched in her husband's capable embrace and grazed something firm with her fingers. After numerous conversations with Isolde, Athel understood the implications of the enthralling aspect of Demetrius's body, even though they had yet to consummate their vows. True to his word, he had not forced her to surrender her maidenhead, which put her at ease in his company. But his chivalrous behavior inspired another response she had not anticipated—curiosity.

Yielding to an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, which burgeoned beyond her control in the wake of her departure from the convent, she traced the stout form of his man's yard and reached lower. So much about their respective forms were different, and she ached to admire his bare physique.

“Good morrow, sweet wife.” Demetrius shifted his hips, and she almost jumped out of her skin as she halted her exploration. “Nay, do not cease thy tender caresses on my account.”

“Thou art not offended?” Ashamed, she burrowed her face to his chest. “I have not angered ye?”

“Wherefore should I be offended or angry?” He chuckled, and her anxiety abated. “Need I remind ye we are married?”

“Nay, as I am well aware of our status, and that is what drives my inquisitive spirit, given thither was naught like ye in Coventry.” When she risked a peek at him, he rewarded her with a broad smile, and she realized she had overreacted. “My lord, although I am not yet prepared to relinquish that which is thine by law and the sacrament, to seal our union, I wish to know ye better, but I am not certain how to go about it. I would not make thy acquaintance on the night we choose to do the deed. Rather, I would have some familiarity with thy anatomy, to assuage my trepidation, which I must confess is mountainous. May I touch ye?”

“Thou dost make excellent sense, and I am amenable to thy plan.” But he closed his eyes and groaned when she resumed her survey of his most male member. “Perchance thou wilt grant me the same privilege with thy person, as I am just as captivated by thy feminine curves.”

“Thou would have me return the favor?” At the prospect, she gulped. Then again, Demetrius had not hurt her, and she believed he never would, so she dipped her chin. “All right.”

The instant he rested his palm to her breast, she gave vent to a half-smothered sob, but hers was not a cry of pain, sorrow, or alarm. Instead, her audible exhalation manifested the wonder of so many delicious, virgin sensations, which she savored as he fondled her flesh.

To her surprise, he untied his braies, grasped her wrist, and brought her into direct contact with his length, and she almost swooned as he tutored her in an illicit massage. And when he loosened her chemise and pressed on her enticing caresses, skin to skin, unlike anything she had ever before experienced, she flexed her fingers, and something strange happened.

Grunting and grimacing, he gritted his teeth, and a hot substance spattered her hand. Sure that she had caused irreparable harm to her man, she tried to withdraw, but he held her fast. At last, she could take no more, and the tears flowed.

“My lord, I am sorry.” Now she shook with dread, as she might have forever ruined their chance at happiness and scarred him for life. “Whatever I did wrong, I apologize. Pray, forgive me.”

“Prithee, a moment, Athel.” He kissed her forehead and sighed. “But allay thy concerns, as thou hast done naught wrong.” Still she wept, while he shifted and thrust his hips, until he exhaled and laughed. “Oh, my lady, how I needed that.”

“Thou art not angry with me?” Beneath the weight of his scrutiny, she faltered.

“My dear, I am relieved, as thou hast brought me to completion.” He rubbed his nose to hers. “Dost thou not comprehend what ye have done?”

“How would I know?” With the sheet, he wiped her cheeks. “Remember, I was raised in a convent.”

“But thou didst tend the sick and the wounded, did ye not?” He toyed with her nipple, and she clenched her gut.

“Aye, but that is a far cry from the activity in which we engaged hither.” In light of his lighthearted demeanor, she checked her trepidation. “Pray, explain what occurred.”

“Thither is no mystery.” Rolling onto his back, he cast a charming grin, and she responded in kind. “Thou hast pleased me, and thou dost bear my seed as proof.”

“Did I?” At that revelation, she sat upright and studied the tacky matter on her skin, which struck her as mundane. Then she pulled back the covers, gazed upon his most male characteristic for the first time, and was not impressed. “It is rather ugly, is it not?”

“I beg thy pardon?” Now Demetrius looked upset. “While I am not the most experienced man, in terms of carnal pursuits, I believe it is of estimable size and form, and it certainly functions as intended, as thou hast witnessed for thyself.”

“But I mean no insult.” For a few seconds, she poked and prodded him, and he did not protest. “Yet thou must admit it is reminiscent of a soggy potage of roysons.”

“Thou dost compare my longsword to a soggy potage of roysons?” Propped on an elbow, he furrowed his brow, and she could not stifle a giggle. “Regardless of its appearance, I wager it will suffice when I claim ye.” Ah, his tone proclaimed his playful mood, which she adored. And when he rubbed his nose to hers, she pressed her lips to his as an olive branch.

“Which thou wilt do once we reach Chichester Castle.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Aye, as I would not take ye on the road, in these crude quarters.” He traced the curve of her jaw. “However, we shall decide, together, the appropriate date.”

“That suits me, my lord.” Then she noted the sunlight filtered by the canvas. “Oh, but I am late, and Isolde requires my assistance, that we might eat and continue our journey.”

“Then I should rise and grant ye the privacy of our tent.” And so he brought her thoughts full circle.

“That is not necessary.” She scooted from the mattress to collect her hose, gown, and surcoat. “As thou hast mentioned, again and again, we are wed. Indeed, this eventide, when we break our travel, I should assist ye in thy bath, as I have been remiss in my duties.”

“My lady, while thy offer is tempting, I am unaccustomed to such luxuries and would do the deed, myself.” Of course, he would. And to further thwart her goal, he eased from the bed and tugged on his tunic.

“But thou dost misunderstand.” Sorting through her belongings, she located her comb and smoothed her wayward hair, as she prepared to make

him an even exchange she never would have dared without Isolde's encouragement. "My motives are selfish, as I had hoped ye might return the favor."

The poor man stood silent, with his beauteous mouth agape, and then he shuffled his feet and shifted his weight. Just as it seemed he would voice a rejoinder, he blinked.

"Thou dost wish me to wash ye?" Was it her imagination, or did he seem open to her suggestion? "Thou would allow me to gaze upon thy nude body?"

"Art thou shocked?" In truth, she had not thoroughly contemplated her proposal prior to extending the invitation and fought unwelcome timidity.

"I am surprised, but I am more than willing to accommodate ye," he declared with a wink. "Perchance, one day we will share the ancere."

"Based on the tenets of our faith, I would express an objection, but Isolde praises such undertakings to foster marital affection, so I will not gainsay what I have not tried." Mayhap it was the appropriate occasion to reveal a secret she had been concealing. "My lord, I know it hath been not quite a fortnight since we spoke our vows, but I no longer regret marrying ye, as I owe ye a great debt, and no one could be more shocked than I, regarding the precipitous development. While I will not claim to covet love, as it is too soon to manifest such bonds of devotion, I do hold ye in high esteem, which I hope will grow into an abiding commitment. And our journey hath exposed me to so much more of the world than I ever would have learned about in the books and journals in the Carmelite's library, as an oblate, so I would tour the coast with ye, build a home with ye, and raise a family with ye, when the opportunity presents itself. Indeed, life beyond the walls of the convent hath much to entice a provincial, and I look forward to so many new experiences with my new husband."

"Thou dost humble me, gentle wife." Well, that was not the response for which she yearned. "Now we should be about our business, as we are but two day's ride from Chichester Castle."



DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER SEVEN

The sun shone in a clear sky, sending bright rays of light reflecting on the snow, which glittered like a sea of diamonds. Traveling in advance of the procession, Demetrius shifted in the saddle, shielded his eyes, bent his head, and peered at Athel. Swaddled in his lap, she smiled when he caught her studying him again.

“Wherefore dost thou scrutinize my profile?” He cast a stern expression, to which she giggled.

“I was thinking of last night and this morning.” As usual, she blushed, and she harkened sweet memories of the first time he bathed her and her maiden completion, which he managed just after dawn, using his fingers, in their bed. “Wilt thou repeat thy tender ministrations this eventide?”

“Didst thou enjoy thyself?” He could not resist teasing her, even as she burrowed her face against his chest and squealed, in much the same fashion as she had when he deployed the soap to her breasts. Cautious of

those who might overhear their conversation, he whispered, “My lady wife, I will do whatever thou dost wish, if ye will scream for me again.”

“Oh, my lord.” Closing her eyes, she squeezed him. “I do not believe I could stop it, if I tried.”

Of course, his innocent bride did not realize he gained just as much pleasure from their somewhat clumsy interludes, and he would maintain that secret, as a matter of pride. While her original plan was to wash him, he simply would not allow it, as he could not control his body in her presence, but that was not his fault, as she posed a most delightful challenge he had not foreseen.

Given her strict upbringing, she was, in so many ways, a newborn babe, and she wanted to try everything, at once. And during the previous sup, she opted to sample his ale. The end result was one he would never forget, as she consumed the contents of his large tankard and another half-portion, and then she all but seduced him, if he could call her adorable maneuvers that. But in her altered state, she let down her guard and presented a whole other side of herself, which he found unutterably appealing and impossible to resist.

“Then once we make camp, and we retire, I shall satisfy ye, if thou wilt stop staring at me.” Just thinking of another sweet respite roused his fire-breathing dragon. But the sensation was short-lived, when he spied a patrol rounding the bend, recognized the colors of their standard, reined in, and drew his sword. “*Arucard.*”

“What is it?” Athelyna stretched upright, but he held her still.

“Shh.” Glancing over his shoulder, he noted the Brethren had hastened their pace, and then he searched for a safe haven. “We ride through the northern edge of Winchester, en route to Chichester Castle, and these men hail from a local nobleman who hath not supported Arucard’s position, so thither may be trouble. If necessary, I will put ye on the verge, and I would have ye shelter beneath the trees until I come for ye.”

“Yea, my lord.” She dipped her chin, but the fear in her green gaze gave him pause. “Is Winchester not the place we are to eventually settle?”

“It will be all right, Athel. And we will do as the King commands, when we receive our orders.” To comfort her, he cupped her cheek and gave her a quick kiss. “Just do as I say, and we will survive.”

“Greetings, good sir.” A guard raised his hand, and the company came to a halt. “I am Sander Lachaille, majordomo of Saltwood Keep.” Sander averted his gaze, just as Arucard joined Demetrius. “Lord Sussex, this is a surprise. What brings ye to Winchester?”

“We are en route from London and Sir Demetrius’s wedding, to Chichester Castle.” Mirroring Demetrius’s stance, Arucard rested his hand on the hilt of his weapon, because the master of Saltwood Keep, Renoldus Van Hermant, did not support His Majesty, in the wake of the battle that followed Isolde’s trial, conviction, and subsequent beating for treason. “Thither is trouble?”

The entire nefarious affair had been a result of the late Lord Rochester’s double dealing, in a failed insurgence to usurp the throne, using counterfeit burgage plots to steal property. To everyone’s horror, the earl sacrificed his own daughter, in a haunting display of brutality that Demetrius would never forget, in an unscrupulous quest for power. In the aftermath, Isolde’s father and her brother were executed.

“Aye, Lord Sussex. And felicitations, Sir Demetrius.” Sander motioned to the rear. “Just across the border, in thy territory, the de Cadby’s suffered an incursion on their lands, as armed bandits attacked the estate and stole cattle, and thither art numerous dead and wounded.”

“What of Aeduard de Cadby?” Demetrius asked, as the gadling was a trusted ally. “Is he among the injured? Didst thou offer assistance?”

“To my knowledge, he was unharmed and tends his people, as he should, given they are his responsibility.” With a smirk, Sander arched a brow. “And we were dispatched to protect Van Hermant’s interests and naught more, thus we leave ye to continue thy travel.” With that, Sander heeled the flanks of his destrier and steered north.

“Shameful.” Isolde drew back the hood of her cloak. “Arucard, I should prepare to care for our citizens, and I need to organize the wagon.”

“Demetrius, I am trained to provide curative aid, and I would assist Isolde, with thy permission.” In his grasp, Athelyna wiggled free of the wool blanket. “Pray, let me serve those in need, my lord. This is my calling.”

“Of course.” To say he was proud of his wife, in that instant, was to say too little. And as soon as her feet hit the ground, she went to work, issuing directives to various Chichesters. “What manner of woman have I married?”

“A spirited woman, I suspect.” Arucard chuckled. “God be praised.”

“Thou dost mock my situation.” Athelyna climbed to the seat, beside Isolde, and when she noted Demetrius’s regard, she smiled.

“Nay. I remark on a commonality we share, and thou art blessed.” Arucard signaled the column and set a hurried pace. “Now, let us continue our journey, that we might be of support to our ally.”

With heightened awareness, Demetrius urged his mount, and the caravan traversed the curve. As the landscape spread wide before him, he glimpsed the carnage of which Sander spoke. Several motionless forms littered the earth, excepting a small collective gathered on the perimeter of the glade. “God’s teeth. How could they refuse to provide assistance?”

“Because Van Hermant is a mean-spirited old fool.” Arucard shook his head. “Ever since his son was killed in the aftermath of Isolde’s trial, he has blamed me for his misery. But I suspect he was a wretch in advance of our arrival on these shores.”

Aeduard de Cadby, a local resident who conspired with the Brethren to liberate Isolde, saluted. “Good sirrahs, I am gratified to see ye, as my men require thy aid.”

“Thither art many wounded?” Isolde inquired.

“Lady Sussex, as always, it is a pleasure.” With a flourish, de Cadby bowed. “Thither art twelve injured and six dead. If thou canst work thy magic, as thou art an excellent physic, I would be forever in thy debt.”

“Given I owe ye a debt I can never repay, I should be delighted to provide medicaments to thy people. And thou art fortunate that I am accompanied by my new sister, as she is trained to offer healing treatment.” Isolde draped an arm about Athelyna’s shoulders. “Permit me to introduce Demetrius’s wife, Athelyna, the countess of Wessex.”

“My lady.” The gadling smoothed his hair and grinned. “Welcome to Chichester.”

To Demetrius’s satisfaction, his charming spouse averted her stare and blushed, as was her way. And then she went to work.

“My lord, fetch me some clean water.” Athel knelt beside a fallen guard. “I must clean the gash, mend the flesh, and bandage his thigh.”

“Aye, my lady wife.” Despite his playful tone, she took no note of him as she focused on her tasks.

And so he abided her requests, issued in quick succession. While she assessed her charges, he worked with the Brethren and Aeduard to construct their camp for the night. After some organization, the patients were moved to a large tent, whither Athel and Isolde tarried.

For Demetrius, his bride excelled in her craft, and he could not have been more satisfied with her performance. With her delicate hands, she tended the soldiers, washing various injuries, setting a broken bone, and extending words of solace and encouragement.

When she realized one individual’s condition was beyond the point of simple curatives and her knowledge, she sat at his side and squeezed his fingers. “Art thou from Chichester?”

“Aye. I have resided hither, all my life.” The unfortunate soul grimaced. “And thou?”

“Nay.” She wiped his brow. “I was born in Coventry, and I journey hither, with my new husband, to eventually make a home in Winchester. What is thy name?”

“He is blessed, as thou art beauteous.” The guard choked, and Demetrius handed Athel a mug of Adam’s ale. “And I am called Dreue, my

lady.”

“Thither is anything more I can do to make ye comfortable?” How calm she remained, as she held the cup to Dreue’s mouth.

“My mother always kissed my forehead, when she bade me enjoy a pleasant sleep.” He closed his eyes and groaned. “Pray, angel. Wilt thou do the same?”

“Of course.” As she abided the request, Demetrius noted the lad passed to the hereafter, with a smile on his face. Then Athelyna lowered her chin. “*In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.*”

For several minutes, she bowed her head in prayer, and he tried to summon an intercession, some appeal for peace, yet such petitions eluded him. Inside, he remained an empty shell, bereft of a single heartfelt plea and incapable of correcting the situation.

Imprisoned in a tortuous cell of his own making, he knew not how to escape the torment that bound him to a shallow reality. Yet he found a glimmer of light amid the clouds. Indeed, Athelyna persisted as a ray of sunshine in his otherwise dark existence, and he craved her company.

“Come, Athel. Thou hast done all ye could, and he at last rests.” Demetrius provided balance as she stood. As he tucked a stray tendril behind her ear, he bent and touched his lips to hers. “Although His Majesty commanded me to the altar, I could not be more content with his choice. My dear, I am proud of ye, as thou didst credit to our shared name.”

“Praise, indeed.” In that instant, she wiped the tears from her cheeks and grinned, as they strolled toward the field kitchen. “The hour grows late, and I should bathe. Shall I collect thy sup, my lord?”

“Ah, I believe we have a prior commitment, and I look forward to it.” With a loud smack, he claimed another boon and swatted her bottom, in play. “I must check that all is well with Arucard, and then I will meet ye in our tent.”

“Do not dally, my lord.” His woman splayed her palms to his chest, and the usual desire flickered, as a welcomed balm to his troubled soul. “As I am hungry.”

“Lady Wessex, I am thy most willing servant.” He winked and admired the sway of her hips as she walked to the wagon and joined Isolde.

Demetrius located the Brethren and de Cadby near a large fire.

“The boothalers attacked as we moved the cattle to the north fields.” Aeduard rubbed the back of his neck. “We were ambushed and outnumbered, thus I suspect they watched us prior to launching their endeavor.”

“And thou dost believe they hailed from Winchester?” Geoffrey inquired.

“Aye.” Aeduard nodded. “We chased them across the border of our lands. And this is not the first raid, as we have suffered numerous such incursions, which have become regular, of late. Given thither is no one to govern the territory, disorder reigns supreme in Winchester.”

“That will change, soon enough.” Arucard glanced at Demetrius. “His Majesty intends to install the new Lord Wessex in Winchester Castle, and his first order of business is to bring the rule of law to the region.”

“And when will that happen?” asked Aeduard.

“The King did not specify.” Arucard scratched his temple. “But I am to instruct Demetrius in the day to day demands of rule, and Isolde is to tutor Athelyna in similar fashion, that the happy couple will be prepared to assume their positions, at the appropriate time.”

“So how doth our merry friend enjoy thy union?” Rocking on his heels, Aeduard snickered.

“Judging from the peculiar noises that emanated from his tent this morrow, I would argue he finds it quite well.” Morgan chuckled, until Arucard slapped the back of Morgan’s head. “*Ouch*. That hurt.”

“Good.” Arucard arched a brow. “As that is what I intended.”

“Arucard, that is not fair.” With a frown, Aristide folded his arms. “In light of recent events, it is only natural that we art curious, as it appears we art all for the altar.”

“Not I,” Geoffrey proclaimed with a scowl. “I shall resist to my last breath.”

“I suppose His Majesty will accommodate ye, when the time comes.” No matter how many arguments the unwed Brethren posed, Arucard always defended his occupation. “But do not be so impetuous, as thou mayest find a lady of estimable worth. And if thou art truly lucky, ye mayest find love.”

“Is that how ye dost view Athelyna?” Aristide inclined his head and snorted. “Or dost thou wish ye had opted for the axe?”

“Oh, it is not so bad, as Arucard suggests.” Demetrius tugged at his tunic and tried to ignore Geoffrey’s mocking countenance, Morgan’s wink, and Aristide’s smug confidence. If only Demetrius could muster the fortitude of Arucard’s conviction. Instead, he failed. “But I suppose one woman is much the same as the next, and thither art moments when I would have welcomed the axe.”

#

The rumble of mirth on the heels of Demetrius’s bold remark struck Athelyna as a cruel blow to the cheek, and she bowed her head in shame. So he preferred an axe to her? In truth, he regretted their marriage, despite the sweet moments they shared, and that knowledge cut like a knife, given her change of heart.

Holding a tray bearing several tankards and an ewer of ale, she waited until the laughter subsided to enter the tent and make her presence known. Clearing her throat, she set the items on a small table. “Isolde thought ye might favor thy beverage of choice.”

“Ah, that is my wife.” Arucard clapped his hands once and then smacked Demetrius on the back. “Enjoy thyselves, good gentles, and I shall see ye on the morrow, which is not so far off. Now I believe I shall retire to my warm bed and my lady, as a simple drink cannot compete with Isolde, and I am not embarrassed to admit it.”

“Rest well, brother.” Morgan elbowed Arucard. “If thou dost rest at all.”

As the men traded insults, Isolde filled the mugs and ignored her spouse. To her chagrin, he did not pay her the same courtesy.

“Hast thou completed thy duties?” Demetrius settled his hand at the swell of her hip, in a shocking display of familiarity, in the company of his friends, which conflicted with his proclamation. Yet she recalled his hurtful words. “Shall we keep our scheduled activity?”

“I should tend my patients, my lord.” In that instant, she could not abide his touch, and a plan formed in her mind. She would run. To spare him further discomfit, she would flee to an abbey or a convent and beg for refuge. “And as Arucard remarked, ere long it will be dawn, and I would assist Isolde by preparing the wounded for travel to Chichester Castle. Mayhap we can postpone our respite, as I can hardly justify such luxury as a bath, in the midst of so much turmoil. Perchance, another time.”

“Indeed, Arucard insists the injured recover under his protection.” Demetrius frowned, cupped her chin, and brought her gaze to his. “Art thou unwell?”

“Nay, my lord.” To avoid suspicion, Athelyna drew on the obvious response. “But it hath been an eventful and onerous day, thus I am tired.” To ease his worry, she offered a kiss as compensation, which exacted far greater payment from her than she anticipated. “Go, and gain thy earned respite.”

“Do not overtire thyself, my lady.” He wagged a finger, and she almost believed him sincere. “If thou dost take ill, I shall be quite vexed. I suppose I should surrender ye to thy duties, but I shall miss thy warm and soft body in our bed.”

“And I shall miss thee.” Yet he could not know the significance of that statement.

After forcing down a meal of beef broth and bread, she tidied the cooking area and prepared a few items for the morning meal, so Isolde would not be too burdened by Athel’s absence. Waving to the guard standing watch at the perimeter, she walked to the tent she shared with Demetrius.

Inside, he dozed, as evidenced by his light snore. Cautious not to wake him, she donned an extra surcoat to shield against the bitter chill, as she would travel without him, and collected a few belongings. At last, she unpinned the mystical brooch from her chemise and placed the precious bauble on the table, as it was no longer hers to claim.

So Athel returned to her charges. She changed bandages, administered horehound tea to quiet persistent coughs, and wiped many a fevered brow. With a final check of her most vulnerable wards, she restocked the brazier and then secured the flaps of their accommodation.

The first streak of gold on the horizon signaled it was time to depart, and she pulled the hood of her cloak over her head. Strolling, slow and steady, so as not to garner undue attention, she reached the horses. It took her a while to locate her original mount, but she tied down her small bundle of items.

“What art thou doing hither, Lady Athelyna?” a guard inquired, and she almost jumped out of her skin.

“But I am out of mint, and I spied a hearty patch nearby.” Maintaining a calm composure, she jumped into the saddle. “I should pick a decent amount to treat my patients, before we continue our journey to Chichester Castle.”

“Mayhap I should escort ye, my lady.” His polite acquiescence reminded her that she outranked him. “If thou wilt give me but a—”

“Nay, as that is not necessary, and I would not leave the encampment susceptible to another attack, while so many remain abed.” Athel drew rein. “I have not far to travel, and I shall return in but a brief moment.” With that, she heeled the flanks of her mare.



DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dawn came far too soon for Demetrius, and he stretched and yawned. As usual, his body called to his wife, and he ached for her capable hands to ease his morning discomfort. Glancing about his tiny abode, he discovered Athelyna never returned and surmised she remained with the injured, much to her credit. Tossing his leg over the side of the mattress, he scooted to the edge of the bed and stood.

On the table, he noted the brooch he gave her for a wedding present, and he frowned. Toying with the unusual piece of jewelry, he wondered wherefore she left it. Then it dawned on him that she might not want to risk losing it, amid her work with the wounded.

At the washstand, he soaped and rinsed his face and then cleaned his teeth. While he donned his garments, he kept glancing at the flaps, as Athel always brought him a light sop and warm bread, about that time. Mayhap she slept, and he decided not to disturb her, as he strolled to the temporary kitchen.

“Good morrow, Isolde.” He dipped his chin and claimed a trencher.

“And the same to ye, Demetrius.” With a smile, she ladled the thick mixture and handed him a chunk of bread. “How is Athel? Hath she not yet risen?”

“I know not, as I have not seen her.” An unwelcome notion plagued him, as he filled a mug with ale and sat on a nearby bench, but he quashed the odious supposition. “My bride is dedicated to her work, and she wished to stay with her patients.”

“But she is not in their tent, as I assessed the condition of the injured before I prepared our food.” Standing watch over a steaming pot, Isolde tapped a wooden spoon on the lip of the pan and paused. “I thought she was with ye.”

“Art thou certain?” Mid-chew, he set aside his repast.

“I am positive.” Isolde wiped her hands on her apron and frowned. “Whither could she have gone?”

“I know not.” Then he recalled the brooch and leaped to his feet. Just as quick, he inhaled a deep breath. Thither had to be a logical explanation for Athel’s absence, and he would not jump to unsupported conclusions without proof of objectionable deeds. “But I should find her—now.”

Nagging thoughts swirled in his brain, as he trudged through the heavy snow to the lodging wherein de Cadby’s men recovered. A swift survey revealed no sign of Athelyna, and anxiety gripped his spine, but still he refused to believe the worst.

In mere minutes, he made the rounds of the encampment and discovered no one had information regarding his wife’s location. It was not until a guard flagged Demetrius that he had any idea of his next move.

“My lord, I understand ye dost seek Lady Athelyna.” He rubbed the back of his neck and shuffled his feet. “I caught her taking a horse, just before dawn.”

“To what purpose?” Demetrius’s blood ran cold, as he again pondered the brooch she left behind and the implication of that seemingly innocent act.

“The lady claimed she needed mint for medicaments.” The soldier opened his mouth and then closed it. “Sir, she said thither was a patch, nearby, and she would return anon.”

“In the middle of winter, thou didst believe her assertion?” In that instant, Demetrius turned and hastened to his destrier.

“I am sorry, my lord.” The hapless fool bowed his head. “I offered to escort her, but she ordered me to remain hither.”

“Sir Demetrius, what is wrong?” Grimbaud dashed alongside. “My lord, thou cannot venture forth, alone, as it is dangerous.”

“I must find Athelyna.” When Morgan and Aristide darted from the kitchen, Demetrius shouted, “My wife has run away.”

The Brethren sounded the alarm, and a small party gave chase, with Grimbaud tracking Athel’s mount in the heavy snow. “Dost thou know her destination, Sir Demetrius?”

“Nay, and I believe neither does she, as she is a stranger to these parts.” The bitter taste of ire filled his mouth, as he counted her behavior a grievous betrayal, and he spat. “Given she knows not the terrain, I presume she has not gone far.”

And she would suffer his wrath when he found her. Because, while the men said naught, more than once Demetrius caught Morgan fighting laughter, and that did not bode well for Athelyna’s bottom. With each successive valley they crossed, his fury grew.

“It looks as though she lost her way.” Grimbaud pointed. “Mayhap I should search the ledge near the crags.”

“But the tracks continue to the south.” Aristide shielded his eyes. “Perchance she proceeded to Chichester Castle.”

“Could be the horse without its rider.” Morgan peered over the edge of a steep bluff. “We should be sure she hath not tried to trick us, too.”

“I do not think that is her intent, but let us divide and conquer more ground, as I would recover her sooner rather than later.” Actually, Demetrius would wager his tortured soul that Athel sought an abbey or a convent in which to seek sanctuary, and it was her ill fortune that the nearest alternative was in Chichester. “As we should arrive home just after the noon hour, and I would not delay the caravan any more than necessary.”

“Then Grimbaud and I will survey the cliffs and head to the east,” said Morgan.

“All right.” With Aristide, Demetrius led his destrier along the ledge and continued toward the town. To say that he was angry was to say too little. Seething beneath the surface, he drove his stallion over a hill and spotted his wife in the distance. “Thither she flees.”

Thus the chase ensued.

Like a madman without care for his own neck, he pushed hard and fast through the thick snow, determined to catch Athel. When she paused and glanced over her shoulder, he knew, without doubt, she spied him, because she urged her mare into a gallop.

Given the landscape was foreign to her, she did not realize she rode toward a steep outcrop, which would force her to veer north, and thither he would snare her. So he adjusted his course and hugged the verge. With his heart hammering in his chest, he soared up a hillside and bared his teeth when he met Athelyna’s gaze, as he forged straight at her.

Emitting a shriek, she attempted to redirect her horse, but she possessed not the strength to maneuver the beast, and the mare reared. In a flash, he pulled alongside, wrapped his arm about her waist, and lifted her to his lap.

“Let me go.” She mounted a pitiful resistance. “Thou dost not want me.”

“Hold thy poisonous tongue, as I will not tolerate further outbursts from ye.” What had once been a pleasurable arrangement, with his wife tucked in his embrace, now served only to further aggravate him. “Thou hast shamed thyself and embarrassed me, and I will have recompense, but

anon, as thou hast wasted precious time, and we must rejoin the procession.”

With a mournful sob, she wiped a tear from her face. “But I have my reasons—”

“I care not for thy reasons.” He waved to Aristide, who collected the mare, and they regained the main road. “Naught can justify thy actions, and thou would do well not to incite me, as I have no more patience to spare ye from a much-deserved, sound whipping.”

The sun was high in the sky, as they retraced their steps. Ere long, they met Arucard, stopped on a curve, and a series of severe expressions gave Demetrius pause.

“What happened?” Aristide inquired of Geoffrey.

“Grimbaud slipped on the ice, fell from a bluff, and struck his head, as he scoured the area for thy wayward bride.” The contempt in Geoffrey’s tone stoked the flames of fury. “It took us a while to recover him. He is gravely injured, and Isolde tends him in the wagon.”

“Mayhap I can help.” Athel stiffened her spine.

“Hast thou not done enough?” Morgan asked, as he strolled up and untied his destrier. “If thou had not run away, he would be fine. He is a new father. Wilt thou orphan his son and widow Isotta? What hath they done to ye?”

“Morgan, cease thy admonishment, as it is not thy place to correct Athelyna.” Arucard trotted to the front of the line. “I am sure she regrets her lapse in judgment, and it is doubtful she intended to harm Grimbaud. Let us continue our journey, that we might get Grimbaud home, whither the physic can treat him, and our friend just might survive.”

And so they resumed their travel, in a silent march bereft of the humor and spirited conversation that previously marked the trip. Still in his grasp, Athel provoked him not, yet she wept. When the caravan approached the north gates of Chichester Castle, the group narrowed in preparation to cross the pair of bridges.

Demetrius steered his horse through the barbican and navigated the machicolated inner gatehouse. In the courtyard, the servants stood at the ready to welcome the lord and lady of the great residence, so he drew rein to the side, in hopes of attracting little attention.

A scream of horror penetrated the somber mood, when Isotta discovered her husband, and Margery, the housekeeper, and her husband Pellier, Arucard's marshalsea, assisted the physic, as they moved Grimbaud to his quarters.

At that moment, scrutiny fell on Demetrius and his bride, as word circulated of the series of events that led to Grimbaud's wounds. Harsh perusal paired with expressions of scorn, and whispers grew to a mix of audible censure, which swelled to a cacophony of dissent.

"Teach her whither she belongs."

"Ought to tan her hide."

"Lock her in her room."

"Deny her food and drink, and let us see how much rebellion is left in her."

Blinded by rage, Demetrius descended from the saddle, turned, and yanked Athel to the ground. With a steel grip on her arm, he all but dragged her into the Great Hall, with the angry crowd on his heels, urging him to claim the retribution she owed. When she stumbled, he roughly pulled her upright, and she cried out in pain. At a bench, he sat and wrenched her across his lap.

"No." Isolde clutched her throat.

Everything went black.

With his palm halted mid-air and poised to strike, naught but the rush of his breath filled his ears, and Demetrius glanced at his bride's back. Lost in a strange reverie, mangled and bloody flesh covered Athel, which evoked dreadful memories of Isolde's beating, and he jolted from the haze of indignation. A chill traipsed his spine, as he lowered his hand, swallowed hard, and shook off the miserable reflection.

“This is not the sort of husband I would be to my wife.” Then he thrust into the present and mulled her words of contrition, *I have my reasons*. Heaving and sobbing, Athel shuddered violently, until he turned her over and embraced her. Rocking to and fro, he cupped her bottom and kissed the crest of her ear. “Shh. It is all right, Athel. I am sorry. I am so sorry. Never will I strike ye. But I would know wherefore ye fled, when I thought we had formed a comfortable accord in our marriage.”

“So did I, until I overheard thy conversation with the men, when I brought ye some ale.” As she wrapped her arms about his waist and rested her head to his chest, she whimpered. “I sought only to free ye from a life of lamentable bondage, given thou dost prefer the axe to me.” With that, she unleashed a flood of misery so potent it shook him to his core.

In that instant, he recalled the various witticisms of camaraderie, uttered at her expense. While Arucard made no effort to temper his regard for Isolde, heedless of the ensuing baiting, Demetrius had used Athel as a whipping post, given he lacked the fortitude to do otherwise.

“I did not mean it, as I spoke in jest,” he explained as much to her as to the witnesses. “My friends made light of our union, and I had not the courage to proclaim the truth, but I do so now, for all to understand.” He lifted his chin and addressed the throng. “Let no one doubt my commitment to my bride, and I take full responsibility for what happened to Grimbaud, given I dishonored Athelyna, when my first priority as her husband is to protect and defend her. Indeed, I failed her. If anyone hath a quarrel with what occurred, thou wilt take it up with me.”

That ended the discussion.

“Back to thy chores, everyone.” Arucard frowned, splayed his arms, and led the Chichesters from the cavernous room. “Thither is naught to see.”

Adjusting Athel in his hold, Demetrius stood and carried her into the narrow passage and upstairs, to their private quarters, which Isolde and Arucard had constructed from two separate accommodations and furnished with lavish appointments. In the solar, he set his wife on her feet, framed her face, and kissed her.

Initially, she did not respond, so he parted her lips with his tongue and intensified the exchange. While he intended to comfort and console her, somewhere in the midst of the moment, he struggled with an overwhelming sense of remorse. In ignorance, he hurt his gentle bride, and that knowledge wore on him as a relentless battle he could not win. Yet he vowed not to repeat the mistake.

When his lady at last reciprocated, he thrust his hips, and she moaned. "Thou art aroused, my lord."

"Wherefore, I know not." He chuckled, as she nipped his nose. "But I would make amends, Athel. Canst thou ever forgive me?"

"Thou dost ask, and it is done." Sorrow invested her green gaze, and she offered an unconvincing half smile. "But I am also to blame, and I would vouchsafe my promise never again to run away from thee, if thou wilt have it and be satisfied."

"Ah, I am content." Lifting her, he whirled about in circles, claiming her mouth in a searing affirmation. A knock at the door brought him to a halt, but he refused to yield his bride. Instead, he tightened his grip, and she giggled. "Come."

"We brought thy trunks." Morgan sidestepped, with Geoffrey at the rear, as they carried the heavy chest. "And we would extend our regrets to Lady Athelyna, as we goaded our brother."

"The misunderstanding was our fault." Aristide cleared his throat. "And we know better."

"Thus we humbly beg thy pardon." Geoffrey dipped his chin.

"Grammarcy, good sirrahs, but thou dost owe me naught." Athel relaxed in his hold, and she speared her fingers in his hair. "Let us forget the unpleasantness of today and move beyond it."

In unison, his brothers bowed.

"Isolde wanted us to ask if ye preferred to dine in thy quarters." Aristide peered over his shoulder. "What say ye?"

“Lady Isolde is a wise and generous soul.” Now Athelyna favored Demetrius with a playful smile he savored. “And I would have a bath, if it is not too much trouble.”

“I shall belay thy request to Margery.” With that, Aristide exited with Morgan and Geoffrey.

“So, my lord.” Athel licked the curve of his jaw. “I believe ye dost owe me a thorough washing, in fulfillment of thy promise, and I would have what I am due.”

“Then it is providential that I always pay my debts.” He suckled the tender flesh of her neck. “But I would have ye know that I truly no longer regret our union, and I speak not in jest.” She stilled, and he met her stare. They loomed on a precipice that posed two options. One, he could persist on his current path, which rendered her unsure of their future and caused only added strife. The alternative necessitated the nerve to admit what he had denied to himself, despite fledgling emotions to the contrary. “I am grateful thee art my wife, as I would have no other.”

#

In the days since arriving at Chichester Castle, Athelyna settled into a routine that mirrored Isolde’s schedule as chatelaine, which occupied much of Athel’s time and revolved around the various meals. After a morning prayer, she ventured to the kitchen, to assist the staff with food preparation, and then she learned the myriad duties required to maintain the castle and its collective of servants and soldiers.

The task was daunting.

With ruthless attention to detail, Athel balanced the household accounts, ordered provisions from a local merchant, and ensured the dry stores in the undercroft remained free of spoilage. And while the community aided her, an undercurrent of tension marred an otherwise exciting experience.

Determined to improve relations with the Chichesters, she checked her appearance in the long mirror, smoothed her plaited hair, and tied the laces of her cloak. In the solar, she gathered her little bag of medicaments

and strolled from the chambers she shared with her husband, who had long since departed for weapons practice.

A biting wind cut through her wool garments, as she raced across the courtyard to the more modest accommodations that quartered the guards and their families. After several wrong turns, she located the correct portal and knocked on the door.

When Isotta discovered the identity of her visitor, she furrowed her brow, frowned, and granted entry. “My lady, what can I do for ye?”

“I have come to see what I can do for ye.” Athel assessed the dank lodging. “It appears thou art in need of help.”

“We can make do with what we have, my lady.” Isotta’s tone conveyed barely masked resentment. “Given I am a maid, it is not thy place to tend my needs.”

“Nonsense, as I know no rank during moments of strife.” Athel set down her bundle on a small chair and surveyed the patient. “His coloring has returned, and I detect no fever.”

“The physic expects my husband will wake soon, as the bump on his forehead has gone down, but it breaks my heart to look upon him thus.” Isotta sniffed, as she sat on the edge of the bed. “He is the mightiest lancer in Chichester, yet he seems so frail, and it frightens me.”

“I am so sorry.” A glance conveyed numerous shortcomings, and Athel dusted off her hands. “Until thy spouse has made a full recovery, I am at thy service. And thy residence would benefit from a thorough cleaning, but I shall work quietly, that I do not disturb Grimbaud.” After doffing her cloak, she rolled up the sleeves of her gown. “If thou wilt fetch a couple of maids, we will make things right.” A baby cooed and then cried, and Athel noted the infant in a cradle. “Mayhap thou canst take thy beauteous son to the kitchens, as thither is a warm place for ye to nurse thy hungry child and fresh bread and hot tea to sustain ye. And I shall stay with thy man until ye dost return.”

For a minute, Isotta hesitated, and then she lifted her babe. “Wherefore art thou so kind to us, my lady? Thou art a member of the

nobility, and I was born into poverty.”

“I may be a product of privilege, but I was raised an oblate, thus I am no stranger to hard work and sacrifice.” Athel found a broom. “Go, and be sure to sample the roasted ham, as it is delicious.”

“Thank ye, my lady.” Isotta swaddled her son. “Thou art most kind.”

“I owe ye a debt, which I intend to repay.” Athel smiled and commenced her chores. Soon a trio of young girls joined in the labor, and they swept, mopped, dusted, and tidied the lodging in but an hour. With their assistance, Athelyna changed the linens, using great care as she shifted Grimbaud—until he groaned.

“Oh, dear.” Supporting his head, Athelyna grabbed a pillow. “Fetch the physic,” she said to one maid. To another, she remarked, “Summon Isotta, as hither she should be, when her husband wakes, and someone should notify his lordship.”

As the servants rushed to do her bidding, Athel wet a cloth and wiped his brow. When Grimbaud opened his eyes, he gazed at her and grinned.

“Am I dead?” He blinked. “Art thou an angel?”

“I am no angel, Grimbaud, but I suspect ye dost know that.” When he propped on an elbow, she helped him sit upright. “Go slow, else thou mayest suffer additional harm.”

“I would kill for a drink of ale.” Wincing, he rubbed his temple.

In a flash, from a pitcher she filled a mug with cool water and held the cup to his lips. “Take a sip.”

He did as she bade and quickly spat the contents. “God’s bones, that is Adam’s ale. Art thou trying to kill me, my lady?”

Just then, the physic thrust open the door and rushed into the room, followed by Arucard, Demetrius, and Isotta. To Grimbaud’s wife, Athel surrendered her place and assumed her rightful position at Demetrius’s side.

“What happened?” Demetrius slipped an arm about her waist.

“I know not.” She shrugged. “He woke as we put fresh sheets on the bed.”

“Isotta told me of thy generous deeds, and I am proud of ye.” His single statement made her efforts worthwhile. “Mayhap I should give ye a good scrub, after a long soak in a hot bath, as a reward for thy toils.”

“My lord, I would love that.” When the physic pronounced Grimbaud well on the road to recovery, Athel glanced at Isotta and nodded. To Demetrius, she said, “Now I must meet with Isolde and continue my study of her duties, but I look forward to our interlude in our chambers.”

As the gathering celebrated Grimbaud’s improving health, she retrieved her cloak and bag of medicaments and retraced her earlier steps. After crossing the Great Hall, she skipped into the screened passage and turned right. In the kitchen, Isolde lingered near a steaming pot.

“I am sorry I am late.” Athel hung her outerwear on a wall peg and dropped the bundle on the floor. “Grimbaud is awake.”

“So said the maid, when she called Isotta.” As had become a habit, Isolde did not glance at Athelyna. “Thither is thy ledger on the table. Pellier just delivered a selection of furnishings for ye, in preparation for thy move to Winchester Castle. Tally the figures, and we can verify the purchases in the storage room.”

Without complaint, Athel eased to the bench and opened the leather-bound book. Grasping the goose pinion, she dipped the end in ink and made calculations, just as she had been taught. But all was not well with her friend, and Athelyna decided she had been quiet long enough.

“Isolde, thou hast always been my supporter, but I know something is wrong.” She put down the quill. “Have I done something to offend ye?”

“Dost thou wish me to speak freely?” Isolde pulled a small bowl from a shelf and proceeded to clean and chop some onions.

“I should hope ye would extend naught less.” Athel gulped. “Thus I have vexed ye.”

“Nay, I am not vexed.” Arucard’s wife frowned. “Rather, thou hast disappointed me.”

“How so?” Her spirits sank, as she feared she might have lost her greatest ally. “Pray, what have I done?”

“Thou dost have to ask?” Then Isolde peered over her shoulder. To the sculleries, she said, “Leave us.”

“Whatever distress I have caused ye, know that I am sorry.” Athel bowed her head. “But I am trying to find my way.”

“And that included abandoning thy husband and breaking thy oath, sworn before the archbishop.” Isolde compressed her lips and sighed. “What have I told ye? His Majesty arranged thy marriage. If thou dost not honor the commitment, thou dost place not only thy neck but also Demetrius’s in peril. Canst thou imagine what he would tell the King, regarding thy disappearance, had ye succeeded in thy endeavor?”

“I did not think of that.” Her mind raced. “At the time, I believed him sincere in his desire to be rid of me, and I sought only to comply with his wishes.”

“Even if that were true, thou must remain hither and perform thy duties.” Isolde stood, poured two mugs of hot tea, and returned. “My dear, life is not fair, and it is often cruelest to the female sex, as we are but chattel in this world ruled by the male sex. Yet, when it comes to thy husband, thou art his foundation. Thou art the source of his strength. Without ye, he hath no home, family, or love. He hath naught to protect and defend, thus no reason to exist. Even if Demetrius’s affections are not fixed, thou must keep thy word, else ye art both for the block.”

“Thou art wise, my lady, and I defer to thy sage counsel.” Athel gazed at her reflection in the full cup and set it aside. “Wilt thou excuse me, as thither is something I must do, at once.”

“Did I speak too much honesty?” Isolde furrowed her brow. “As that was not my intent.”

“On the contrary, I appreciate thy candor.” Athel clasped hands with her advocate. “But thou hast forced me to confront an uncertainty that

I have avoided until now, and I would resolve the situation, without further ado.”

With that, Athelyna pushed from the bench, gathered her belongings, and strolled to her private quarters. In the inner sanctum, she stored her bundle of treatments and draped her cloak on a chair. Then she faced herself in the long mirror.

Garbed and styled as a noblewoman of estimation, she hardly recognized herself. Yet she belonged to a wealthy and powerful man who would soon demand her most intimate gift, to seal their union in obeisance of a royal decree. But she mistakenly held tight to the dreams of an unattached oblate, which might rescue her from the situation, when she could do so no more. Thither was no redemption, not that she desired it, and that unexpected development she had to acknowledge. Her fingers shook, as she untied the neckline of her gown, reached beneath the heavy fabric, and unpinned the mysterious brooch from her chemise.

The oval-shaped bauble, cumbersome in weight, due to the large gemstones, sparkled in the soft light from the hearth. Mesmerizing in its design, it beckoned with alluring possibilities that harkened a comparison to fairy stories of old, yet she persisted not in the realm of fantasy, and it was past due for her to grow up and assume her position, sans indecision.

Since Demetrius gave her the fascinating piece of jewelry, she wore it every night. As per the lore, she experienced vivid reveries of an as yet unidentified knight, whenever she slept. But the curious tale mattered not, in the grand scheme. Regardless of fate, she had to renounce the anonymous savior in favor of her spouse, by law and faith. And she had to accept that she cared for her husband.

And so Athelyna stowed the brooch in a small box atop her grooming table.

“My lady, thou art hither?” Demetrius walked into their bedchamber and smiled, as his silvery gaze settled on her. “Isolde told me thou retired to our quarters, and I was concerned for ye.”

“How thoughtful is my knight?” In that instant, she bade farewell to the illusion born of cryptic tales and seized the truth composed of flesh and

blood. To his unveiled surprise, written in his expression, she charged. Twining her arms about his neck, she claimed a searing kiss. Ah, thither were worse things in life.

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DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER NINE

Christmastide at Chichester Castle featured a customary mass, a holiday festival on the grounds surrounding the great curtain wall, a Shepherds' Play, and a huge feast, with Arucard and Isolde presiding over the celebrations. But before they opened the gates to the community, the family gathered in the Great Hall.

It was to Demetrius's misfortune that he forgot the usual exchange of tokens intended to express affection. As he sat beside his bride, with his unwed brothers to his right, he cursed his miserable hide when she produced a tied bundle of garments.

"My lord, these are but a few items sewn by my own hands, and I hope ye dost find them serviceable." Then she pointed to a new belt. "And fear not, as I worked the leather, myself, so it is nice and soft."

As he flipped through the small stack, he discovered two shirts and a black tunic, expertly rendered. And the strap was remarkably pliable. Invested with a countenance of hope and anticipation, his wife all but

bounced, and he cleared his throat, as he searched for some bit of comfort that might save him from the fray, because he suspected he had just committed a grievous error.

“Athel, my dear, forgive me.” He shifted in his chair and ignored the sudden interest displayed by his brothers. “Given the short length of our marriage, and the fact that we just returned from London, I forgot to procure something for ye.”

“Thou didst forget me?” Athel emitted a pitiable whimper.

In that instant, Morgan, Geoffrey, and Aristide fled the scene, and Demetrius cursed them as traitors.

“Now, my sweet lady, let us not put such store in material goods.” He gnashed his teeth, when her chin quivered and a tear coursed her cheek. How could he have neglected his wife? “Athel, never have I participated in the trade of gifts, and it did not occur to me that ye would do so.” Mayhap a logical appeal would rescue him. “Is it not a formality?”

“Thou didst forget me, and thou would characterize thy lapse as a formality?” Mayhap logic was insufficient. Downcast, she bowed her head, and he swore under his breath. “I should check the servants and ensure that everything will be ready for the meal, as Isolde is much in demand, and I promised to supervise in her stead.”

“Athel—wait.” To his regret, she ran behind the screened passage, and he rubbed the back of his neck.

Shortly thereafter, Isolde, casting him a piercing glare, strolled past, and he tugged at his collar. Then he noted Arucard’s approach, and Demetrius knew he erred by epic proportions.

“Thou art quite the glutton for punishment.” Arucard snickered, as he perched opposite Demetrius. “What manner of lunacy made ye think ye could forgo a present for thy bride, on this of all occasions?”

“Who told ye?” He narrowed his stare. “Thou were at the dais.”

“Aristide, as he feared for thy safety,” Arucard explained.

“Very funny.” With elbows propped on the table, Demetrius slumped forward.

“Brother, how many times must I belabor the point?” Arucard flagged Margery. “Prithee, bring us some ale, as Demetrius needs a drink.”

“Thou dost make jokes, when I have hurt Athelyna.” A strange ache nestled in his chest, and he grimaced. “How was I to know she required an offering, as never did we participate in such practices, in La Rochelle?”

“This is a new land with its own traditions, which art foreign to us, almost as much as the ladies, but thou should know women require such evidence of devotion for every conceivable reason—and some ye cannot conceive.” Arucard whistled. “Hast thou not witnessed, firsthand, my courtship of Isolde? Dost thou not notice I bring her flowers and other trifles intended to foster affection, regardless of events and circumstances? Dost thou think I do so because it pleases me, or I enjoy the baiting I get from my brothers?”

“Nay,” Demetrius answered with reluctance. Of course, he refused to admit that he indulged in his fair share of verbal jousting, at Arucard’s expense. “Thou should write a book, as thou art a fountain of knowledge, and thou mayest save our descendants a mountain of grief.”

“Oh, our future generations will know much more of romantic endeavors, so I doubt they would benefit from what I suppose they will view as archaic proficiency.” Arucard paused, as Margery delivered the refreshments. Then he peered from left to right. “I anticipate our heirs will manage their women much better, as I am the first to speak the vows, and thou art the second poor bastard to venture into the trap-infested institution the archbishop hath the nerve to call holy matrimony.” He pointed for emphasis. “Brother, thither is little holy about it, except thou wilt pray as ye hath never before prayed.”

“But I do not understand thy assertion.” Demetrius scratched his temple. “I thought ye were happy with Isolde.”

“Make no mistake, as I love her.” Shaking his head, Arucard rolled his eyes. “But a wife will test thy patience and faith as none other.”

Now that was the root of Demetrius's problem.

It unnerved him that Arucard seized upon Demetrius's failing without even knowing it. The secret that tore at his gut, that ripped at his soul, and kept him awake as Athel slept in his arms was simple yet absolute in its devastation, and he knew not how to recover what he had lost.

In short, Demetrius had no faith.

Since that dark day in thirteen hundred and seven, when the Knights Templar were betrayed, their order was disbanded, and they were hunted as animals, something inside him fractured and remained in tatters. Bits and pieces of his battered spirit floated in a seemingly endless miasma of anger, resentment, and guilt, and he knew not how to escape the mire.

So he wallowed in a lonely existence, confined by his secret.

Yet Athel wandered into his life, as a ray of sunlight, casting out the shadows of misery, and he adored her for it. He craved her company, and in her absence he suffered. But he wounded her, and that troubled him for scores of reasons he could not begin to discern, unless he eliminated a single undeniable truth.

In a brief period, he had formed an emotional attachment to his wife.

"How can I make amends?" Demetrius stretched upright, as Athelyna and Isolde reentered the Great Hall and made for his table. As they neared, he stood. "Athel, may I speak with ye, alone?"

"Arucard and I should resume our stations at the dais." Isolde claimed her husband's hand. "What say ye, my lord?"

"As always, I am thy servant." Arucard glanced at Demetrius and winked. "Given I live to fulfill thy every wish."

Ah, his friend was good.

"Mayhap we might stroll the festival." Standing, he downed his ale in a single gulp. "Permit me to collect our cloaks, if thou wilt but consent to spend this auspicious day with me."

“That sounds lovely, my lord.” Her answering smile did not fool him.

“Hither thou should wait, and I will return.” As he exited the castle’s primary meeting room, he heaved a sigh of relief.

He should have told her the truth.

He should have admitted his feelings.

But he had no interest in winning her heart, as Athel just might learn that her husband had no soul. Indeed, he was as empty as a hollow tree. It was better to keep her in the dark.

#

Another nasty winter storm ushered in the New Year, and Athel continued her study under Isolde’s tutelage. After Grimbaud’s well-timed awakening, the community of Chichester Castle deemed her a savior, of sorts, and she found her somewhat unconventional place in the collective, as various citizens sought her advice for a myriad of ailments. With the physic’s support, she tended minor maladies but always deferred to his expertise. Yet it was another tenuous bond forged of sometimes aching tender moments and still other inexplicably strained exchanges that occupied her waking moments to the detriment of all else.

To her chagrin, Demetrius kept her at arm’s length. Despite regular intimate interludes, revolving around her baths, during which he washed her, he had yet to permit her to glimpse his nude form. And although they slept in each other’s embrace, he had not made love to her. In fact, he made no attempts to advance their passionate cause, and that particular realization served as the source of her quandary.

“Thou dost woolgather, my lady.” With a grin, Margery giggled. “Mayhap thou dost ponder sweet memories of thy husband?”

“Dost thou require our special potions to ease unusual soreness?” As she pounded chicken breasts in preparation to cook her special blancmange, Isolde elbowed the housekeeper. “Ah, the lady blushes, so I think we art a tad premature in our estimation.”

“Isolde, I told ye of the mystical brooch Demetrius gifted me, on the eve of our wedding.” It was frustrating that Athel’s thoughts had run full-circle, and she reconsidered her decision to put away the item. “But I have not discussed the visions it inspired, and I would do so now, if thou art willing to listen.”

“Sounds fascinating.” Margery sat at the table and stirred a mixture of flour and eggs. “Didst thou dream of Sir Demetrius?”

“Well, I am not sure.” Recalling the series of images, in detail, Athel shrugged. “No matter the time of day I sleep, the reverie is always the same. It begins with a vicious battle and the clash of swords.” She pulled up a chair and reclined. “An unknown champion defends a group of innocent pilgrims, beneath the glare of a brutal sun. With incomparable skill and speed the valiant knight charges numerous assailants, kicking sand in his wake and dispatching his enemies with lethal aim, until the enemy cowers in the shadows of the faceless warrior, but he is merciful. Anon, as he walks amid the bodies scattered across the dunes, the sweet stench of blood hangs heavy in the air, and he doffs his gauntlets.”

“How thrilling.” Isolde paused to wipe her brow. “Dost thou never glimpse his face?”

“Thus far, nay.” Athel searched her memory for the slightest oddity, which might yield an overlooked clue. “Then the activity ceases, and I am transported to a different scene, whereupon the encroaching night sky signals the advancing eventide, and the defender enters a tent. As he removes his armor, he reveals an intriguing mark etched into his flesh and barely visible in the soft light from a brazier.”

“And dost thou recognize the symbol?” With unmasked interest, Margery bit her bottom lip.

“Aye.” Athel nodded. “It is the Crusader’s Cross, black in color, and marred by a distinct scar in the shape of a jagged spike.”

In that instant, Isolde dropped her wooden spoon.

“Lady Isolde, is something wrong?” Margery started.

“Arucard bears such a badge in the spot as ye dost describe.” Isolde swallowed hard, and Athel feared she might swoon. “But it is unmarred by the injury ye dost recount.” She poured herself a tankard of ale and downed an impressive portion. “It is a brand rendered by Coptic priests outside the walls of Jerusalem, to commemorate a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands.”

“But I thought the church banned such cutting of the flesh?” Consulting her knowledge of scripture, Athel tapped her chin. “Wherefore would they commit such a breach of faith?”

“Because it serves as unimpeachable proof that they completed the religious journey, which they revere.” Isolde narrowed her stare. “And I believe all the Brethren are similarly branded.”

“Art thou aware of the capacity in which they made the trip?” Despite repeated attempts to question Demetrius, Athel had gleaned naught from him on the subject, and his reticence only inflamed her curiosity. “He hath not been very forthcoming with his history.”

“Thy husband will tell ye when he is ready, and it is not for me to discuss.” Isolde’s curt reply increased Athel’s suspicions. “We should complete our chores.”

Thither persisted a great secret in Chichester Castle, and Athel believed only she remained unacquainted with the truth. What were they hiding?

“Would thou like to borrow the brooch, and see what it reveals to thee?” As was her charge, Athel cleaned and separated beans for supper. “I can fetch it for ye.”

“I told ye already, I need no object to tell me what I know in my heart.” Isolde pummeled the chicken with uncharacteristic fervor. “And I warned ye not to set store in illusions, as they art dangerous. They have no imperfections, because ye canst control them. They art what ye doth make of them, and that is not fair to Demetrius. He is flesh and blood, and thou wilt do well to focus thy efforts on him.”

When Athel peered at Margery, she shook her head, smiled, and hugged her protruding belly. “I have no need of thy bauble, my lady, as I

already know what particular part of Pellier's anatomy it would show me, and I am quite familiar with it."

"Woman, what dost ye grouse about now?" Pellier strutted into the kitchen, followed by Arucard and Demetrius. "If thou art compelled to employ thy mouth, I wager I have use for it."

"Whither hast I heard that before, little man?" Margery eased from her seat and tossed a cloth in his face. "And I might be temped if ye could compose something original, as I am acquainted with what ye hath to offer, and I am not impressed."

"Did I or did I not make ye scream, last night?" Wagging his brows, Pellier smacked her bottom. "And I will do so again, this eventide."

"That is much more than I wish to know of thy relationship, Pellier." Isolde inclined her head, and Arucard kissed her cheek. "If thou dost insist on announcing such crude information, ye may exit my presence and return to the garrison, whither thy boasts are appreciated and celebrated."

"Apologies, Lady Isolde." With an exaggerated flourish, he sketched a bow. "Wife, come with me, as I am dirty after weapons practice, and I need ye to scrub my back." Then Pellier rested his hand to Margery's hip and pressed his lips to her forehead. "How fares my heir?"

"Much like his father, the babe gives me so peace." Margery glanced over her shoulder. "My lady, I shall return, anon, after I attend my largest child."

"Nay, thou hast done enough, and we can finish the work." Isolde wrapped her arms about Arucard's waist and rested against his chest. "Thou should take a nap, as thou dost near thy time."

As Margery and Pellier departed, they traded a series of quips that left the others laughing. For Athelyna, the couple's easy manners highlighted the difficulties of her partnership, but she knew not the solution to her problem.

"My lord, what brings ye hither, as thou dost never venture into the kitchen?" Mirroring Isolde's behavior, Athel hugged Demetrius. "Dost

thou require a bath, as I would be happy to assist ye?”

“Actually, I have surprise for ye.” Demetrius drew her to the side, and in strolled Briarus and Gerwald.

“Brother, wherefore art thou hither?” She tensed. “And I suppose I must welcome Briarus, though I have do not have fond memories of ye.”

“As the King’s man, I have no choice but to obey his orders, Lady Athelyna.” Briarus rocked on his heels and grinned. “Hadst thou not run away, I would have had no reason to run ye down. I trust ye art content in thy marriage, as thou dost persist within these walls?”

“And what sort of welcome is that, for thy own relation?” Gerwald rested hands on hips. “Thou should check thy tone, sister, else I might take offense.”

“Gerwald, thou art hither to learn from my example and become proficient in leadership of a large garrison, as thou art young and inexperienced.” Demetrius tightened his hold on her. “Thy assignment doth not extend to management of my wife, given I own her fealty, and she outranks ye, so thou wilt check *thy* tone when ye dost address Lady Wessex. Thou wilt forget that to thy sincere regret, as thou art neither her better nor her equal.”

“Of course, I am most grateful for thy good health, Gerwald, and mayhap thou wilt sup at our table, this eventide, that thou mayest apprise me of the news from court.” In that moment, Athel could have kissed her husband, as she drew herself up with noble poise. To her Demetrius, she asked, “My lord, should I help ye with thy hauberk?”

“Let us adjourn to our quarters, my lady.” His muscles flexed, and he smirked, as he offered his escort. “Shall we?”

“Indeed.” A familiar flame sparked beneath her skin, as they crossed the Great Hall, entered the narrow passage that led to the family chambers, and ascended the stairs. Near the end of a long corridor, Demetrius set wide the double doors of their solar. When he turned, Athel pounced.

Framing his face, she bit his chin and then claimed his mouth, and her man responded with a hunger that well nigh consumed her. But Athel would never complain, as desire beckoned. After a few fiery, groping, desperate minutes, during which they engaged their tongues in a searing duel, he ended their kiss and rested his forehead to hers.

“What was that for, my lady?” As he cupped her bottom, he rubbed his nose to hers.

“I require a reason to occupy my husband?” She nibbled his lower lip, and he thrust his hips.

“Nay.” Now he squeezed her backside, and her knees buckled. “Thou mayest storm my castle, every day of the sennight and twice on Sunday.”

“Then I shall thank ye properly for coming to my rescue and defending me against Gerwald.” With a yank and tug, she removed his chainmail, but when she attempted to strip him of his tunic, he grasped her wrists, and she gave vent to a sigh of exasperation. “Have I told ye thine eyes art of the purest silver, such that they evoke a comparison to moonlight? Much like the awe-inspiring hue, thy gaze casts shadows, behind which ye cannot hide. Thou art troubled.” Caressing the angular lines of his jaw, she fought unexpected tears. “Wilt thou not share thy encumbrance?”

“Thou dost know me so well?” With the pad of his thumb, he wiped the wetness from her flesh. “For naught in the world would I hurt ye, Athel. The load is mine to carry, but thou dost make it easier to bear.”

“Mayhap thou might claim my maidenhead, as further distraction.” How she wanted him, and she shivered with unbridled passion. “Prithee, it hath been more than a month since we wed, and I will not protest. Indeed, I would encourage ye.”

“Thou art more than a distraction, Athel. Thus I will not take ye without consideration.” The kiss with which he favored her set her head spinning, and she all but fell into his embrace. But when he nuzzled her, cheek-to-cheek, she lost all sense of time and place. “Sweet Athelyna, I care for ye too much to use ye in so rough a fashion.”

“Thou dost care for me?” That elementary yet fervent declaration brought her alert. “Oh, my lord. I care for ye, too.”

In that instant, Demetrius hugged her so tight she knew not where she ended and he began. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she struggled for breath, but in her mind she shouted for joy.

“Cherished wife, I have given much thought to the consummation of our vows, and I would celebrate the deed in a manner as befits the momentous occasion, that we might commemorate the event, every year, with fondness.” Then he grinned, the last remaining vestige of her fortitude melted, and she convinced herself he would confess his anxieties, at some point. “Remember, I am a virgin, too.”

“Then I shall rely on thy right and true judgment.” But she would conspire with Isolde to provoke Demetrius, and she would claim her husband.



DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER TEN

The sun rose on a clear day near the end of January, and Demetrius sought his bride. Given the snow had melted, and the roads had dried, he thought it the perfect time to surprise his wife with a special outing.

After the disaster he made of Christmastide, he pondered his situation and made an overdue decision. He opted to make a success of his marriage, thus he consulted with an expert in matters of forgiveness. In short, he asked Isolde how he might recover from his mistake.

“Whither is my beauteous bride?” With a spring in his step, he strode into the kitchen, whither he knew he would find her.

“Demetrius?” Gowned in a crème-colored kirtle and a rich blue cotehardie, with long lappets, because he selected the ensemble just for the occasion, and her blonde locks plaited, Athel gazed at him from her pile of dried wortes and blinked. “Is something wrong?”

“Nay, my lady.” To her expression of surprise, he rounded the table and drew her from her chair. “But I require thy company.”

“Wherefore?” Athel clutched his hand, as he led her into the screened passage, but he glanced at Lady Isolde, who smiled and nodded.

In the entry, Margery waited with their cloaks. “Have a wonderful time.”

“My lord, what art thou about?” Despite her query, Athel glowed, and that was enough reward for him.

“It is a very great secret.” When they strolled into the courtyard, the master of the horse met them, holding the reins of Demetrius’s destrier and Athel’s mare. “What say ye, my dear? Wilt thou consent to accompany thy undeserving husband on an important errand?”

“Whither shall we go?” Yea, she bounced with unmasked excitement, which delighted him beyond words.

“I will not tell ye.” He tapped her nose, and she squealed.

“But I have a request.” Biting her lip, she inclined her head. “I would ride with ye, in thy lap, as it is cold, and thou art warm.”

As usual, he languished in a near permanent state of arousal when in his wife’s presence, and he seized upon what he considered a brilliant plan for the consummation. Only he had no idea how to broach the topic, as they had not discussed it since the morning her brother arrived, but that could wait.

Today was about Athelyna.

“Thou art most wise, and I like the way ye dost think.” As he lifted her to the saddle, she claimed a quick kiss, and his cheeks burned with uncharacteristic reticence. When he settled behind her, she scooted close, and he lifted her atop his thighs. As was her way, she wrapped her arms about his waist and rested her head to his chest.

Heeling the flanks of his stallion, they charged through the barbican and crossed the two drawbridges. In the meadow, he steered to the north

until they came upon the road into town. It was then he chanced a glance at Athel and discovered her admiring him.

“Thou art staring again.” Demetrius sighed. “Wherefore dost thou look at me so?”

“Because thou art beauteous.” With a giggle, which he favored, she burrowed beneath his cloak, and he tucked the folds about her. “Now, tell me of thy mission, as I am intrigued.”

“In truth, thou art my assignment.” At her expression of confusion, he chuckled, tipped her chin, and brushed his lips to hers. “I owe ye a gift, as I was remiss in my duties as thy husband last Christmastide, and I will rectify my deficiency, if thou canst forgive me.”

“But thither is naught to forgive, and thou dost owe me naught.” A hint of sorrow colored her joy, and he regretted his comments. “Thou dost misunderstand, because it was not the lack of a present that hurt me. Rather, it was that ye forgot me.”

“Athel, thou art the one laboring under a false impression, as I never forget ye.” It genuinely wounded him that he had neglected his bride to the extent she supposed he paid her no heed. In some respects, he had avoided her, so she would not discover his lack of faith. But then he realized his grand design only punished her, and she was without crime. “Since the moment I was told we would wed, thou hast occupied my thoughts.”

“But thou were not happy about our union.” Ah, her smile betrayed her playful demeanor.

“If memory serves, neither were ye.” Grasping his hand, she twined her fingers in his, and how he loved that elementary connection.

Skin to skin, the effortless touch spread though him, leaving naught unmarked by her influence and soothing the internal disquietude that plagued him. In fact, unbeknownst to Athel, she had become his personal salve for the anger and resignation that threatened to consume his soul.

“I was wrong.” Now she sat upright and looked him in the eye. “I am happy, my lord. I am very happy.”

“As am I, Athel.” That was no falsehood, and no one was more astonished than Demetrius by recent developments, in that respect. “So let us enjoy our private time, as thither may be little left to us, once we move to Winchester.”

“And that will be when?” She brushed the tip of her nose to his neck, and he clenched his gut.

“Briarus expects the soldiers to arrive in Chichester in February.” The main gate came into view, and he turned left at a fork in the lane. “His Majesty sends us three hundred men to settle the territory, but it will take them longer to cover the ground between hither and London, and thither will be much work for us both. The last time Arucard and I toured the castle, it was in poor condition, to say the least. In advance of our relocation, I have hired and dispatched craftsmen to ensure the structure is sound, the curtain wall is repaired, and the roof doth not leak. Then a group of women will clean the place, from top to bottom, as I will not have ye confronted by the same situation Isolde faced. The entire building hath no oilskins for the windows, and thither will be glass installed, similar to what we benefit from at Chichester Castle.”

“Thou hast organized and formulated well, my lord, but that is not what worries me. Art the people as dangerous as Isolde reports?” Her question belied her apprehension, and Athelyna was right to be afraid. “Isolde believes the citizens of Winchester hate us.”

“They will not hurt ye, as I will protect ye. But they resent the King’s presence on their lands, so I will keep a watchful guard, until we convince them that we art not their enemies.” In a flash, he revisited that awful day, when the Brethren entered Winchester and found Isolde tied to a whipping post, with her bloody and mangled back exposed to a riotous hoard that cheered for her death. Thither was naught the Nautionnier Knights could do to save her at that moment, so they plotted and planned her escape. But never had Demetrius felt so useless than when he restrained Arucard, and the entire nefarious affair only bolstered his faithlessness. “And like my brother, I will never leave ye, as I have witnessed what ill can come of separation. Whither I go, so go ye.”

“That suits me, my lord.” As a modest woman, she straightened her spine and lifted her chin, when they rode through the decorated egress of Chichester.

On the streets, numerous vendors shouted appeals, promising the lowest prices for their wares. Demetrius reined in, dismounted, tied his destrier, and retrieved his bride.

“My lady, I give ye a town for thy perusal.” With a flourish, he bowed. “And I am thy devoted servant, at the ready to perform thy bidding.”

“Oh, I want to kiss ye, but we art not alone, and I would not make a spectacle of our intimacy.” Athel stepped near and whispered, “But were we in our chambers, I should stroke thy stout man’s yard, until thou dost find thy relief, and I will do so, this eventide, my lord.”

“Thou mayest purchase whatever ye dost wish, as my purse is heavy, and my braies art far weightier on the heels of thy promise.” Reaching under his cloak, he adjusted his unwieldy one-eyed dragon and offered his arm in escort. “Shall we, my dear?”

For the next couple of hours, he accompanied his bride into a seemingly endless stream of shops, whereupon he witnessed countless male market keepers fall prey to her charm and beauty. But it was her bargaining instincts that had him fighting laughter, as Athel possessed a keen ability to assess value, and she refused to pay more than a particular item was worth.

To his befuddlement, she had yet to select a gift for herself, when he led her to a furrier’s cart. “This is ermine, sweet lady. It will make an excellent cloak for the journey to Winchester.”

“It is soft and lovely.” Athel leaned into him. “But I prefer ye keep me warm.”

“I said naught about a change in our riding habits.” Demetrius waved to the purveyor. “Yet thou could use it.”

After haggling over the price, he made arrangements to send Briarus and Gerwald, with a wagon, to collect the purchases. Anon, Demetrius ushered her into a tavern, and they selected a table near the front window.

As she bestowed upon him a shimmering smile, he untied her outerwear and draped the swath of wool over the back of her chair.

“Art thou hungry?” He signaled the proprietor.

“I am starved.” Then she closed her eyes and inhaled a deep breath. “Pray, what is that heavenly aroma?”

“It is my wife’s savory pourcelet farci.” The owner wiped his hands on a cloth. “And it is a pleasure to wait on ye, again, Sir Demetrius. Might I inquire after thy fair companion and take thy order?”

“Permit me to present my new bride, Athelyna, Lady Wessex.” With pride, Demetrius studied her. “Athel, this is Umfrey, our host for this afternoon.” He chuckled. “My friend, believe it or not, my dainty lady prefers ale.”

“A woman after my own heart.” Umfrey bowed. “I am honored, Lady Wessex. To which variety is my lady partial?”

“I know not.” Athel glanced at Demetrius, and he shrugged. “May I sample thy different brews?”

“Of course.” Umfrey nodded. “And the usual for Sir Demetrius?”

“Aye.” As Demetrius regarded the former oblate turned goddess, he counted himself a truly fortunate husband. “And two heaping portions of the farci.”

Anon, with full bellies, Demetrius and Athel rode along the coastline. At a particularly magnificent bluff, he brought his destrier to a halt, jumped from the saddle, and conveyed her to the ground.

“My lord, I would be remiss if I did not express my gratitude for our special day.” When he sat on a large crag, from which they enjoyed an arresting view of the ocean, she plopped herself between his thighs, reclined against him, and drew his arms about her. “Know thou art forgiven for thy minor breach in decorum at Christmastide. If thou dost never again bequeath a gift upon me, I will neither complain nor doubt thy affection, as this outing doth constitute enough presents for two lifetimes, and I shall never forget it.”

“Thou art a beneficent soul, my Athel.” It did not surprise him, when she clutched his wrist, untied the neckline of her cotehardie, and eased his hand beneath her slip, that he might caress her bare breast.

“I love it when thou dost touch me.” With a sigh he felt all the way to his toes, she offered her lips, which he claimed without hesitation.

Thither was naught more tempting or delicious than Athel’s supple mouth, and he loomed at a precarious precipice. Desire scored a path from their point of contact to his crotch, and he danced on the edge of insanity, as he yearned to claim her most intimate prize. But Demetrius had brought her thither for a reason, and he could not yield, thus he broke their kiss.

“Thou dost distract me from my cause.” He toyed with her pert nipple, and she wiggled her hips, which intensified the ache in his loins. “But it is time for hard truths. I want ye to trust me, but I cannot ask that of ye, if I do not vouchsafe the same commitment, so I would share my history with ye. Given we have not sealed our vows, thither remains an escape for ye, if thou dost hear my story and opt to end our union.” In his hold, she tensed, and he stroked her pliant mound of flesh. “If, however, thou dost choose to stay with me, I shall fix a date for the consummation, and we will plan our future, together.”

“My lord, naught ye can say will drive me from thy side.” She squeezed his arm, as if to support her assertion. “I gave ye my solemn promise that I would never leave ye, and I stand by my word. So make thy confession, safe in the knowledge that naught can take me from ye.”

And so Demetrius told her of his past, of his Templar origins, and of his ensuing imprisonment. Beneath his palm, her heartbeat raced, and as he recounted the King’s commands, which resulted in the formation of the Brethren of the Coast, Arucard’s marriage to Isolde, and Demetrius’s wedding to Athelyna, tears streamed her cheeks, though she spoke not. When he was done, save the lone secret of his lack of faith, she angled her head and met his stare.

“My lord, had ye taken me by force, had ye treated me with cruelty, or had ye showed me indifference, I might have doubted thy reputation.” She inhaled a shaky breath. “Instead, thou hast been naught but my noble knight, and I know the accusations leveled at ye art but the vicious lies of

unscrupulous persons, and woe to the unfortunate villain who attempts to divide us, as thou art my husband, now and forever. Make no mistake, I will defend ye.”

“My lady, I am truly blessed.” Only then did he relax.

Driven by an urge to express their devotion in a manner that stretched beyond the bounds of spoken devotion, they locked gazes, and like recognized like. In quiet, they indulged in intimate activity, and he played as a finely tuned instrument that part of her body he had yet to invade and brought her to completion. Then she moved to sit at his side, untied his breeches and braies, and extended the same much needed release.

The sun sat low on the horizon, when he lifted his bride to the saddle. And as he prepared to join her, he noticed a small blue stone, which he snatched from the ground.

“Hither, my lady.” He gave her the colorful rock. “To commemorate our special day.”

“Oh, how unusual.” She fussed over the simple gift, as she held it aloft for better inspection. Then she clutched the stone to her chest. “I shall treasure it, always, my lord.”

It was a testament to the purity of her character, that she placed a greater value on the otherwise unremarkable item than on the expensive fur cloak he purchased in Chichester, and he realized the emotional attachment he coveted for his wife was far more profound than he wished to admit, to himself or anyone else. When he revealed the last of his secrets, he would take her. Soon.

#

As January yielded to February, the winter weather subsided, and Athelyna grew impatient. Despite his pledge to set a date for the consummation of their vows, naught had been said since the day they spent in Chichester, and they scarcely enjoyed a free moment.

The royal compliment of soldiers appeared in the meadow surrounding the castle just after the first of the month, and in the sennight since their arrival, Demetrius worked with Briarus and Gerwald, in

preparation for the move to Winchester. And Athel grew dizzy from the overwhelming tasks associated with organizing a new household. But if one aspect remained constant, it was their nights, when they met in bed and took pleasure, however fleeting, doing everything but the deed.

So Athel and Isolde conspired with a stubborn and reticent knight, to bring down another *very* stubborn and reticent knight.

“The brewets art almost done, but I fear they are still too warm.” Isolde wiped her hands on her apron. “And the blancmange is ready.”

“I have the sambocade, per thy specifications.” With nervous anticipation, Athelyna pinned her hopes on the path to success via her husband’s appetite. “Oh, what if this doth not work?”

“Fret not, as men art all the same and quite predictable in their habits.” Isolde shrugged. “In fact, when I approached Arucard about our scheme, he protested, just as I expected.”

“How did ye sway him?” Athel checked the bread and the buttered wortes. “As he intimidates me with a mere glance.”

“My dear sister, thou dost give him too much credit, as he hath his weaknesses, which I know in detail.” After filling a bowl with steaming gourdes in potage, Isolde retrieved a stack of napkins from a shelf. “Thus I appealed to his favored activities, from which I shall glean equal enjoyment, and gained his allegiance. We will play the part of the happy couple. In other words, we will act as ourselves, and perchance we will inspire thy shy spouse.”

“Lady Isolde, thou art wise beyond thy years.” Margery tittered. “Because as much as I try, I cannot outsmart that fussy little soldier I married.”

“But Pellier is not of short stature.” If memory served, Arucard’s marshalsea cut an impressive figure, and Athel did not fathom the housekeeper’s complaints.

“That is true, but it doth not harm him to be cut down a peg or two, as his pride precedes him into the room.” Laughing, Margery transferred a trio of jellies to a divided dish and arranged pastries about a large platter.

“All right, Lady Isolde. I believe thy sup is complete, and I shall enlist the maids to deliver everything to thy solar.”

“Wonderful.” Isolde doffed her apron. “Athel, let us join the men.”

“I should cool the brewets a tad longer, as I want everything to be perfect.” She set several tankards and a heavy pitcher on a tray. “Mayhap ye can convey the ale to thy quarters, and I will be right behind ye.”

“Do not tarry.” Isolde wagged a finger, and the caravan of servants exited the kitchen.

In the quiet of solitude, Athel fought distressing doubt, as she knew not how she would react if Demetrius rejected her. On so many pleasurable eventides, she thought he would claim her bride’s prize, yet he brought her to release with his fingers, and then they slept. The problem was such completion left her craving something she knew not. She wanted true intimacy with her husband—she ached to be close to him, yet some invisible barrier loomed between them.

After situating the pickled meat strips on a trencher, she carried the food into the screened aisle, across the Great Hall, into the narrow passage, up the stairs, and down the corridor that led to the family chambers.

As she neared the lord of the manor’s rooms, a heated argument ensued, and Athel halted, given she recognized the voices of the participants.

“Wherefore art thou being so difficult?” Isolde inquired. “And who told ye of our intentions?”

“Isolde, my sweetheart, do not be angry.”

“Arucard, if thou hast betrayed my confidence, thou canst sleep in the garrison.”

“Isolde, I must be honest with my brother.”

“Wherefore must thou interfere in my affairs?” asked Demetrius. “Wherefore can ye not leave well enough alone?”

“Because Athel is not happy. As her sister, I am honor bound to help her.”

“Athel and I will seal our union when I decide—not thee.”

“Pray, that it might happen in my lifetime.”

“Isolde, that is enough.”

“Thou art correct, my lord husband. And for thy disloyalty, thou mayest seek shelter elsewhere.”

“Isolde.”

Athel stepped into the entryway, just as Isolde slammed shut the inner portal.

“Well, now ye have done it.” Arucard raked his fingers through his hair. “Thou hast angered my wife, thou abyss of ignorance.”

“It is thy fault.” Demetrius mirrored Arucard’s stance, with his back to Athel, and neither knew of her presence. “Thou never should have agreed to intervene on Athel’s behalf.”

“Mayhap not, but Isolde is correct in her estimation.” Arucard smacked Demetrius on the back. “Wherefore hast thou not performed thy duty by thy bride? The King demands ye produce an heir. Thou cannot manage that without breaching thy bride’s maidenhead.”

That her body was discussed as if Arucard were commenting on the weather humiliated Athel, and she shivered.

“I have my reasons, which art none of thy business.” Demetrius folded his arms. “And I will consummate my vows when I deem suitable—and not before then.”

“What of thy commitment?” Arucard wagged a finger. “Thou hast been wed for two months. Wilt thou imperil thy wife? Athelyna is a fine woman, but she cannot create a child on her own.”

“If thou dost remember, I never wanted to marry.” Demetrius emitted a groan of frustration. “I always intended to remain chaste.”

In that instant, Athel's heart fractured.

She glanced at the meal she labored all day to prepare, in the hopes that her knight would make love to her. To find naught but confirmation of her worst fears, that he did not want her, she cowered in shame. With a thud, she dropped the trencher on the table and ran from the solar.

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DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“And now my wife is angry with me.” Demetrius gnashed his teeth, as his ire boiled over, and he wanted naught more than to punch Arucard in the nose. “Well, thou hast achieved much this eventide.”

“Do not blame me for thy shortcomings.” Arucard gazed at the fare on the table, which posed an impressive collection of dishes. “Thither art brewets and a sambocade. Thy bride hath cooked thy favorites.”

“And Isolde prepared blancmange, I suspect because thou art partial to it.” Together, they claimed a chair, and Demetrius poured two tankards of ale. As he studied the contents of his mug, he sighed. “I am lost, brother. I chose a particular way of life, and it hath been ripped from my grasp, and I know not whither I fit in this new world, much less how to deal with Athel.”

“Thou art a coward.” Arucard bared his teeth, and Demetrius realized his friend spoke not in jest. “Wherefore art thou afraid of a little woman? She is not thine enemy; she is thy partner in all enterprises.”

Indeed, she is thy greatest source of strength. And thou hast taken the sacrament. Thou hast given thy word to Our Lord—”

“I know no such commitment, as I have no faith.” And thither it was, his primary problem, and relief flowed through him, as the incoming tide. “Indeed, I am a heathen, a nonbeliever. I am condemned.”

For a few minutes, Arucard just sat thither.

Demetrius had not planned to reveal his flaw in a fit of temper, but at last he could share his pain with someone. And, at some point, he would have to apprise Athel of his situation prior to sealing their vows, as he could not, in good conscience, saddle her with a soulless husband.

“Wherefore hast thou made such a declaration?” Arucard narrowed his stare. “Have care with thy brash statements, as thou mayest not recover from them.”

“Wherefore should I bother, when God hath forsaken us?” He growled with unveiled derision. “We led right and true lives. We honored the Creator, and wither was our savior when King Philip hunted us down and killed Randulf? What of our fellow Templars?”

“And what of the men we killed in battle?” Arucard lowered his chin and frowned. “Did they deserve to die?” He shook his head. “Nay. No more than Randulf, and thou art not the only one to grieve his demise. But faith doth not guarantee life. Rather, it ensures salvation in the hereafter, and that is what worries me for thee. Thou must abide thy responsibilities, as thou hast given thy promise.”

“Is that how ye dost rationalize thy obligations?” Demetrius had never comprehended how quickly Arucard accepted Isolde. “His Majesty doth issue edicts, and thou dost bend to his will.”

“Is that what ye dost believe?” Arucard opened and closed his mouth. Then he wiped his face. “Brother, I know well what happened that onerous day in La Rochelle, when we abandoned our homes and our families, that they might survive in our absence, so thou need not preach to me. But I will never surrender my conviction, as no monarch or other estimable official will claim that part of me.”

“And what of thy forced nuptials?” He pounded his clenched fist on the table. “How dost thou reconcile a marriage with our Templar Code, which demands chastity?”

“Of the two and seventy tenets, thither is no greater love than service to thy brothers.” With his brow a mass of furrows, Arucard toyed with the handle of his tankard. “When the King demanded a union with Isolde, in an expression of fealty, else he would put ye to the block, I did not hesitate, as it is my solemn duty to protect ye, given my rank of Grand Prior. Did ye think I left that function on France’s shores? From my perspective, the wedding was naught but an extension of my original oath, and I saw no other choice but to honor the scripture. Yet, I never expected to fall in love with Isolde, thus I am twice blessed.”

In that instant, the latch squeaked, and Isolde opened the bedroom door. With evidence of her sorrow etched in her countenance, she peered at Arucard, and he extended an arm and flicked his fingers. Without a word, she ran to him, and he drew her to his lap.

“I am sorry we quarreled.” He kissed her. “And I apologize for ruining thy savory meal.”

“It will keep.” Isolde rested her forehead to his. “I love ye.”

“And I love ye.” With his napkin, Arucard dried her tears. “Let us fill two trenchers and dine in our private chamber, as I would share ye with no one, my lady.” As he cradled her head, Arucard glanced at Demetrius. “In truth, thou art lost, brother. But that dost not mean ye cannot find thy way home. Go to Athelyna, and disclose thy troubles. I wager she will help ye recover what ye hath misplaced, as women excel in such hopeless endeavors.”

#

Stretched across the bed, Athel hugged a pillow and sobbed, because now she knew why Demetrius did not take her bride’s prize. She long suspected thither was a problem, but she thought they moved past his initial diffidence, and it hurt her to discover otherwise.

“Athel, may I speak with ye?” The edge of the mattress dipped, when Demetrius sat at her feet.

“Thither is naught to say.” Indeed, the damage was done. “If thou dost intend to send me to a convent, I will not protest.”

“Thou art going nowhere, unless ye dost wish it.” Well, that mollified her, somewhat. “But I would tell ye of my shame, and if thou dost desire to part company with me, I will allow it, and I shall face the consequences, on my own.”

“I will hear ye.” To stifle a cry, she bit the fleshy underside of her thumb.

“I know not whither to start.” He sighed.

“The beginning is best, so I have heard.” As an anchor, she focused on a spot on the wall. “But whatever thou dost feel compelled to divulge, I would have the whole of it, sir. If this union is to succeed, I will abide no further secrets between us. In that respect, I believe I have shown great restraint and patience, but we cannot forge a future built on a foundation of deceit.”

“Thou art wise, my lady.” She almost screamed, when he grasped her ankle. “Will ye look at me, as I am no coward, and I would speak directly to ye?”

“Just talk to me, my lord.” If she could acquiesce without weeping, she would defer to his request. But she had no fortitude, at that moment, so she kept her place. “My ears work fine.”

“Athel, I do not want to hurt ye, but I carry a burden that might imperil thy salvation, if thou dost persist as my wife, thus I refused to consummate our vows.” Her mind raced in all directions, as she tried to guess his revelation, and she braced for the worst. “In these months since our ceremony, I have developed an attachment to ye, and I need to apprise ye of the dire circumstances, which may drive ye from my arms, and that is wherefore I have delayed.”

“So thou hast protected me?” Indeed, he piqued her curiosity, and she wiped away her tears. “Prithee, continue.”

“Thou dost know of my Templar affiliation and Randulf’s untimely death, but thou dost not know the personal toll it exacted on me, because I have hidden it.” When he twined his fingers in hers, as she did when they rode, she squeezed his hand. “I have not uttered a single devotional since that day. I lost my faith.”

In that instant, Athel rolled over and met his tortured stare. “What of thy credence? Thou hast sworn an oath.”

“I abandoned it, as it abandoned me.” Tears welled in his silvery gaze, and she sat upright. “I am a hollow tree, my lady. I am damned, and I would not surrender ye to the same fate.”

“How is that possible, when I know ye to be a man of honor?” She shook her head against his statement. “Thou art noble and pious, regardless of what ye doth claim, and thou wilt never convince me otherwise.”

“Mayhap it is thy influence ye dost perceive, because thou dost make me want to believe again.” Demetrius blotted his cheeks with his sleeve and glanced at her with renewed interest, and she crawled to him. As he cupped her chin, he smiled. “Thou dost give me hope, Athel. But I fear without ye I am condemned.”

“Did I not promise that I would never leave ye?” Bending her legs, she perched on her feet and slipped her arms about his shoulders. “I am thine, my lord. And if necessary, I will pray for both of us, but I will not relent. Yea, I will never renounce ye. Thou art my husband, and I am thy wife, per the sacrament. And when thou art ready to claim what is thine, by law and the commitment we swore before the archbishop, thou shalt tell me, as I will not force ye.”

“In truth, I am more than willing to seal our union, and I have given it a great deal of thought.” At his declaration, her heart sang, and she kissed him. “Ah, that is my tempting lady.”

“So when shall it be, my wayward husband?” In that instant, in that very slim margin of time, Athelyna understood what Isolde meant, regarding the brooch and its mystical powers. Indeed, Athel required no piece of jewelry to discern that Demetrius was her one true knight, as she

coveted the conviction of her conclusion. “If thou art amenable, I shall indulge thee, tonight.”

“Actually, I propose another option, which bodes well for our relationship.” He chuckled when she pouted. “Given tomorrow is St. Valentine’s Day, and the bird shall choose its mate, I think it a good omen and the perfect opportunity to complete what we started in December, on the steps of the Chapter House.”

“*Hallelujah.*” Again, she pressed her lips to his. “Shall I collect some food from Arucard and Isolde’s solar, or should I not disturb them?”

“They are otherwise occupied.” With a grin, he chuckled. “So I shall fetch our meals, and thou should get some sleep, as I can guarantee ye will need the rest.”

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DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER TWELVE

Deep in the bowels of Chichester Castle, Demetrius unlocked a heavy gate and carried a torch into the former dungeon. Months after the Brethren took possession of the ancient residence, they cleaned out the underground prison and turned it into a holding cell for a vast amount of the Templar treasure they brought from France.

After Isolde revealed that Athelyna had sewn a burgundy gown for the St. Valentine's festival, he commissioned Margery to line the ermine cloak and knew precisely what he wanted to give his wife for the special occasion. He dug through two chests overflowing with jewels until the third yielded the item he sought, and he returned to the ground floor.

When he walked into his solar, he noted the new outwear draped on the back of a chair, and he clucked his tongue. Then he strutted to the inner portal and knocked on the door. "Athel, art thou ready for the festival?"

"Aye, my lord." Peering inside, he discovered Margery had just completed plaiting Athel's blonde hair. His bride stood, turned, and

smiled. "How do I look?"

"Thou art a vision." He glanced at the housekeeper and dipped his chin. "Thank ye, Margery. Thou art dismissed."

"Have a wonderful time at the festival, my lord." As she passed him, Margery winked. "Everything is prepared, per thy request."

"Dost thou favor my attire, as we purchased the material in Chichester?" As was her way, Athel all but bounced with excitement. "Dost thou remember?"

"Aye, how could I forget?" He narrowed his stare and pretended to give her ensemble due consideration. "But thither is something lacking."

"Oh?" Her ebullience faded ever so slightly, as she smoothed the folds of the velvet skirt. "I can change into something else."

"I know what thou dost need." He snapped his fingers. "Close thy eyes, my lady."

Emitting a heavy sigh, she did as he bade. With care, he led her before the long mirror, moved behind her, and settled the bauble about her neck. As he could have guessed, she peeked and then started.

"Oh, *Demetrius*." She pressed a hand to her bosom but stopped short of touching the expensive choker. "Never have I seen anything like it, but it is too much. My cherished knight, I cannot accept it."

"On the contrary, thou art my wife, to bedeck as I see fit." Fashioned of solid gold, intricate findings, with large ruby cabochons encircling her throat, the jewelry contrasted with her creamy flesh and blonde hair, and he would brook no refusal, as he traced the edge of the gemstones. "It is my gift to thee, in celebration of this most auspicious occasion."

"Can we not forgo the fair and remain hither?" She rotated to face him. "I am so excited I can hardly breathe, and my head spins whenever I think of our plan."

"I, too, am excited, but I wish to show off my beauteous bride, so let us away." In the solar, he collected her new cloak. "May I?"

“Another gift?” She positively glowed, as he tied the laces. “And it matches my gown. My lord, thou dost spoil me, and I fear my present pales in comparison.”

“Nonsense.” In play, Demetrius nipped her nose. “My bestowal is but pauper’s fare, in regard to thy treasure.”

“Prithee, can we not stay home?” She clutched fistfuls of his black cloak. “Else I shall go mad with wanting thee.”

“Nay.” He lifted his chin. “I promised my lady a day at the festival, and I intend to keep my oath.”

With that he offered his escort, and they rushed into the hall. In the front egress, a crowd gathered. One by one, the Chichesters ventured forth, and Demetrius, with Athel perched in his lap, drove his destrier to town.

Chichester was alive with activity, as musicians played various dances, and Demetrius tutored his wife in several maneuvers. They patronized the roast house and savored a fresh venison bake, and then they shared an apple muse. Athel clapped and cheered for the tumblers, and she grew misty-eyed, when he commissioned a lover’s lantern with a unique design that he would explain to her, anon. And all the while they favored each other with frisky smiles, stealing gentle caresses whenever possible, as they held a secret known only to them.

Ere long, she dragged him from the crowd. “My lord, I have so relished the festival, and I shall remember it until I die, but if thou dost not take me home this instant, I shall expire, on the spot.”

If the short trip to the village had been stirring, the return journey was rife with unbridled exhilaration and tension. Soft and feminine in his arms, Athel kissed every bit of exposed flesh she could reach, and no part of his neck or face escaped her tender attentions. By the time they crossed the drawbridges, navigated the barbican, and drew rein in the courtyard, Demetrius was on the verge of exploding.

The master of the horse collected the stallion, and Demetrius struggled to maintain a calm composure. The castle was quiet, given most of its occupants were at the fair, and the path to their private chambers

seemed never-ending. In their solar, he noted the simple meal that had been delivered, as he closed the double doors.

In their bedchamber, he set the hand-carved lantern on a side table, retrieved a taper, lit it from the fire in the heath, and placed the candle inside the gourde. “Dost thou recognize the symbol?”

Athel doffed her cloak and shook her head. “Nay.”

“It is called a true lover’s knot.” He shed his outerwear and tunic. “The two loops, side by side, are meant to signify the unfailing connection between a couple in love. Seamen parted from their ladies created all manner of accessories from rope, to ease the pain of separation, and they often fashioned an item for every day, until they were reunited with their sweethearts.”

“How romantic. Thou art so thoughtful, my lord.” Athel reached for the clasp of the necklace.

“Nay, my lady.” He positioned a chair and sat. “I would have ye remove everything but the jewels.”

“As thou dost wish.” A charming blush colored her cheeks, as she disrobed, one garment at a time, but she never faltered. When she rolled down her hose, she cast furtive glances in his direction, and Demetrius gritted his teeth. At last, his wife loomed before him, with hands resting at her sides, ornamented only in the bauble.

“Now take down thy hair.” Hard as forged steel, his man’s yard begged for relief, but he restrained his base instincts, as she loosened her long blonde locks.

Finally, Athelyna stood beside the fireplace, and the soft glow illuminated her flawless alabaster skin. Only then did he go to her.

“Art thou afraid, my lord?” Grasping his wrist, she pressed her cheek to his palm.

“Nay.” He lied. “Art thou?”

Without warning, she emitted a high-pitched cry and leaped at him. In seconds, she claimed his mouth, ripped open his shirt, and untied his

breeches and braies. When he tried to halt her, she fondled his longsword, and in the third tug of his stout length, he shot his seed all over her flat belly, but still she worked him.

And so Demetrius ceded the battle for self-control.

To her whimper of frustration, he lifted her from the floor, conveyed her to the bed, and threw her to the mattress, none too gently. After divesting himself of his boots, and clothing, he knelt between her legs and spread wide her thighs.

The first glimpse of her most intimate flesh reminded him of some strange sea creature that threatened to swallow him alive, and he reconsidered his plan. In previous exchanges, he played her with his fingers to bring her to completion, but that activity usually took place under the covers, in the dark, in the ancere, or beneath her cotehardie and kirtle. Never had he devoted any time in serious contemplation of that part of her body. But Arucard assured Demetrius that the center of her pleasure existed therein, and he had better become familiar with it.

Rubbing his nose to her tiny golden curls, he expelled his breath, and she shrieked. But when he fastened his lips to her pearl, she wiggled her hips and yanked his hair. That was the encouragement he needed, and he licked and suckled until she screamed and became rigid with release.

Riding a wave of desire, he crawled atop her, gave her his weight, positioned his man's yard, and thrust. "Oh, sweet sanctuary."

And Athel burst into laughter.

#

The slow descent to reality, as heralded by her husband's odd exclamation, rendered Athel on the precipice of hysteria. And poor Demetrius looked down on her and frowned.

"Did I do something wrong?" He stilled. "Have I hurt ye?"

"Nay." Yet she could not quiet her giggles. "But I am so glad we waited, my lord."

“So am I.” When he pumped within her, the world tilted, and Athel rested her palms to his shoulders. Yet she soared to some heretofore-foreign place, whither an alluring deliverance reigned supreme. “But I am thine, and that is remarkable, is it not?”

“It is, my lady.” Groaning, he increased his pace. “But we can discuss it, anon. Right now, I wish to make love to ye.”

To her infinite shock, her once secretive husband said far more, as he found his rhythm, and she curled about him. He told her of his devotion, he imparted what she did to him, and he praised her fledgling attempts to please him. And in that brief but poignant conversation, Athel fell in love with her husband.

Again and again, they came together, after that first fiery coupling, until she lost count, not that it mattered. And she bared more than her physical self, inviting him to luxuriate in something far deeper than passion. The connection flickered and took root, enveloping them in an invisible but nonetheless potent blanket of dedication, as Demetrius rose above her, flung back his head, and signaled his fulfillment with a mighty roar, before he collapsed atop her. And Athel held him, stroking his muscled back and running her fingers through his thick black hair, even after the torrent had passed.

Demetrius shifted and propped on his elbows. “How dost thou fare, my lady?”

“I am quite well.” Oh, she could dance an estampie, naked, down the center of the Great Hall. Then her stomach rumbled, and she snorted. “But I am hungry.”

“As am I.” He rendered a thorough kiss and then rolled from the bed. “I shall fetch some food from the solar.”

It was then Athel spied the mark from her visions, and she lurched upright. “My lord, wait.”

He glanced at her and arched a brow. “What is it, sweetheart?”

“The brand thou dost bear, will ye tell me of it?” She blinked and tried to gain a better view in the dim light. Did it have the jagged scar? “It

is fascinating.”

“Of course.” He disappeared, only to reappear, carrying a tray with two trenchers of brewets—what else, bread, and ale.

But Athel wanted to inspect the Crusader’s Cross, so she grabbed a candlestick and held it high, as he sat on the edge of the mattress. Thither it was, the telltale disfigurement cut right through the symbol, and she shouted for joy.

“That is it.” She traced the design, and his flesh was warm to her touch. “Thou art my one true knight.”

“My dear, thou art delirious.” He offered her a tankard of ale.

“Permit me to explain, and I beg thy forbearance.” With a generous gulp of the tasty brew, she hummed, as everything seemed to fall into place. Indeed, her life suddenly made sense. “But first I would know when ye got the brand.”

“In thirteen hundred and four, on my maiden trip to the Holy Land.” He fed her a piece of a spicy brewet. “In fact, it is customary to commemorate the religious expedition. Wherefore dost thou make thy inquiry?”

“All right. I am going to recount something of importance, and I would have ye tell me if I am correct.” When she shivered with elation, he tucked the covers about her. “On thy journey, a vicious battle raged, sword clashed with sword, and thou didst protect a group of innocent pilgrims, beneath the glare of a brutal sun. With incomparable skill and speed, thou didst valiantly charge numerous assailants, kicking sand in thy wake and dispatching thy foes with lethal aim, until the enemy cowered in the shadows, but ye were merciful. Anon, as thou walked amid the bodies scattered across the dunes, the sweet stench of blood hung heavy in the air, and thou doffed thy gauntlets.”

“Thou dost describe a battle just south of Nazareth, on the old Roman road to Jerusalem, whither I was wounded.” With mouth agape, Demetrius stared at her. “How didst ye come to know this?”

“From the brooch.” She scooted from the bed and retrieved the captivating pin, which she handed to him, and then she huddled under the blankets. “When thou didst gift me the precious badge, I wore it on my chemise. Indeed, I never took it off, except to bathe and don a fresh slip. But regardless of when I slept, I revisited the same reverie, without fail. Dost thou not understand? The lore is not some harmless tale. Thou art my one true knight.”

“Athel, thou art leaping to unsupported conclusions.” He seemed so calm in the face of her revelation, as he studied the brooch. “Mayhap my story influenced thy dreams.”

“But thou hast never told me of the conflict, and I only just spied the mark, as thou hast never permitted me to glimpse thy nude body.” She had to make him believe in the legend, as it just might renew his faith. “Its powers are real, and it is a gift from Our Lord, as naught that predicts love can be evil.”

“Sweetheart, despite the fact that I am fond of ye, we married because the King commanded it.” He drew an imaginary circle about her nipple. “But I count myself fortunate.”

“Nay, thou wilt not deter me.” When he moved the tray to the side table, and sidled next to her, she reclined in the pillows. “I care not for the King’s decree. Thou were meant to be mine, and I am thine. Thou mayest not doubt that--not now. Indeed, not ever.”



DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Four days anon, Demetrius emerged from his chamber a contented man, with visions of a naked and sated Athelyna dancing in his brain. Whistling a happy tune, he strutted into the Great Hall to partake of a light sop before weapons practice.

“I do not believe my eyes.” Aristide smirked. “It lives.”

“And he hath definitely shrunk.” Morgan pounded the table. “But I am grateful for thy return, brother, as we have taken turns fighting Arucard, and thou art the only one capable of deflecting his attack.”

“Our brother hath grown arrogant in thy absence.” Geoffrey rubbed his jaw. “He clipped my chin yesterday, but thou would not know, as thou hast confined thyself to thy quarters.”

And so the baiting commenced, not that Demetrius cared. Indeed, the more he pondered his warm bed, and his wife’s soft and inviting body,

he reversed his decision to partake of his usual activities and opted to rejoin his bride.

“Demetrius, wilt thou have something to eat?” Isolde set a napkin and a trencher across from Arucard. “Mayhap thou wilt enjoy a bit of conversation with my husband, whilst I tend Athel, as I suspect she would benefit from a hot bath, and she will require assistance I am too happy to provide.”

With an unruly dragon in his breeches, he hesitated.

“Sit, brother, and fill thy belly.” Bearing a half-smile, Arucard dipped a chunk of bread and paused. “Trust me, thy wife is not going anywhere. And after four days in thy unreserved company, it is doubtful she could walk down the stairs without aid.”

“Art thou not the wit.” He took his place and designed a sweet invasion, which further aroused him, but all he wanted was to return to Athel’s embrace. The now familiar hunger burgeoned, and he ached to run back to his room, back to his sanctuary, back to his Athelyna. “Arucard, given thou dost love Isolde, mayhap thou can tell me how ye dost manage, after what happened in Winchester?” In a low voice, Demetrius said, “My greatest fear is losing Athel.”

“Thou dost want the truth?” When Demetrius nodded, Arucard leaned near. “Thither art times when I want naught more than to lock Isolde and Roswitha in our quarters, but my wife and daughter hath committed no crime, so I can hardly impose such punishment. But I would caution ye not to overreact, else ye may offend thy bride. Never forget she is thy partner, not thy property.”

“And I am her steadfast servant.” Demetrius mulled his next move, as he entered unfamiliar territory, and he needed advice. “So when thou didst woo Isolde, what expressions of affection worked best to win her heart?”

For a few minutes, Arucard scrutinized Demetrius and cast a sly grin. “Thou art interested in thy wife’s devotion?”

“I am aware that is a change in tune.” He braced for ensuing jokes at his expense. “And thou canst spare me the criticism or amusing remarks.”

“Given I have walked in thy shoes, I would not dream of it.” Arucard chuckled. “But I can offer suggestions to help smooth rough waters, as courtship is far more perilous than the most lethal battle.”

“I am listening.” He shifted his hips, as his senses called to Athel.

“When in season, bring her flowers. Find an outdoor spot, a private place to spend time with her, as that is the most important commodity thou canst gift her.” Arucard inclined his head and narrowed his stare. “Never tell her she is fat, especially when she increases with thy babe. And take her a morning meal, as she will express her gratitude in a manner that pleases ye both.”

In that instant, Demetrius flagged a maid. “Prepare a tray for Lady Athelyna.”

“Aye, my lord.” The girl rushed to the kitchen.

“Any news since St. Valentine’s Day?” Demetrius queried.

“I had a missive from His Majesty.” Arucard wiped his dish clean. “Thou art to depart for Winchester in three days.”

“Mayhap we can send the wagons ahead, with some servants, so the castle will be ready when we arrive.” He made a few calculations. “But we have no housekeeper or marshalsea.”

“Well, perchance I can provide a solution.” With his napkin, Arucard daubed the corners of his mouth. “Grimbaud and Isotta would fill the positions, and given thy wife’s treatment of Grimbaud and friendship with Isotta, it should work.”

“I would be glad to have them, if thou canst spare them.” The maid brought Athel’s meal, and Demetrius stood. “Thus I have Briarus as my majordomo, and I have yet to discern in what capacity I might use Gerwald.”

“He shows an advanced aversion to work of any kind.” Arucard suddenly brightened. “Ah, hither comes my lady, which means thy wife is prepared to receive ye, and I believe I shall forgo weapons practice, too.”

After collecting Athel’s food, Demetrius retraced his earlier steps. In the solar, he put away his sword and coif, and then he tugged off his hauberk. When he entered the bedchamber, he found his bride curled beneath the covers.

“Good morrow, sweetheart.” He bowed and presented her sustenance. “Art thou hungry?”

“Oh, Demetrius, thou art so thoughtful.” As she sat upright, the sheet dropped to her waist, revealing her sumptuous breasts, and she patted the mattress. “Wilt thou break thy fast with me? And afterward, I should express my gratitude for thy consideration.”

In silence, Demetrius thanked Arucard.

#

On the eve of her departure for Winchester, Athelyna inventoried additional wagonloads of items. Given Grimbaud and Isotta embarked on the journey two days prior, along with the bulk of their belongings and the garrison of three hundred soldiers, Athel had not much to pack, other than the few comforts of home she would employ to make their nights more pleasant.

“How goes thy chores, sweetheart?” Demetrius hugged her from behind and kissed her ear.

“I believe I am done.” Resting against him, she angled her head in perfect position to receive his kiss. It still surprised her how much he had changed in so little time. While she worried about his salvation, given he would not pray, she did not criticize him, as she would not risk ruining their newfound intimacy. “And what of thy tasks?”

“The same.” Trailing playful nibbles along the curve of her neck, he cupped her breast, and she sighed. “And Arucard hath offered to loan us his large traveling bedframe, if thou art interested.”

“While it is a nice gesture, I would decline.” She wiggled her hips. “As I am looking forward to making love in our smaller one.” Then she burst out laughing. “Oh, my lord. Dost thou recall our first night on the road, when we took turns knocking each other to the ground?”

“I was trying to be polite.” He drew her into their inner chamber. “But those days have long since passed, and I would indulge in a bit of exercise, right now, if thou art amenable.”

“Under normal circumstances, I would satisfy ye, my lusty knight, but I promised Isolde I would help with the feast in our honor.” In a swift shuffle, she eluded his grasp, and he cast an irresistible pout that brought her right back to his arms. As she squeezed his waist, she suckled his lower lip. “I missed ye this morning.”

“My brothers wanted to engage in a final weapons practice, given I will not be hither to defend them against Arucard’s vicious molinetto.” He rocked, and his stout man’s yard snared her attention. “Prithee, Athel, as I ache for ye, and I cannot wait until we retire.”

“All right, I relent, but thou must be quick about it.” She untied his breeches and braies and found him hot and unyielding as forged iron. “And do not tangle my hair, as I must get to the kitchen.”

“Trust me, it will not take much, as I am more than ready for ye.” He lifted her to the bed, flicked up her skirts, knelt between her thighs, entered her in a single powerful thrust, and halted. “Thou dost slay me, sweetheart. Thy succulent sheath doth offer an oasis of bliss, such that I cannot discern fantasy from reality, and if I had my choice, I would never separate from ye.”

“Demetrius, thou art my one true knight.” As he moved within her, Athel framed his face and pulled him to her. Enticing heat simmered in her veins, and desire licked at her senses. “And I will do whatever thou dost ask, as I am thine to command.”

As he found his rhythm, she curled about him, as he preferred, and he took her hard and fast. But to his credit, he always made sure she found completion before him and never withdrew in haste. Nay, he held her, and

they kissed. It was in those cherished moments that Athel's love grew, and she vowed to protect and defend her man.

In keeping with his routine, he claimed her a second time. Whereas their initial couplings often resulted in swift release for him, the follow-up featured the softest caresses and tender words of devotion that brought her to tears. Thither she found unequivocal acceptance, and she labored to extend the same to her husband.

Anon, they righted their clothes, and Athelyna assessed her appearance in the mirror. "I smell stewed beef." She gave Demetrius a quick hug and ran through the solar. "Thus I am late."

Soon the beverages flowed, the dining commenced, and the Brethren provided roasting of a different sort. But when her husband claimed the floor, Athel lamented their impending departure.

"My friends, my family, words cannot adequately express the gratitude Athel and I hold for Chichester and its inhabitants. Given this was our first home as a married couple, we shall always recall our time hither with fondness. And thou wilt have accommodations in Winchester, if ye ever have need of it. Remember, we art but a two-day ride away, and our door is forever open to ye." Demetrius raised high his tankard. "Let us toast to the future and all its possibilities."



DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The relatively short journey to Winchester Castle contrasted drastically with the ride from London, and not just in duration. For Demetrius, the primary clue that his bride intended to add to the difference came five hours into the initial leg of the trip.

Swaddled in his cloak and two blankets to keep her warm, she occupied her usual perch in his lap. What he did not expect was for her to shift, straddle him, untie his breeches and braies, and take him into her sweet sheath, thither and then.

“Athel, what art thou doing?” The natural motion of his destrier, and their respective positions, coupled to seduce him, and Demetrius gnashed his teeth.

“My lord, I should think it obvious.” She licked his neck. “Now tell Briarus that ye will search ahead and check the condition of the lane. And then heel the flanks of thy stallion, as I desperately need ye to move.”

Per her directive, Demetrius did as she bade, to Briarus's look of confusion. But when Demetrius sent his horse into a gallop, the world tilted on end, the passing landscape blurred, and all too soon, he soared into blissful release.

"Oh, mother of mercy." Again and again, he tensed with pure unadulterated pleasure, until he slumped over his bride, who clung to him. Spent to his toes, he fell prey to a fit of mirth. "Whither did ye learn that, my lady, as thou were a virgin when I first took ye?"

"From Isolde." Athel shrugged. "She swears by it to pass the time on an otherwise unremarkable tour."

In that instant, he sifted through his memory and recalled several occasions whereupon Arucard offered the same thin excuse, to Demetrius's unutterable bewilderment.

But now he understood the need for secrecy.

The need for isolation.

The need.

To his horror, he suspected he had fallen in love with his wife.

That particular development would not have troubled him, had he regained his faith, but he remained detached from his beliefs, as a lost son. Every attempt at prayer left him empty and mute, so he suffered in silence, wondering if he would ever find his way home.

So that first night, after the party retired, he sought solace and seduced his bride with soft kisses intended to entice and arouse, and Athel all but melted beneath him. And in the intimate connection he won redemption, however temporary.

Rising before the dawn, they came together again, melding into one entity, and his declaration danced on the tip of his tongue, but his bride rushed to prepare a morning meal for the small contingent of soldiers that escorted them to their new home, so he held his tongue. But in their moments of shared bliss, he glimpsed a light at the end of a long and dark tunnel.

To his delight, she took him again, in the same soul-stealing manner, on the second day of their travels, and he employed the same excuse to gain a measure of privacy. But she was exhausted when they approached the massive stronghold, as the sun sat low on the horizon, thus he carried her to their quarters and deposited her on the bed.

In the Great Hall, he met with Grimbaud, his marshalsea.

“Thither are not enough tables and chairs for the garrison to dine at once, so Isotta feeds everyone in two sittings.” Grimbaud opened his mouth and then closed it. “And given Lady Athelyna’s absence, I would speak with ye about a difficult situation.”

“What is it?” Demetrius flipped through a stack of bills.

“Per thy orders, I conferred upon Gerwald a supervisory rank in the garrison, but he doth not perform his duties.” Grimbaud frowned. “Sir, I am not one to gainsay ye, but the men hath noticed, and they resent him. Thither is talk of preferential treatment, given he is thy relation through marriage, such that Gerwald undermines my authority.”

“Whither is Gerwald now, as he did not welcome his sister?” The gadling reminded Demetrius of Randulf, and that gave him pause.

“He may be in the meadow, sir.” Grimbaud rolled his eyes. “The lad is absent whenever thither is work to be done, but he never misses a meal, so thou mayest catch him at supper.”

“But I did not see him, when we made our approach to the gate.” He pondered the landscape. “Thither is a particular place he favors?”

“Aye. I wager ye can find him just on the edge of the woods, as thither is a gentle verge.” The marshalsea accepted the bundle of parchment. “And what shall I do with these, my lord?”

“I will remit payment, immediately.” Demetrius strolled toward the courtyard. “And purchase more furnishings, as I would have us gather as a community, especially for holidays and such.”

“Yea, my lord.” Grimbaud nodded and disappeared down a side corridor.

As he exited the main gate, Demetrius peered to the left and noted the forested area. A slope in the earth caught his attention, and he just spied the crown of Gerwald's head visible above the tall grass.

Given the long ride, he enjoyed the walk to his undisciplined relation. A cool breeze rolled off the river, and he inhaled the fresh air. As Demetrius neared, Gerwald started.

"Demetrius, thou art hither." With arms stretched overhead, Gerwald yawned. "And how is Athelyna?"

"She is spent, thus she sleeps." He squatted and dropped to the earth. "Wherefore art thou hither, when thither is much work to be done?"

"Such drudgery is boring." Gerwald rubbed his eyes. "And I drank too much at the tavern in town, last eventide, thus I suffer for it now."

"Gerwald, thou cannot go through life as an idle drunkard, as that is not an occupation, unless thou art a king." Had he not said the same to Randulf? "Thou dost want to lead, but ye must do so by example, else thou wilt never know respect, and thy charges will desert ye. What I ask of ye is naught more than I do, myself."

"But I am too young to be locked away in toil." Gerwald leaped to his feet, spread wide his arms, and rotated in circles. "I am in my prime, and I wish to have fun."

"Complete thy chores, and then ye may indulge in various entertainments." Demetrius smacked Athel's brother on the back of the head. "But if thou dost embarrass my wife, thou wilt have to deal with me." Stars twinkled in the encroaching indigo sky, and he envisioned his lady, reclining in their bed. "Now let us return to the castle."

As Demetrius strolled the lea, he made a mental list of necessities to address on the morrow. But at that moment, he thought only of Athelyna. Despite Briarus's suggestion that Demetrius sup at the dais, he chose to convey a tray to his private accommodation.

In deep slumber, his bride did not stir when he carried their meal to a small bedside table, which was not like her. After removing her heavy

cotehardie, he divested her of her shoes, kirtle, and hose, and then he tucked her between the sheets.

Once he joined her, he woke her. “Sweetheart, thou must eat something.”

“I am too tired.” She moaned.

“Athel, take some beef broth, for me.” Demetrius held the bowl to her lips.

“My lord, stop fussing.” She nestled close, and he kissed her. That brought her alert, and she sipped the hot liquid. “Mmm, that is delicious.”

After tending his wife, he sank into the mattress and drew her into his arms. While his body responded to her closeness, he disturbed her not, as just holding her brought him comfort.

It dawned on Demetrius then that so many dreams he coveted in La Rochelle had since come to completion. Indeed, despite the hardships he endured, he prospered. Although he had never planned to marry, he had longed to manage his own community, and he was just beginning to attain that goal, in France, when everything was destroyed.

But fate chose a different course, which brought him Athelyna and the possibility of a family legacy. He wanted an heir. He wanted his wife. More importantly, he wanted her love.

#

By March, the chill of winter surrendered to the rebirth of spring, and countless wildflowers littered the meadow before Winchester Castle. Built of beige stone, the motte-and-bailey fortress perched high on a sandstone bluff, with a river on one side and a moat on the other. Crenellation marked the parapets, and a pair of impressive towers stood guard over the north face of the curtain wall. At first glance, it was an awesome responsibility for a novice chatelaine, but Athelyna fell in love with the resplendent structure.

But in rare moments of frustration, she resolved to ride for Chichester Castle, if she could persuade her husband. Of course, she was

not in earnest, as the huge residence presented a challenge she could not resist, so she commenced to creating a warm and inviting home from the cold fortification.

Vivid tapestries hung on the walls of the solar, and intricate woodwork decorated the ceiling of Athelyna's new shared accommodation. A large four-poster, with a hand-tooled headboard, occupied the center of the back wall, and she spread a luxurious burgundy damask coverlet over the mattress.

"Lady Athelyna, thou art not a maid." Isotta shook her head and clucked her tongue. "Permit me to summon the servants."

"Thou dost remind me of Margery." She assessed her work and dipped her chin. "I think it lovely, if I do say so, myself."

"Well that is enough, as his lordship bade me fetch ye to the courtyard, whither he awaits." Isotta snatched the pillow from Athel's grasp. "I will have the maids finish thy chores, as thou hast been tired, of late."

"All right." She glanced at her appearance and doffed her apron. "I am gone."

Athel paused in the hallway and glanced left and then right. On more than one occasion, she got lost in the maze of corridors, but she suspected she could access the side egress to the right. Indeed, in a few minutes, she stepped into the bright sunlight.

"Ah, thither is my beauteous bride." Demetrius loomed with his destrier, and she ran into his embrace. "And thy ardent welcome is my reward."

"My lord, thou art up to something." As he lifted her to the saddle, she sneaked a kiss. "Whither dost we roam, as I have yet to supervise organization of the undercroft, and although the buttery is in order, the spicery requires a thorough scrubbing."

"And that is what servants are for, my dear." Planted at her rear, he heeled his stallion, and they exited the castle at a blazing pace. "Right now, my burdens are few, and I wish to spend time with ye."

“Oh, Demetrius, I have missed ye, of late.” Bursting with joy, she fought happy tears, as demands on the lord and lady of the manor were many. “But we art both occupied with settlement of our new home.”

“Thou dost glow, my lady.” As they approached the wooded area to the east, he slowed the stallion. “Have I pleased ye?”

“Thou hast, my one true knight.” How she favored his mischievous nature, as it was a part of him shown only to her. “So what art thou about?”

“Well, Arucard and Isolde have a special place, whither they engage in private interludes, and I suppose we could indulge in a similar practice.” With his teeth, he nipped the crest of her ear, as he steered between the trees. “When I surveyed the outlying lands, I discovered a small glade, which I thought perfect for our purpose.”

“How dost thou know of their habit, if it is private?” The thick canopy of leaves rustled in the breeze, and she closed her eyes.

“Because I happened upon them by accident, whilst they partook of marital affection.” He snorted. “They were not aware of my presence, but I will never forget the sight of Arucard’s bare arse, and it is an experience I wish I could erase from memory.”

Athelyna burst into laughter. “And yet thou would follow their example?”

“To an extent.” The foliage thinned and opened to a tiny clearing, fully enclosed by the trees. “What dost thou think of our glade, my lady?”

“It is charming, my lord.” She surveyed the surroundings, as he dismounted and then handed her down. “And it appears quite secluded.”

“Thither art all manner of branches and twigs on the ground, too.” After collecting a bouquet of wildflowers, which he presented to her, he spread a blanket atop the grass and she propped on an elbow, as he unpacked a bundle, to reveal grapes, cheese, bread, and wine. “If someone doth try to spy on us, we will know it.”

“Is my husband bashful?” She could not help but giggle.

“Nay, as I care not who views my backside.” With a snort of disgust, he fed her a plump piece of fruit. “But I share my fair Lily with no one.”

“Thou hast not called me thus, since the night we met.” And how far they had journeyed from the initial meeting. “I am partial to the name.”

“Well, in truth, my use is not so noble.” He tempted her with a bite of cheese. “Thy naked bottom doth remind me of two great creamy petals, which doth harken a comparison to the bloom.”

“*Demetrius.*” She buried her face in his chest, and he chuckled. “Thou art shocking.”

“Art thou indeed startled?” In that instant, he skimmed his hand along the edge of her skirt, before easing beneath her kirtle. When he touched the sensitive flesh at the juncture of her thighs, she sighed and reclined. “Ah, my Lily is wet for me.”

To Athelyna’s delight, their outing erupted into a passionate encounter under a clear blue sky, as her husband made love to her amid the flora and fauna. It was not a quick coupling. Rather, he moved slow and steady, drawing out the experience, until she gave her scream of fulfillment into his mouth. But it was after their joining, when he held her and stroked her hair, that Athel yearned to proclaim her affection, as their intimacy climbed to new heights. Instead, she just enjoyed his presence.

“I am sorry if ye dost believe I have ignored ye, of late.” With his thumb, he toyed with her nipple. “We must host a dinner for the local notables, and I would have thy assistance when I negotiate peace in Winchester.”

“Of course, my lord.” So much had happened in the town, and she dreaded meeting the awful people who treated Isolde so callously. “I understand the citizens incurred countless losses in the battle. According to Isolde, the residents blame the Brethren.”

“They are hurt, and they need someone to fault.” He twined his fingers with hers. “This region hath been without a leader for a while, and our people art fragmented and afraid.”

“Thus they need us to bring them together.” She met his stare. “We should present a united front.”

“Thou art wise and beauteous.” He winked.

“And that should honor His Majesty’s command.” Yet Athel was not appeased, because failure could send them to the block, and she mulled the tenuous predicament. “Thou must have confidence in thy actions, which necessitates confidence in thyself. My lord, I hesitate to broach a sensitive subject, but I must know if thou hast been able to pray, as I am concerned for thy soul?”

“I have tried, Athel.” Almost at once, she regretted prodding him, as he frowned. “But I suspect I require inspiration. Yet, the situation is not hopeless, as thou hast made me want to try. I want to be a good man for ye, and what we build hither is what I have always coveted. However, something inside me questions everything.”

“Thou art the best of men, and I have sufficient faith for both of us.” So many dependents pulled them in numerous directions, and she promised herself to pray on his behalf. Somehow, some way, she would restore his salvation, because she loved him. “It will be fine. I know everything will work out, in the end, as I will not tolerate otherwise.”

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DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Powerful men required special handling, and Demetrius plotted his moves with ruthless precision. If he wanted to gain the allegiance of Winchester's most esteemed citizens, he had to play his part. Garbed in a crisp white shirt and a dark blue tunic sewn by his wife, with matching chausses and leather boots, he brushed his hair and slipped on the signet ring that bore the crest of his title.

When he strolled into the Great Hall, he found a large table, bedecked in rich blue linens, positioned at the center of the room. Platters heaped with select cuts of roasted beef and ham held pride of place, and all manner of delectable side dishes completed the tempting fare.

"Everything is set, my lord." Gowned in vivid green velvet, Athelyna scrutinized the placement, and he hoped his hastily sketched plan worked. "And Grimbaud tells me our guests are arriving, thus we should assume our station in the front egress."

“My Lily, thou art an ethereal vision.” He kissed her plaited crown. “Let us welcome our new friends.”

In the main entry, Demetrius shook hands and exchanged pleasantries with the most prosperous members of Winchester society, and thither were so many, he lost track of their names. But they all shared a single commonality, a flaw in the male sex that rendered them vulnerable to persuasion. In short, they fell victim to his bride’s incomparable beauty, and he could not have been more proud. By the time they adjourned to supper, Athelyna had charmed more than half of the set, and he anticipated little resistance to his overtures.

“So thou hast been appointed to bring order to Winchester, yet it is the King’s neglect that resulted in the false burgage plots and the exploitation by Lord Rochester.” A noble stared down his nose. “Prithee, wherefore should we trust ye to lead us?”

“Because I am His Majesty’s duly appointed servant, I command three hundred soldiers, and I am ordered to restore the rule of law to the lands.” A series of whispers filtered through the cavernous meeting space, and Demetrius shifted with discomfit. “Good sirrahs, how is it we art at odds?”

“Thou art a friend and confidante of Lord Sussex, and he blames us for the injuries to Lady Sussex.” A grey-haired elderly gentleman frowned. “We had naught to do with that, yet we paid a steep price in the blood of our citizens.” Suddenly, he compressed his lips. “Apologies, Lady Wessex. I mean no offense.”

“None taken.” Seated to his left, Athel toyed with her goblet, and he braced for her strike, as his bride could be a thousand times more lethal than the sharpest sword. “But I question the honor of any man who would stand idle, as a defenseless woman is tried, convicted, and punished for a crime she did not commit. I have seen, firsthand, the lasting scars that will never fade, in payment for a debt that was never owed, and I wonder how those gathered within these walls turned the other cheek to such an affront to justice. Is that not in itself a crime?” She sighed, as she held the visitors enrapt. “Then, to compound thy transgressions, thou didst take up arms against the Sovereign, some of thy loved ones paid the ultimate price, and

thou dost blame my husband for thy losses. Thou dost profess a desire for order, but when the King sends his servant to manage the jurisdiction, a garrison is installed herein, the purpose of which is to protect ye and ensure thou art treated equitably and with respect, thou dost again rebel. Prithee, I am but a woman. Might someone explain thy reasoning?"

Silence fell on the gathering.

Under cover of the linens, Demetrius squeezed Athelyna's fingers.

Tension hung in the air, until at last one person stood and raised a tankard. "I will support ye, Lord and Lady Wessex."

"As will I," another proclaimed.

One by one, the nobles, save a lone dissenter, swore their loyalty to the Crown and its agent. When the protester shot to his feet, the scene quieted.

"I am Renoldus Van Hermant, and I rebuke thy authority." With a sneer, he clutched the hilt of his sword, and Demetrius nodded to Briarus, who remained on alert for trouble. "In the conflict His Majesty waged on Winchester, many lives were stolen, including that of my heir. No amount of pretty words can compensate me, and I do not forgive ye. At some point, mayhap now, mayhap anon, I will have my revenge on ye and send thee to thy much-deserved grave."

"That is quite enough." Just as Demetrius anticipated, Athel charged the fore. "I can abide a great many things, but thou wilt not come into my home, invited or not, and threaten my husband."

"Fret not, Lady Wessex, as I am leaving." Van Hermant peered at his companions. "Anyone coming with me?"

Thither was no movement in the ranks.

Athelyna summoned Briarus. "Van Hermant has chosen to depart our company. Pray, show him to the door." And that was how a dainty woman quashed the Winchester resistance, raising naught but her voice. Then she clapped and said to Isotta, "Thou mayest serve the meal."

Everyone moved with speed and efficiency, and he availed himself of the opportunity to express his appreciation of her efforts. “My lady, thou art magnificent. And when we retire, I shall pleasure thee, until ye dost scream.”

“My lord, that sounds lovely.” She licked her lips, and he clenched his gut. “Then I shall take ye till dawn.”

Thither, Athelyna won again.

#

On a warm and sunny April morning, Athelyna bent over a basin, disgorged the contents of her belly, and wiped her brow with a cool cloth. The strange malaise that assailed her without mercy began in March, but she presumed it was naught more than a temporary hardship. And just as she thought it passed for the day, she doubled over and vomited again.

“My lady, art thou unwell?” With a stack of folded sheets in her grasp, Isotta frowned. “Should I summon the physic?”

“Nay, as it is naught.” And if she repeated that enough times, she just might believe it. When she stretched upright, the room spun out of control, and Athel stumbled. “Oh, dear.”

“Thither is something wrong, my lady.” Isotta dropped the linens on the bed and rushed to assist Athel. “Lean on me, and I shall lead ye to the chair.”

“Thank ye, Isotta.” With tenuous steps, Athel collapsed on the seat. “Do not summon the physic, as I would not worry Demetrius. But if thou wilt accompany me to the physic’s quarters, I would grateful.”

“Just try and get me to abandon thy side.” The housekeeper slipped an arm about Athelyna’s waist, and they ventured into the hall and out the secondary entrance.

In the courtyard, she clung to Isotta, and they traded polite conversation, so it appeared they did naught more than conduct their business. On the other end of the garrison, the housekeeper pushed open the heavy oak panel and hollered for the physician’s help.

“Lady Athelyna.” Paganus drew her to a bench. “Take thy ease, my lady.” To Isotta, he asked, “What happened?”

The housekeeper shrugged. “I found my lady heaving, and she was dizzy. Lady Athelyna reports the illness struck in March.”

“How dost thou feel now, my lady?” Paganus pressed the back of his hand to Athel’s forehead and then gently squeezed her stomach. “Thou dost have no fever.” As he rubbed his chin, he narrowed his gaze. “If I may, when is the last time thy courses flowed?”

Initially, Athel did not comprehend the consequence of the physic’s question. But as she counted each sennight, she flinched. “I know precisely. My courses have not flowed since before St. Valentine’s Day.” And then she recalled the significance of that particular moment in her personal history. “Am I with child?”

“So it would seem, my lady.” Paganus smiled. “Felicitations. I suggest ye lighten thy load and take a nap, every afternoon. And ye may forgo thy morning sop in favor of a substantial noon meal, which should ease thy symptoms.”

“Thank ye, Paganus.” Without thought, she caressed her flat belly and pondered the life growing inside her, and inexpressible elation welled. If her revelation did not restore Demetrius’s faith then naught would.

“Shall I collect his lordship?” Isotta sniffed.

“Nay, as I have an idea.” Ah, her husband’s seed was strong; as it found its mark perchance from the instant they consummated their nuptials. Recovered, Athel stood and hugged the housekeeper. “Let us adjourn to the kitchen and plan a special celebration.”

As they navigated the bailey, Athel nodded acknowledgements to the members of her community. Maintaining her composure by a mere thread, she choked on a sob when they sheltered in the screened passage.

“Athel, art thou all right?” Gerwald paused in the doorway to the spicery. “Wherefore dost thou weep?”

“It is naught, brother.” It was to his misfortune that she had no patience for him just then. “Hast thou finished thy chores?”

“Demetrius treats me like a scullion, when I am of noble blood.” He scowled. “I should complain of the abuse to the King.”

“Well, my husband will spill thy noble blood, if thou dost not complete thy tasks, as everyone at Winchester Castle assumes numerous duties.” She wagged a finger. “Cease thy complaints, as management of this residence requires work. Given thou dost hope His Majesty confers a title on ye, thou would do well to make the most of this opportunity to learn the rules of governance.”

Like a wayward child, Gerwald stomped from the kitchens.

And then Athelyna burst into happy tears. “Canst thou imagine it, Isotta? I am to be a mother, and Demetrius will be a father. Is it not grand?”

“My lady, I am thrilled for ye.” Together, they hugged and cried, and cried and hugged. “Now what would ye ask of me, that ye might celebrate the glorious news, as fits the occasion?”

With an apron, Athel dried her cheeks and giggled. “I have an idea.”



DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ensnorced in their solar, and with Athelyna nestled in his lap, Demetrius shared a remarkably thorough kiss with his wife. While he had planned to lead the lancers through military maneuvers with Grimbaud, Athel commanded his attention at a special feast, promising delectable fare both on the table and in their bed, so who was he to refuse her?

“Sir Demetrius, come hither.” Briarus banged on the door, and Demetrius cursed under his breath. “My lord, we art under attack.”

“Great bulging balls of agony.” With care, he set aside his bride. “Duty calls, my tempting Lily, but I will finish what I started once I dispatch our intruders, and they will rue my wrath for interrupting our intimate interlude.”

“Oh, thou wilt be careful.” She fetched his hauberk and coif. “Shall I summon Gerwald to help ye into thy armor?”

“Thither is no time.” At her expression of horror, he framed her face and covered her mouth with his. “Worry not, my Lily. Naught can keep me from ye, and I intend to sup on the sweet flesh between thy thighs and make ye sing for me.”

“Wilt thou be serious?” She followed him into the hall and through the side entrance, whereupon she wrenched his arm. “Demetrius, pray, do not take unnecessary risks.”

“Woman, dost thou doubt my finesse on the battlefield?” He chuckled, as he affixed his sheathed sword to his saddle and took his mount. “I shall return, anon, and I want ye naked and in our bed, whereupon I shall feed ye with my own hands and make love to ye until dawn. Now stand clear, my lady, as I would not chance injuring ye.”

“Prithee, a moment.” As had become her habit, and one he treasured, she clutched his wrist and pressed his palm to her cheek. “My lord, I love ye. That is one of the reasons I locked ye in our solar tonight, because I wanted to tell ye, in private. But should something happen, I want ye to know thee dost carry my heart, wherever thou dost go.”

Soldiers ran across the courtyard, and servants rushed in all directions, but Demetrius bent and pulled Athel into his lap. Without regard for those present, he claimed his bride’s lips in an unshakeable affirmation of shared devotion. And when he at last broke their connection, he rested his forehead to hers and gazed into her eyes.

Nagging fear danced a jig down his spine, but he brushed off the disconcerting emotion. It was time for him to move beyond the sadness of the past and seize his future. And if he hoped to win the future he desperately desired, he had to take a leap of faith.

“My Lily, I love ye, too.” And he chuckled, when she shrieked and hugged him so tight he could scarcely draw breath. “All right, my lady wife, know that I share thy excitement. However, duty calls, and I am remiss in my priorities, at the moment. But when I have dispatched our invaders, I shall come for ye, and thou would do well to prepare thyself for my invasion.”

“I am already conquered, my lusty husband.” When he set her down, she maintained her grip on his hand. “My lord, I do love ye. Come back to me, safe and sound, else I shall be sorely vexed, as thither art many felicitations to savor this night.”

“My lady, thou mayest depend upon it.” He winked.

And so with his Lily’s heart as a shield, he stormed into the fray, with Grimbaud to the left and Briarus to the right, but Demetrius was confused by what he confronted outside the curtain wall. As soon as he entered the field, the raiders, what thither were of them, dispersed. It seemed illogical to attempt an assault with such small numbers, and he did not comprehend their goal.

“My lord, the fence is damaged, and some cattle have escaped.” Briarus held up a torch. “I will herd the stock with the guards.”

“Send Gerwald to fetch some of the craftsmen, and I will help repair the breach in the wattle.” Lightning flashed, followed by the rumble of thunder, and he cursed. “Hurry, as we do not need to be caught in a storm.”

“But I do not see Gerwald.” Grimbaud rotated his stallion. “Did he accompany ye?”

“Nay.” Demetrius peered into the darkness, as the wind howled. “I thought he was with ye.”

“That boy is as useless as teats on a boar hog, and we are better off without him, as he doth naught but complain.” Briarus rode beyond the line. “Sir, thither art only three loose cows. Let us mend the fence and return to the castle, before we take an impromptu bath.”

Working together, Demetrius and his men re-stacked and restored the barrier, but something in the back of his mind told him all was not as it appeared. And a single nagging question pummeled him without mercy. Wherefore would someone feign a theft?

And then an awful realization dawned.

What if the supposed thievery was naught more than a distraction to lure him from his fortress?

“Briarus, Grimbaud, let us return to the castle—now.” Demetrius set a course for home and Athelyna.

“Is something wrong, my lord?” the marshalsea inquired.

“I know not, but I am troubled.” He heeled the flanks of his destrier and charged through the field. Half expecting the castle to be under siege, he sighed in relief, when naught seemed amiss. In the bailey, the Winchesters remained on alert, and he flew past the master of the horse and drew rein at the main entry, whither he found Isotta.

“Whither is Athelyna?” He scanned the vicinity but did not spy his wife.

“I know not.” The housekeeper shrugged. “But she was hither, when ye departed. Mayhap she retired to thy chambers.”

He recalled his salacious request and ran to their quarters. The solar was empty, so he burst into the bedroom, in search of Athel, only to find the four-poster vacant, and the chill of dread seeped into his chest. In a few strides, he regained the front egress, whereupon he located Grimbaud and Briarus.

“Lady Athelyna is missing.” Just giving voice to his fear almost broke him. “Summon the staff and search every part of the castle. Leave no stone unturned.”

For the second time that night, the Winchesters organized a response, and the result rendered Demetrius adrift on an ocean. He retraced his steps and studied the space he shared with Athel, but naught had been taken. Even her robe remained draped at the foot of their bed.

“Sir Demetrius, we have completed the task, and Lady Wessex, Gerwald, and three soldiers are gone.” Grimbaud rubbed the back of his neck. “We can pursue them, but not now, as the storm intensifies.”

“But the foul weather works in our favor, as they could not have made it very far without stopping.” Briarus shuffled his feet. “We can give chase at first light, my lord.”

“Fine.” So many thoughts echoed in his brain, and he waved to his men. “Get some rest, and we depart at dawn.”

Alone in what he once considered his sanctuary, Demetrius sat at the table. With his elbow propped on the armrest, he stared at the window, as the gentle rap of rain pelting the glass kept time with his heartbeat.

The declaration his Lily so boldly proclaimed played a mocking refrain, and he covered his ears, as if he could shut out the memory. Was it a lie? Had she made a fool of him?

It was his persistent lack of faith that reared its ugly head, that shouted crude taunts, and he questioned everything about his marriage and his wife. Was everything he thought they built naught more than a ruse? Had she planned, all along, to run away with her brother, given she defended him at every turn?

Something inside him shattered, in that moment. Cracks and fissures spidered and snaked through every part of his being, leaving naught unscathed. Searing agony festered and ignited, scorching his marrow, and he clenched his fists.

“Damn thee to hell.” In a single sweep, he sent the trenchers and tankards tumbling to the floor. “I spit on thee. I curse thee for hurting me, and from my broken heart I stab at thee. I pray ye dost meet a similar fate, as thou hast slayed me, Athel.”

#

Athelyna struggled against her bindings, to no avail. Through the canvas bag stretched over her head, she could spy naught, but woe the poor fool who took her from her home and Demetrius.

A storm raged, and the rain soaked her to the skin. If she caught a cold, and a resulting illness injured her babe, thither would be hell to pay.

At last, her captors stopped for the night, and she tried but failed to glean any clues through the whipping gale. When someone dragged her from her horse, she resisted.

“Calm thyself, Athel.” Gerwald groaned as he set her feet on the ground. “I put up a tent, and I would see to thy comfort.”

When he removed the sack, she blinked, as even the dim light from the brazier hurt her eyes. “Art thou out of thy mind? Wherefore hast ye taken me from Winchester?”

“Because thou never wished to marry, but I forced ye to do so, that I might advance in stature.” He produced a knife and cut the rope from her wrists. “These past months with Sir Demetrius have taught me a few things, not the least of which is what sort of man I would become, with the opportunity to atone for past mistakes.”

“I beg thy pardon?” She assessed her bloody flesh. “Thou dost speak of recompense for thy wrongs, when ye hast wasted precious opportunities under Demetrius’s tutelage and stolen me from my husband? Thou dost make no sense.”

“I thought, mayhap, I would return ye to the convent, as thou didst desire to become a nun. Then I will petition the King for a new commission, elsewhere, as Demetrius hath no respect for our family legacy, and naught I do pleases him. That is why he treats me like a servant.” A soldier carried in a few belongings, and Gerwald stepped aside. “Bring my sister some ham and bread.”

“Aye, sir.” The guard saluted.

“And thou hast re-tasked His Majesty’s soldiers?” She scoffed. “Art thou mad? He will send ye to the block.”

“Athel, I am trying to do the right thing by ye.” He folded his arms. “Canst thou truly claim ye were happy with Demetrius, when I saw ye weeping in the courtyard, and thou didst require Isotta’s comfort?”

“Oh, thou great gulf of ignorance.” She could have screamed at the irony. “I was crying because I just found out I am with child, which deems me entirely unsuitable for a convent and the life of a nun.”

“Thou art pregnant?” Gerwald blinked. “But—how?”

“Art thou joking? How dost ye think?” At once, the ire building within her sought an outlet, and Athel reared back and slapped her brother. “Thou wilt take me home, and if thou dost refuse, I will not protect ye when Demetrius comes for me. And he will come for me.”

“But, thou cannot mean that.” Frowning, Gerwald rubbed his cheek. “Thou didst run away twice, in an attempt to evade thy wedding. Wherefore should I believe thy protestations otherwise?”

“I am well aware of my actions, brother.” Livid, she struck him again. “But I love my husband. Dost thou hear me? I love Demetrius. And I will fight to return to him, so thou wilt take me home—now.”

“It is too dangerous, as we traveled through the fields to avoid capture.” He shrugged. “Thus I know not our present location, but we are sheltered and shall remain hither until the tempest passes.”

“And then ye will convey me to Winchester Castle.” She wagged her finger. “If thou dost not do as I command, I will be sure to tell my husband of thy indifference, and I guarantee he will exact recompense.”

“Art thou certain?” Gerwald scratched his temple. “I was only trying to make reparations and gain thy forgiveness.”

“Gerwald, I am furious with ye. If thou wanted to make amends for past transgressions, ye should have left me in my warm chamber, in the safety of my husband’s custody.” The guard entered the tent and handed her a trencher, with large chunks of ham and bread, and a tankard, and a brilliant plan formed in her brain. “I cannot consume this, as the pieces art too big.”

“Thou mayest use my knife.” Gerwald yielded the utensil. “Eat and rest, and we will discuss the situation on the morrow, as thither art other options.”

She just stopped herself from arguing with him. Instead, she averted her gaze. “All right.”

Alone, Athel shoved morsels of food into her mouth and washed the fare down with ale. Huddled near the brazier, she uttered a prayer for strength, as lightning flashed, and thunder shook the earth beneath her.

Staring at the knife, she wondered at the hour and peered between a small gap in the flaps.

A single soldier stood watch over her, and she considered the possibilities. In a flash, she scooted to the rear of the tiny structure, cut a hole in the canvas, and glimpsed naught. To her good fortune, no one guarded the back side of the tent.

Employing her old designs, she opted for patience.

To pass the time, she envisioned Demetrius and wondered what he must think of her absence. How she rued the missed chance at their celebration, and she longed to tell him their joyous news. Then again, he had revealed felicitous news of his own. Opening the door to her memory, she revisited his declaration and gained renewed strength. He loved her, and naught in the world would keep her from him.

So when the rain ceased, and the first glimmer of approaching dawn appeared on the horizon, she enlarged the opening in the tent and slipped to freedom with none the wiser. She found the horses tied to a tree and released her mare. Slow and steady, she walked her mount to the crest of a hill. On the verge, she climbed to the saddle and heeled the flanks of the elegant beast.

But Athel was unfamiliar with the countryside, and she could not locate a road. Given the sun's placement, she drove east, hoping to find someone to help her. Yet, when she spied a collective of guards wearing familiar colors of a hostile force, she panicked.

Breaking into a gallop, she steered toward the coast, and the patrol gave chase. She veered left and then right, and rounded a wide bend, but she could not shake her pursuers. The ground was a muddy mess, and when she came to a small creek, she drew rein to cross the water. To her unutterable horror, the mare slipped on wet stones and launched Athel, head over heels, into the air.

Athel landed in the soft grass but fought to breathe. Her ears rang, and her vision blurred. As she spiraled into a dark chasm, she pondered her husband, their months of marriage, and the unique gift he presented her on the eve of their wedding.

In the beginning, Athelyna wore the ancient brooch in hopes of discovering her one true knight, in obeisance of the associative lore. But she had long ago ceased such behavior, because she required no fancy bauble or mystical visions to proclaim what she knew beyond all doubt.

Demetrius was her man—her only love, and she bore his name, etched upon her heart, as proof of her unimpeachable devotion. No power, of earth or the hereafter, however estimable, could breach the overwhelming force of her commitment to her husband. And she would tell him so, if ever again they met.

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DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The lush green countryside, which he once enjoyed with his wife in what he thought were happier times, served only to mock Demetrius, as he searched for Athelyna. And with each successive parcel of ground they covered, his anger festered. Burning in a steady flame just beneath his flesh, the ire spread, infecting every part of his fiber until nothing escaped its foul touch, and he choked on the bitter taste in his mouth.

The love he cultivated with care, the faith he dared to invest in their marriage—and Athel, taunted him, and he cursed himself a fool for believing again. But his worst imprecations he saved for his *devoted* bride.

Better it would be for her, if she broke her neck in some unfortunate fall, as opposed to enduring untold years in servitude, as his despised spouse. And loathed was she. No matter how long it took, he would ensure she reaped her just rewards in recompense for her crimes. She would suffer for her betrayal, as she had taken the one thing he had left to give. Indeed, she stole the most valuable gift of all.

She robbed him of hope.

Demoralized, he heeled the flanks of his destrier and drove his mount harder and faster, as he tore over the hills and across the valleys. When he spied three riders in the distance, he halted and waved at his party.

“Briarus, look yonder.” Strange, it appeared the unknown group neared. “They journey in the wrong direction.”

“Aye.” Shielding his eyes from the sunlight, Briarus narrowed his gaze. “And they are men, as thy wife is petite, thus Lady Wessex is not among them.”

“Mayhap they have seen her collective.” Demetrius nodded. “Regardless, we should question them.”

Following in his path, the patrol closed ranks. To his surprise, the small contingent actually altered course and steered straight at him. A sense of urgency burgeoned in his chest, and he raced across the uneven terrain, without care for his neck.

At last, he gained a clear vision of his target, and pure rage coursed his veins. A familiar face came into view, and he veered to the left. Within striking range, he hugged his mount with his thighs, thrust his arm, and hauled Gerwald de Moutiers from his horse, in a single sweep.

The young man rolled on the ground and scrambled to his feet, but he was not fast enough to evade Demetrius, as he leaped. “Whither is my wife?” With fistfuls of the gadling’s tunic, Demetrius bared his teeth. “Tell me whither I may find Athelyna, else I will rip out thy throat with my hands.”

“I know not, my lord.” Her brother appeared on the verge of tears, as he clutched Demetrius’s wrists. “In fact, she declared her intent to return to ye, in a rather spectacular fashion.” Gerwald swallowed hard. “But I asked her to sleep on her decision. Instead, she took flight from me, in the middle of the night, and I have been trying to recover her, without success. So I set course for Winchester Castle, when I came upon ye. I presume she is home.”

“Thou dost make no sense.” Confused, Demetrius eased his grip, and his thoughts ran rampant. “Wherefore did she leave me, if she intended to return, as thou dost say?”

“Because she never left ye.” Bowing his head, Gerwald slumped. “Sir Demetrius, I forced my sister to marry ye, in a quest for power and prestige, and I was wrong to do it. Spending these months in thy company, I have made many mistakes, and I wasted the chance ye gave me. But in the past sennight I discovered I want to be like ye and the Brethren. I want to be a good man, so I endeavored to correct my error, but I went about it the wrong way. In my haste to make things right, I failed to realize Athelyna loves ye, and I made what I assumed was a bad situation worse. Given she is with child, I planned to bring her back after dawn, when it was safe to travel, as I would take no risk with the babe.”

“Wait.” His ears rang, like the bells in Westminster Abbey, and Demetrius almost stumbled. Reflecting on their final exchange, he wondered if that revelation constituted Athel’s special celebration, which she mentioned in accompaniment to her cherished pronouncement. “What babe?”

“Thou dost not know?” Gerwald blinked. “But Athelyna was adamant about her condition and took me to task. In fact, she struck me.” He rubbed his jaw. “And never has my sister resorted to violence, which convinced me she was in earnest. She insisted she loves ye, and she is convinced ye dost love her. I suppose that is why she fled.”

“She loves me.” Demetrius gazed at the horizon and shuddered.

No one ever claimed that love was easy or sensible, but everyone insisted it possessed incomparable strength, and its compelling force manifested soothing warmth, which pervaded his flesh, mending the invisible cracks and fissures in his frame. As if by some mystical power, his wounds, save one, healed with the knowledge that Athelyna’s declaration was true. But Demetrius knew no joy, his heart remained broken, and his grief compounded tenfold, given the curses he rained upon her. In his ignorance and anger, had he doomed his bride to an as yet unknown and horrible fate?

Then he jerked alert. “To Winchester we ride.”

As a madman, he led his haphazard patrol for the castle and Athelyna. Heedless of Briarus and Grimbaud's caution for restraint, Demetrius left a trail of dust in his wake, as naught would delay a prized reunion.

Nay, he did not deserve her, and he would find some way to atone for his weakness. Never again would he doubt his wife, and in silence he rescinded his curses, but he knew that was not enough. While he would prefer not to confess his utter failure as a husband, he had to apprise her of his temporary foundering and, if necessary, beg forgiveness.

Traveling in opposition to the sun's journey across the heavens, he heaved a sigh of relief, when the crenellated towers of Winchester Castle rose above the hilltops, and he hastened his pace. With all manner of sweet welcomes dancing in his brain, he soared through the main gate, rode to the other side of the bailey, ignored the waiting master of the horse just shy of the double-door ingress, and jumped from his steed before the beast came to a full stop.

In the front hall, he spied Isotta and grabbed her by the forearms. "Whither is Athelyna? Hath she returned?"

"Nay, my lord. We have had no sign of her." With fear in her countenance, the housekeeper shook her head. "I had hoped ye might have located Lady Wessex, as eventide approaches, along with another storm, and I am worried for her safety and her health."

"Did ye know she is with child?" He released Isotta and raked his fingers through his hair. "Were thou aware of the babe?"

"Aye, my lord." A tear streamed Isotta's cheek, and she shuffled her feet. "Though I was sworn to secrecy, as my lady wished to deliver the felicitous news, that no longer matters. The night she disappeared, I prepared the special feast, among other things, at thy wife's request, that thou might mark the occasion with fond recollections." Then she clutched his wrist. "Prithee, Sir Demetrius, thou must find her. Do not abandon her to the wild, as Lady Athelyna is an angel of mercy, and she is too gentle to brave the unknown on her own."

At that instant, Briarus, Grimbaud, and Gerwald rushed into the castle.

“Is she hither?” Gerwald asked.

“She is not.” Even as his spirits sank to new depths, Demetrius smacked a fist to a palm. “Let us saddle fresh horses and resume the search.”

“My lord, it will be dark soon.” Briarus lowered his chin. “I know ye art concerned, and thou art correct in thy instincts, but we will not find thy lady in the rough terrain of thy lands, without benefit of light.” He wiped his brow. “Let us sup, rest, and retrench. At dawn, we may continue the task.”

“But somewhere she persists, and she is alone.” Pain threatened to consume him, as he pondered his sweet Lily, without escort to protect her. Rubbing his temples, he considered the possibilities, none of which inspired confidence. “We can take torches and move slow.”

“My lord, thy insistence speaks well of thy affection for and devotion to Lady Wessex, but thou canst support her not if ye art injured, or worse, in the quest to locate her.” Grimbaud pulled Isotta to his side. “No one could understand more thy apprehension than an equally enamored husband, but Briarus grants sage advice. We should delay until the morrow, and we should employ twice the guards to cover more territory.”

“All right.” Another part of Demetrius died to yield, but he had to defer to their logic. When thunder rumbled through the castle, any lingering protest faded, as it was madness to venture into a spring tempest during the night hours. Dejected and drowning in a sea of remorse, he tugged off his mail coif. “Isotta, bring my meal to my chambers, as I will dine in solitude.”

“Aye, my lord.” She dipped her chin and rushed toward the kitchen.

As the gathering dispersed, and a series of whispers swept into the Great Hall, Demetrius trod to his quarters, whereupon he doffed his hauberk. At the washstand, he scrubbed and dried his face.

The small table bedecked with his wife's appurtenances caught his attention, and he picked up her brush and inhaled the subtle scent that was uniquely hers. Then he noted the smooth blue stone he gave her, to commemorate the day he spent with her in Chichester, after he neglected to purchase a Christmastide gift for her.

A box sat at the other end, and he lifted the lid. Tucked inside, he found a bundle of dried flowers and recognized them in an instant. It was the remains of the bouquet he collected in the glade, the afternoon they made love in the woods for the first time. And beneath the less than elegant spray, he found the brooch and reminisced of Yordana's prediction.

Thou dost have dark days ahead, Sir Demetrius, as thou dost call friend those who would smile to thy face and sink their sword in thy back. But fear not, as thou wilt not meet thy end on these shores. Rather, thou wilt rise again, and a mighty legacy is thine to claim, if thou wilt but seize it. And know thy bride-to-be is thy equal, in every measure.

Upon reflection, her preceptive words posited not polite conversation, or the unhinged ravings of an aged fool, and he should not have discounted the curious divination. Indeed, taken as a whole, the foretoken should have comforted him. But in light of his actions, the last part of the old woman's prophecy mocked him. If he were honest with himself, Yordana overestimated the fortitude of his character. Indeed, Athelyna possessed unfailing strength, courage, and faith, whereas he doubted her at the first test of honor, and he would never forgive himself.

Closing the miniature chest, he glanced about their private accommodations and beheld so many signs of Athel's tender care and nurturing spirit—the quilt she sewed for their bed, the pillow she stuffed with goose feathers just for him, the tapestries she selected to keep their rooms warm, and the furnishings she purchased to create their sanctuary, and he wondered how he missed them. Of course, he never really bothered to look. He took it for granted that she built a home from the cold and unremarkable stone structure, never understanding she labored to please

him. That, in her way, she never missed an opportunity to declare her love, again and again, with what he viewed as commonplace details.

“My lord, I brought thy sup.” From the solar, Isotta peered into the bedchamber. “Dost thou require anything else?”

“Nay.” Before he embarrassed himself, he waved to her. “Thank ye. That will be all.”

Alone, he strolled into the outer quarters.

A steady rain played a gentle drumbeat on the lancet windows, and he gazed at the landscape, briefly illuminated by a bright flash of lightning. From his perch, he caught glimpses of the meadow, which led to their secret place in the midst of the coppice. A symphony of her breathy sighs and achingly sweet moans echoed in his memory, as he revisited those treasured afternoons, wherein he made love to her amid nature’s splendor.

And then Demetrius broke.

Dropping to his knees, he wept, clasped his hands, brought them to his chin, and did something he had not dared since that fateful day, more than six years ago, when he set sail from La Rochelle and stood helpless as Randulf died.

He prayed for the Lord’s grace and munificence.

He prayed for Athelyna’s safekeeping.

He prayed for his unborn child.

He prayed for forgiveness.

He prayed for courage.

He prayed.

What previously posited naught but an empty intercession burgeoned from his chest, and he invested a wealth of devotion into his supplications. And in that simple yet profound act, he found faith restored. And in faith he found salvation. And in salvation, he found strength. And in strength he found determination. And in determination, he found

comfort mixed with unquestionable certainty, because he would reclaim his wife or die trying.

“My Lily, I know not whither thee art, but I vow never to stop searching for ye, because I love ye.” After a moment of quiet reflection, he gained his feet and stretched upright, just as Briarus flung open the door.

“My lord, I apologize for the intrusion, but a messenger is just arrived from Saltwood Keep.” The marshalsea bowed and stepped aside. “He bears a missive from Van Hermant, which is to be delivered only unto thee.”

As his mind raced, Demetrius descended the stairs, two at a time. When he ran into the Great Hall, a hush fell on the cavernous room, and he spied the interloper. Recognizing the Van Hermant colors, he swallowed his suspicions and extended a hand in friendship. “Welcome to Winchester Castle.”

“Lord Wessex, hither am I on behalf of my master, Renoldus Van Hermant.” The guard produced a rolled parchment. “I am bid to await thy response.”

“Pray, enjoy my hospitality, as the weather is stormy.” Demetrius broke the seal and read the missive. It was as if the world halted, the wind stilled, the rain ceased, and the thunder quieted. Fearing he persisted in some cruel dream, he reread the note, pressed it to his lips, and uttered a silent invocation of thanks. “Briarus, see to it our guest is fed and sheltered. At dawn, we ride for Saltwood Keep and Lady Athelyna.”

#

A loud clap of thunder brought Athelyna awake and alert. As her vision cleared, she studied the intricate hammerbeam roof that loomed above her, and she realized she was not at home. When she sat upright, the room spun, and she slumped in the pillows.

“Careful, Lady Wessex.” The male voice harkened to the past, to another time and place, and beckoned fear. “Thou didst suffer injuries when ye fell from thy horse.”

“Whither am I?” With muddled thoughts, she tried to compose an image of the last moment she could recall, yet naught made sense. “A group of men chased me.”

“One of my patrols, Lady Wessex. And they meant ye no harm.” Renoldus Van Hermant emerged from the shadows. “Welcome to Saltwood Keep.”

“Prithee, sir.” Now she recognized her husband’s self-proclaimed enemy and his hateful words. “I command ye to return me to Winchester Castle, at once, and naught will happen to ye. But if thou dost delay, Sir Demetrius will come for me, and I cannot ensure he will be grateful for thy intercession.”

“Thou dost show spirit.” Slapping his thighs, Van Hermant laughed. “Wherefore should Lord Wessex hold me accountable, when I have done naught but grant ye the benefit of my hospitality and the care of my able physic? Were I a heartless heathen, like that boothaler ye married, I would have abandoned ye to the wild.”

“Thou art a cruel villain, sir, and do not disparage Lord Wessex in my presence, as I will not tolerate it.” When she discovered she was garbed in a modest lady’s nightgown, she scanned the area for her clothing. “I know well thy hard heart, thus I would not appeal to thy charitable nature, as thou dost not include such a noble trait. But I shall pray for thee.”

“Save thy petitions for those who believe in such myths, as I hold no faith, when my devotions have gone unanswered.” Van Hermant paced, paused, and caught her in a lethal stare. “Wherefore should I offer charity, when I have suffered loss after loss, until only I remain? My good deeds go ignored, whilst others prosper when they commit heinous crimes against my family.”

“Thou dost speak of thy son.” The chamber posed no possible means of escape, as it had no windows and a single door. Still, she resolved to make an attempt at the first opportunity.

“Nothon was my lone child, as Phylace died giving birth.” He rubbed his eyes. “Thou dost remind me of her, as she possessed estimable fortitude.”

“Wilt thou tell me of her?” To her amazement, Athel realized he lacked faith, inasmuch the same fashion as did Demetrius, after he was betrayed, lost his friend, and was exiled to England. “I should dearly love to know about thy wife.”

“Phylace and I were betrothed before we were born, as our powerful families posed a threat to the governance of England, and the King sought an alliance.” To her surprise, he smiled. “Ah, she was beauteous beyond compare, and I fell in love with her the moment we met, at court. Thus ours was a felicitous union.” Then he sighed and peered at the floor. “She was but seven and ten when her life ended.”

“I am very sorry.” Athel hugged her belly and pondered the babe growing inside her, yet she harbored no concern. “And what of Nothon?”

“Thy husband, and that pack of animals he calls friends, killed my son.” Van Hermant loomed at the footboard of the bed, and she cringed. “They murdered Nothon.”

“That is not true.” Anxious, she held the covers to her chest. “His Majesty ordered them to defend the throne against Lord Rochester’s nefarious schemes, which included the unjust charges against Lady Isolde.” Athel recollected the details and launched a defense. “Indeed, after a mockery of a trial, she was sentenced to a public lashing. And when that did not satisfy thy community’s thirst for blood, they tried to hang her.”

“I had no part in that affair,” he asserted with vehemence.

“But thou stood silent, when ye might have prevented it. And I have it on good authority that thy son took up arms against the Sovereign. Yet, thou dost dare blame Lord Sussex and question my husband’s honor.” She inclined her head. “Dost thou not see thy logic is flawed? Thy son made his choice and reaped the consequence, and thou dost punish thyself when ye art blameless, as is Demetrius. Let go thy anger and rejoin the community, as thou art in dire need of fellowship. Without faith and friendship, thou art already in the grave.”

“Thou art most wise, Lady Wessex, and thou dost make a compelling argument.” For a while, her host simply gazed at her. Then he shifted his weight. “Mayest I call thee Athelyna?”

“Oh, I wish ye would.” She studied the tufts of gray hair, just above his ears, his balding crown, and the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and decided he appeared less menacing than she previously thought. “And might I indulge in the same privilege?”

“I am Renoldus.” With a huff, he turned and dragged the chair closer to the side of the four-poster and sat. “Wilt thou tell me of thy people, as it hath been ages since I hosted a guest?”

It seemed odd to share her personal history with an individual who once vowed to harm Demetrius, but Athel thought it the perfect occasion to attempt an invasion, of a sort. If she could sway Renoldus in her knight’s favor, they could bring peace to the tumultuous region. So, for the next few hours, she detailed her childhood in Coventry, as well as her education at the convent.

“Then the King summoned ye to marry Sir Demetrius.” Renoldus slapped his thigh and chuckled. “I wager Lord Wessex had no idea what danger he courted, as thou dost have a mind and a will of thy own.”

“And that is bad?” She pouted.

“Nay.” Renoldus grinned. “It brings me much satisfaction.” Then he quieted and rubbed his chin. “Forgive my indelicacy, but my physic informs me that ye art with child.”

“Pray, say naught to Demetrius, as I have yet to make the announcement, and I wish to do so in my way.” A loud rumble emanated from her stomach and pierced the calm, and she averted her stare.

“Thou art hungry, and I am not surprised, as thou dost eat for two.” He stood, walked to the door, opened the oak panel, and shouted, “Bring Lady Wessex a hot meal, and be quick about it.”

“Mayhap thou can also send for my husband?” She held her breath and prayed Renoldus would defer to her request.

“Gentle Athelyna, I dispatched my man last eventide, despite the foul weather, as I am not the villain thee dost think.” Renoldus cast a sympathetic expression. “I anticipate, now the storm hath cleared, Lord Wessex shall arrive in a matter of hours.”

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DEMETRIUS

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A long and lonely ride, filled with tortuous thoughts and silent expressions of regret, led Demetrius to the gate of Saltwood Keep. An imposing fortress surrounded by a massive curtain wall, the structure conveyed power and prestige that was not lost on him. That his bride resided somewhere within the confines of the stronghold only intensified the anxiety that gripped his spine.

And countless thoughts of Athelyna plagued his conscience.

In the bailey, he drew rein, as several Van Hermant guards surrounded him, and he splayed his palms. “Have no fear, good sirrahs, as I come only for my wife.”

“Welcome, Lord Wessex.” Sander snapped his fingers. “Take his mount, at once.”

“Grammarcy.” After yielding his destrier, he followed the majordomo into a massive hall. “Wherefore doth my countess not greet

me?”

“Lady Wessex recovers from her injuries, my lord.” Sander strolled toward a narrow passage, but he grunted when Demetrius threw the majordomo against the wall.

“What happened to Athelyna?” Demetrius grasped fistfuls of Sander’s tunic, as all manner of horrible deeds filled his mind. “What have ye done to her?”

“We have done naught but provide shelter and care for thy bride.” Sander tried but failed to break free. “When my patrol came upon Lady Wessex, she fled. The guards pursued her, as she had ventured onto Van Hermant land, and her horse slipped. Thy wife was thrown from the saddle, and she hurt her ankle.”

“Take me to her, now.” He shoved the steward forward. “Do not delay, else I shall tear down this castle, stone by stone.”

“Calm thyself, Lord Wessex.” Sander took the stairs, two at a time, with Demetrius in his wake. “She hath been quartered in a room near the family chambers, she hath been well fed, and she hath been given the best possible care.”

“That is for me to decide.” When Sander opened a door, Demetrius shoved past the majordomo. In the well-appointed room, amid a mountain of pillows, Athelyna reclined in a large four-poster bed. “*Athel.*”

“Demetrius.” The second she spied him, she glowed with an internal fervency that struck him as a blow to the gut, smiled, and flicked her fingers in entreaty. “Come hither, my love.”

Impelled by some invisible force impossible to deny, which enfolded him in its steely grip, he shot forth, eased to her side, and drew her into his embrace. Tears beckoned, as relief shimmered over him like a spring shower, and all was right in his world, as his Lily was in his arms. Mindful of her condition, which he had yet to ascertain, he set her in the cushions and brought her hand to his mouth.

“Let me look at ye, my sweetheart.” He noted a cut above her left eye and a nasty bruise on her cheek. “Did they hurt ye, my Lily?”

“Nay, my lord.” To his relief, she giggled. “It was a misunderstanding. After my brother took me from Winchester, I begged him to take me home, but he refused.” She claimed a kiss. “Oh, how I missed ye.”

“But how did ye come into the custody of Van Hermant?” Again, she pressed her lips to his, and he chuckled. “And how were ye wounded?”

“When Gerwald retired to his tent, I waited until the middle of the night, when all were abed, save my guard. Using a knife I kept from my sup, I cut the canvas at the rear and ran away, that I might find ye. But I am unfamiliar with the countryside, and I became lost. The patrol found me, but I knew them not, so I tried to evade them. Given the rain, the ground was wet, and my horse lost its footing on the rocks. I fell and lost consciousness.”

“Thanks be to Our Lord.” Although he feared causing her pain, he simply could not resist pulling her into his lap. “And what of our babe? Art thou truly well?”

“*What?*” She furrowed her adorable brow and pouted. “Who told ye my secret?”

“Thy brother.” How her fit of temper soothed his concerns for her health, as she appeared quite herself. “He is worried about ye.”

“Just wait until I get my hands on him.” She humphed. “That is my news to impart, and he hath no right to tell ye of thy forthcoming fatherhood, and still thou dost not know.” In a show of feminine pique, she stiffened her spine. “Thou art forbidden to broach the subject until I heal, we journey to Winchester, and I execute my special ceremony to mark the joyous event.”

Demetrius burst into laughter—as did Renoldus Van Hermant.

“Good morrow, Lord Wessex.” Van Hermant occupied a chair in the corner. “I am glad ye could join us.”

“Sir, pray, do not hold my wife accountable for our disagreements.” He cradled Athel’s head. “She is innocent. If thou wilt spare her, and let her go free, thou canst do as ye will with me.”

Van Hermant studied Demetrius. “Thou dost love thy wife.”

It was a statement, not a question.

“More than my own life.” And he would sacrifice himself to save her and their firstborn. “I give ye my word, as a knight of the realm.”

“Mayhap we have more in common than we realized.” Van Hermant narrowed his stare and stood. “Enjoy my hospitality for as long as thy charming countess requires rest. And mayhap, after thy reunion, thou wilt consent to join me for dinner this eventide.” He strolled to the door. “Thither is much to discuss, if I am to help ye bring peace and order to Winchester.”

Alone with Athel, Demetrius shared a thorough kiss with his lady, but he broke their contact when she caressed his man’s yard. “What did ye do to convince Van Hermant to aid our cause?”

“Naught much, really.” She unhooked his belt, and he just stopped her from untying his breeches. “I merely sang thy praises, in truth. How could anyone not defend thee?”

“Well, supper ought to be interesting.” He considered his approach, as Van Hermant would make a valuable ally. In his moment of distraction, Athelyna skimmed her fingers beneath his braies, and he caught her wrist just in time. “Thou art injured, my beauteous bride.”

“Precisely.” She frowned. “I am not dead. And I have naught but a few scrapes and bruises, excepting my ankle, which the physic assures is not broken, thus I am perfectly capable of making love to my husband.”

“But thou art with child, and I will take no unnecessary risks.” Ah, how she tempted him, yet he restrained her.

“Thither art no risks.” She tried but failed to ease his hold.

“Go to sleep.” He lowered his chin. “And I shall guard ye.”

“But I am not tired.” At last, she rested against his chest and sighed. “How I missed ye.”

“Thou must recover, that we might return home.” He kissed her crown of gold hair. “Rest, my angel, and know I am with ye.”

“I feared I might never see ye again.” As was her way, she shifted and hugged him about the waist.

“That would never happen, because I will always come for ye, as I love ye.” Yea, he had much to atone for, and he would atone. “My Lily, whither thou art, all roads lead.”

#

Candles bathed the bedchamber in a soft saffron glow, and wildflowers, picked from the landscape surrounding Winchester Castle, decorated the wall sconces. The meal with which she chose to celebrate the news of the impending addition to their family consisted of all her husband’s favorites, including cameline meat brewets, yet his light-hearted demeanor and mischievous grin remained absent, since their return home.

Although Demetrius proclaimed he would not touch her until she birthed their child, his self-enforced abstinence lasted but a few hours, and he made love to Athelyna every morning and eventide, and sometimes in between, both within the privacy of their quarters or at their special place in the woods, an underlying intensity intruded on their intimate moments, and she wondered at the source of his internal unrest. But no matter how much she encouraged him to share his disquietude, with subtle prompts and gentle intimations, he remained mute on the subject, and she had reached the end of her tether.

Naked, she stretched beside her equally nude husband, propped on an elbow, and pinned him with her stare. “What is wrong? What happened? Thou dost hide something from me, and I will have it. Wilt thou not unburden thyself to thy devoted wife, that I might carry part of thy load?”

“Thou art imagining things.” Withdrawing from her, he tugged on the sheet and rolled to his side, with his back facing her. “I am tired.”

“Do not lie to me, my lord.” She crawled over his frame and plopped down in front of him. “I am thy wife, and I know ye better than I

know myself, in some ways. Thou art distressed, and thou hast been since we departed Saltwood Keep. Pray, talk to me. Do not shut me out, as by my faith I have sworn to comfort ye.”

“Thou dost accuse me of falsehood and follow thy charge with sweet words of persuasion.” With a mighty frown, he turned toward the opposite wall, and she repeated her maneuver. “And thou dost wonder wherefore I am not more forthcoming.”

“Thou dost admit ye doth keep secrets from me, in violation of thy promise.” With her palms placed to his shoulders, she pushed him into the pillows and straddled him. “I will not permit ye to avoid me. I will not allow ye to suffer another day, so thou wilt confess thy worries.”

“It will destroy us.” He rubbed his eyes and furrowed his brow.

“That is not possible.” She folded her arms, even as he circled her nipple. “And do not attempt to distract me with thy provocative games.”

“But I am not attempting to distract ye.” Swift and sure, he pounced, and she found herself beneath him. “I want ye again.”

“Thou would join our bodies whilst ye doth build walls between us? Wilt thou take me in anger?” When he tried to break free, she wrapped her arms and legs about him. “Nay, I will not let go. Thou art my prisoner until I convince ye of a simple certainty.”

At last, he collapsed atop her. “And that would be—what?”

“Thou canst never lose me, because I have loved thee all my life.” With that, he shifted, met her gaze, and arched a brow. “I know it sounds odd, but I loved ye before I knew ye existed. Indeed, I loved the promise of ye, and thou hast given me the dream I coveted, first as a young oblate and now as thy wife. And while the brooch lore proclaimed thee my one true knight, I knew ye were my heart prior to the discovery of the mark on thy flesh, in keeping with the pin’s predictive nature, and that is wherefore I put aside the precious heirloom.”

“I cursed ye.” Cupping her chin in his grip, just shy of hurting her, he loomed with a scowl marring his beauteous lips. “I hated ye. I bade

horrible deeds befall ye, when I found ye gone, as I thought thy declaration a trick to deceive me, and it killed me.”

Aye, he wounded her just then, but she knew of his past pain and resolved to persevere. Undaunted, fearless, and without hesitation, she replied, “I still love ye.”

In an instant, he eased his hold. The tenor of his caresses, subdued and sweet, proclaimed she struck a blow for her cause. “When thy brother revealed what happened, and his part in thy kidnapping, I died a thousand deaths, because I realized thou didst uphold thy oath, whereas I betrayed and broke faith with ye.”

With her thumb, she traced the angular line of his jaw. “I still love ye.”

“And I compounded my faults with dissemblance, because I feared ye would despise me, and I cannot lose ye as I would lose myself.” As tears streamed her temples, given she wept for him, he rested his forehead to hers and stroked her hair. “Thus I am a coward, and I have injured ye, when thou art innocent.” Yet, to her surprise, he softened, and his expression, so earnest in its hope, threatened her composure, as she ached to comfort him. “But if ye could see fit to—”

“I forgive ye.” Guessing his plea, she pressed her mouth to his. “And I still love ye, because love is not a word I utter so indiscriminately as to render it meaningless.”

“And I love ye and vouchsafe the same.” With a swift flex of his hips, he entered her. “Prithee, indulge me, as I need to be close to ye, my Lily.” As he moved within her, he gritted his teeth. “Thy body was made for me, and never again will I doubt ye. And I shall spend my days in toil, aspiring to deserve ye.”

“Nonsense.” Emitting a shaky sob, she hugged him to her, as he set a relaxed rhythm. “Thou art my warmth, when I am cold. Thou art my strength, when I falter. Thou art my benevolent lord and master, when I desire direction. Thou art the father of my babe, when I require a partner for our fledgling family. Thou art my protector, when I need shielding. All these things, and more, thou art for me, so I have not nor have I ever

doubted ye.” Then she hugged him about the waist with her thighs. “And I would remind ye that thee art an intelligent man, even though ye dost thy best to prove otherwise. But, in the future, when thou dost stretch the limits of my patience or downright exasperate me, which will happen, never think for a single instant that I do not love ye, as naught can temper my affection or dedication.”

“Now and forever, thou art my Lily.” He favored her with a delicate but potent kiss.

“Ah, thither is the smile I treasure.” She squeezed his firm buttocks. “And while I am moved by thy solicitous proclamations, which art impressive, I would have ye show me the depth of thy adoration, as deeds speak louder than pretty words, my lusty, one true knight.”

“My lady, thy every wish is my command.”

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DEMETRIUS

EPILOGUE

How fast a year passed when life was filled with unlimited joy, love, and promise. The days composed a cherished mosaic—a collection of incomparable remembrances detailing an abiding devotion unmatched in its intensity, which never failed to bolster his faith and inspire his soul. And Demetrius and Athelyna celebrated the anniversary of their union in the quiet confines of their chambers, doting on their newborn babe and recalling stories of their initial meeting and courtship.

Given the approaching end of autumn, he thought it past due for the King to broker another match for one of the three remaining unwed brothers, and he prayed the future groom found as much contentment in their marriage as Demetrius found in his. Thus, when Arucard's summons arrived, Demetrius was not surprised to learn that His Majesty once again called another Nautionnier Knight to the altar.

In felicitous spirits, he journeyed with his precious Lily and his heir for the two-day ride to Chichester Castle, in preparation to break the news of another impending marriage for the Brethren of the Coast.

“Wilt thou consider a wager, regarding how he takes the news?” Arucard waggled his brows. “As we know how ye reacted.”

“And I do not need ye to remind me.” Mustering his best scowl, Demetrius grabbed his tankard and downed a healthy gulp.

“Oh, I want to hear about it.” Athel set down a platter of buttered wortes and a basket of bread. “Especially in light of his behavior when he arrived at the Chapter House.”

“Now that I will never forget.” Placing a stack of trenchers on the table, Isolde giggled. “Thou didst vomit and—”

“Thither is no need to relive such embarrassments.” Somehow, Demetrius knew it would not be the last time his relations revisited the unpleasantness.

“Well I would very much like to know how he received the initial notice from the Sire.” With hands on hips, Athelyna assessed the offerings and glanced at Isolde. “I believe we are missing the ale and the wine.”

“And the bryndons, which I should fetch.” With a huff, Isolde snapped her fingers. “I overlooked the napkins, as well as thy sambocade.”

Still talking, the ladies rushed into the hall.

“Ah, my Isolde cooked her specialty.” Arucard inhaled a deep breath and sighed. Then he leveled his stare on Demetrius. “She makes the best blancmange in the kingdom.”

“Indeed.” Demetrius squared his shoulders. “And Athel’s brewets are the most delicious in the world.”

“What dost thou think of my tunic?” Arucard stretched upright in his chair. “It is my wife’s handiwork.”

“It is adequate, I suppose.” Demetrius sniffed. “Of course, my Lily sews all my garments.”

“Didst thou see Isolde’s garden space?” Leaning forward, Arucard rested his elbows atop the table. “We harvested twice as much food for winter.”

“Athel put back more, such that the undercroft overflows with her bounty.” He mirrored Arucard’s stance. “And she composes an herbarium, that others might benefit from her curative skills, which art renowned.”

“Isolde manages Chichester Castle.” Arucard narrowed his stare. “In fact, I have naught to do but spend my waking hours in weapons practice.”

“Winchester is bigger, and Athel is the finest chatelaine in the land.” Ah, it was a sad thing to serve an old friend a portion of humility, but Demetrius resolved to laud his bride, as she had accomplished a singular feat without equal, to which even Arucard could not lay claim on behalf of Isolde. Savoring the thrill of victory, Demetrius lowered his chin. “And she gave me a son.”

Silence weighed heavy in the solar, as Arucard bared his teeth and flexed his fists, just as the women returned.

Isolde glanced at Arucard, then Demetrius, and back to Arucard. “Not again.”

“What is it?” Athel inquired, with an expression of confusion. But soon she sobered. “Oh, no. My lord husband, thou wilt cease thy competition, this instant, as Isolde is not my rival, and Arucard is not thine.”

“That goes double for ye, Arucard.” With a thud, Isolde yielded the pitcher of ale. “But if thou dost insist on continuing thy disagreeable games, thou canst sleep in the garrison this eventide.”

Now that brought a grin to Demetrius’s lips.

“And thou mayest join him,” Athel said to Demetrius, which blackened his mood, until she slid to his lap. “Which is a shame, given my visit to the physic this afternoon.” She pressed a kiss to his temple and whispered in his ear, “After a thorough examination, he gave his expert opinion. At last, I am healed and may resume my marital duties. How sad I will be, to sleep alone in our bed. But if thou art polite, I would suckle thy longsword when we retire and make love to ye all night, as a reward.”

“May I refill thy tankard, brother?” As he reached for the ewer, he discovered Isolde in a similar position, with Arucard, and the flush of his skin suggested his lady employed the same tactic. When Arucard shook his head and rolled his eyes, Demetrius laughed. “Verily it is good to be a husband, is it not?”

“Thou dost know the impressive forces we faced, as Templars, yet none could contend with the imposing coercion of a beloved wife.” Arucard raised his flagon, in toast. “To our women.”

“Am I interrupting?” At that moment, Aristide, the man of the hour, appeared in the entry.

“Not at all, as thou art our special guest.” Arucard waved a welcome. “Take thy seat.”

“I hope ye art hungry.” Isolde loaded a trencher with various savory foods, intended to ease the shock of impending nuptials, and Demetrius reminisced of the day he learned he was to wed.

“Lady Isolde, in light of thy invitation, I opted to forgo the noon meal, thus I could eat the arse of a dead horse.” Athel grimaced, as Aristide plucked a huge chunk of bread and shoved it into his mouth.

To wit Isolde gazed at Athel and said, “We will have to work on his manners.”

“Indeed.” Athel nodded. “As that comment just diminished my appetite.”

“I beg thy pardon?” Aristide paused mid-chew. “What dost thou reference, in regard to my manners? What use have I for polite habits when I reside amid the garrison?”

For the second time that eventide, an uncomfortable silence invested the solar.

Athel stared at Demetrius, and he glanced at Arucard, who peered at Isolde. Without a word, Arucard produced a letter, which he passed to Aristide.

Several minutes ticked by, as Aristide just scrutinized the parchment. At last, he broke the seal, unfolded the missive, and read the contents.

In his mind, Demetrius recalled his moment in that seat and the sheer terror that rocked him, when he discovered his bride had been selected, and the wedding date had been set. Little did he know how much that singular decision would alter his destiny, for the betterment of everyone involved, but especially him. Bereft of hope, he had lost his way, physically and spiritually, but Athelyna grounded him and gave him something in which to believe. She led him back to the warrior, to the lover, to the principled servant—to the honorable man.

Emotions welled in his throat, and he pressed his lips to her ear. “While the broach declared I am thy one true knight, thou didst save me. Thou art my wife. Thou art my strength. Thou art my rescuer. Thou art my heroine, as thou hast restored my faith, and I love ye.”

To wit she leaned against him and replied, in a low tone, “Just wait till I get ye in our room.”

Ah, the promise of so many delightful nights and morrows.

“So I am to marry in a fortnight.” Aristide broke the disquietude and sighed. “And we shall celebrate Christmastide at court, in London.”

“It would seem His Majesty commands it.” Demetrius pushed a tankard in Aristide’s direction.

“All right.” As expected, Aristide downed the ale and then emitted a booming belch, as Demetrius braced for a riotous uproar and outright refusal to yield. Instead, Aristide draped a napkin across his lap. “Now may we eat?”



EXCERPT

TO CATCH A FALLEN SPY

The Descendants
London
September, 1815

Secrets lurked in the shadows, beckoning as a welcomed friend for the undaunted. Unfettered by social conventions, the spotlight of which forced many a lord or a lady to conform to the expectations of others, the blackness functioned as a form of liberty, wherein revelers conducted their covert games without threat of discovery or retribution. It was in those dark spaces Lady Elaine Horatia Prescott found comfort and strength.

As the youngest member of a large, extended family comprised of spirited ladies with bold personalities and equally intrepid men, the famed Nautionnier Knights of the Brethren of the Coast, daring sea captains descended of the Templars, the warriors of the Crusades, she often hugged the background, taking pride in her ability to hide in plain sight. Searching for some sense of herself, something not influenced by the rich history of

her ancestors or her colorful relations, she fought to construct her own identity on her terms.

What she had not expected was to find love.

With great care, she moved swift and sure as she approached her target, skulking amid the outskirts of the crowd that filled the Hawthorne's ballroom, during the height of the Little Season. As she neared, he shifted, and she paused just shy of touching him and held her breath.

In one fail swoop, he pivoted, slipped an arm about her waist, pulled her into a corner, and bent to whisper in her ear. "Lady Elaine, you are the only person capable of sneaking up on me, and I am not sure I appreciate your skill." Sir Ross Logan, the enigmatic head of the Counterintelligence Corps, brushed the crest of her flesh with his lips, she suspected not by accident, and her knees buckled. "Why do you not dance? Why do you not take your place among the *ton*, with the other debutantes? Do you not wish to snare a husband, marry, and have children?"

"On the contrary, I want all those things with someone of my choosing." She cupped his cheek, and he retreated, much to her chagrin. "But I am here because you are here."

"Elaine, you must stop this nonsense." Now he withdrew and attempted to push her aside, but she resisted, even as her heart plummeted. And despite his complaints, he would not hazard courting attention, so she held her ground. "I am not the man for you."

"How do you know that?" It was not the first time he rejected her, and she surmised it would not be the last. "Why will you not give us a chance at happiness?"

"Because I have nothing to give you but misery and regret." As usual, Ross offered the same excuse.

"I disagree." As usual, she would not be deterred. "And I will not yield my cause, no matter your protestations."

"Neither will I." To convey his position, he folded his arms, but he could never fool her. "Go back to your world of perfume and petticoats, as I have work to do, and I require no partner."

“As you wish.” Of course, she knew well the routine and her part to play in their typical drama. So she marched into the fray, unabashed and poised in her determination. A potential solution tripped before her, and she extended assistance, as would any woman of character. “Sir Kleinfeld, are you all right?”

“Oh, my lady.” With a toothy grin, he brushed off his lapels and bowed. “Did I step on you?”

“No.” Elaine giggled, because he was well known for such behavior. “How are you enjoying the party?”

“Not very much, I am sorry to admit.” Frowning, he glanced over his shoulder. “The elder Miss Hogart refuses to grant me the honor of the Allemande.”

“Perhaps she will change her mind, when she spies you in a graceful performance of the waltz, with me.” In a valiant appeal to his pride, she curtsied. “What say you, Sir Kleinfeld?”

“Lady Elaine, you are the soul of charity.” When she rested her palm in the crook of his elbow, he covered her hand with his. “You know, if my affections were not firmly planted in Miss Hogart’s garden, I should court you.”

“You flatter me, sir.” To her credit, she mustered the courage to brave the rotation with one of the clumsiest, but good-natured, members of her set.

And so she ventured into the breach, imperiling her feet in her quest to win Sir Ross. After the third trouncing of her toes, she swallowed a grunt of pain and prayed her savior would not linger, else she might suffer broken bones. Just how long would her beau wait? As if on cue, her rescuer presented himself as she predicted.

“May I intrude?” Ross tapped Archibald on the shoulder. “As I believe Miss Hogart seeks an audience.”

“Capital.” Without so much as a backward glance, Sir Kleinfeld gave her into Ross’s care, and that suited Elaine just fine.

“I know what you are doing.” Ross took her in his arms, twined her fingers with his, and they whirled in the soft light of the cut-glass chandeliers.

“I beg your pardon?” She lifted her chin and avoided his stare.

“Do not dissemble with me, Lady Elaine.” The tone of his voice declared she had scored a direct hit, and she reveled in her small victory. Near the side wall, he pulled her closer. “How dare you deliberately put yourself in jeopardy to bait me, as that buffoon could have seriously injured you.”

“But you are not the man for me, so you would never answer a supposed summons.” Let him counter that. “Or did you lie?”

“You lured me into the open, without thought of my mission or the risk to my safety, just to meet your selfish aims.” Now that hurt. “I ought to spank you.”

“Name the date and time, and I shall accommodate you.” Swallowing her trepidation, she looked him in the eye, and he cast the hint of a grin. “I challenge you, sir.” She licked her lips. “Resist me.”

“What in bloody hell are you two about?” Lance Prescott, sixth Marquess of Raynesford, her cousin and guardian, cleared his throat, and it was then she realized the music had stopped. “Do you intend to garner the notice of everyone present, as you have damn well succeeded?”

A rush of whispers signaled society’s interest in the exchange, and she gulped, given she detested the spotlight and the gossip often associated with the glare of unscrupulous contemplation.

“Lance, you are not helping.” Cara, Lance’s wife and one of Elaine’s lifelong friends and confidants, elbowed her husband. “Sir Ross, it is wonderful to see you, as always. Given your service to my family, might I persuade you to favor me with a minuet?”

As she was Lance’s marchioness, Cara’s quick response, in full view of the *ton*, would gratify the scandalmongers. Her estimable position afforded her power, privilege, and respect, and no one would gainsay her. That she wielded her influence to save Elaine was humbling.

“It would be my pleasure.” Ross tugged at his cravat and led Cara to the dance floor.

And Lance steered Elaine toward the Brethren. There, surrounded by their chums, he scowled. “Are you out of your mind? Sir Ross is not a viable candidate for the daughter of a marquess.”

“Why not?” Ire surfaced and fortified her defenses, as she would brook no slur upon her swain. “He is a decorated knight of His Majesty and holds a rank of prominence in our government, in much the same fashion as Admiral Douglas or Sir Collingwood, and you have no objections to them. Given you married Cara and found her worthy of your title, are you a hypocrite? In light of Sir Ross’s military record, he is highly regarded in the *ton*, and that makes him a perfect suitor, in my estimation.”

“You cannot be serious.” With his mouth agape, Lance appeared stunned by the revelation she had just imparted, however indiscriminately. “I forbid it.”

“You are not my father, you hold no sway over me, and I will have a man of my choosing.” Conscious of the regard displayed by her relations, she paused to gather her wits. “Lance, this is not how I planned to broach the topic, but there it is, and I cannot deny the truth. If he will accept me, I will have Sir Ross, and nothing you do will alter my path.”

“My young and naïve cousin, do not bet on it.” As Lance reached for her, she turned and ran, ignoring his calls.

Bobbing and weaving through the sea of partygoers, she scurried down the hall and pushed through the terrace doors. The cool night air penetrated the heavy folds of her powder blue gown, and she hugged herself. Strolling the garden trail, she located the maze from memory, despite the thick clouds shrouding the moonlight. Little by little, Elaine surrendered to the encroaching tears and despair.

Did no one trust her to determine her own life?

Ever since her parents died, when she was but a child, everyone tried to shield her from the harsh reality of the world. And for the better portion of her life, she cooperated with her family, because it was far easier

to obey their directives and let them dictate her actions than to take responsibility for herself and set her own course. Well she had other plans, which included a husband and children. She was done bowing to the commands of others, and it was past due for her to spread her wings and fly.

An intense dialogue posed a fortuitous distraction, and she wiped her cheeks and inched further into the complex network of thorny hedgerows. She veered left, right, and left again, as the argument grew heated. At last, she came upon a miniature courtyard, where two men hurled accusations at each other, and she stood mesmerized by their row.

“You betrayed our family.”

“My *family*?” The unknown antagonist snickered. “When have you ever counted me as such?”

“What an embarrassment. I should have drowned you at birth.”

“Then your son would have had no one to do his dirty work.”

“That is the sum of your usefulness.” The foe grasped the lapels of his rival. “You are a worthless bastard.”

“Not so anymore.” The confident opponent broke free. “And suddenly, I am the talk of London. Given my statements to the authorities, I am a hero, and your legitimate issue will swing atop the gallows.”

“I think not, as without you, the prosecutor has nothing.”

Without warning, the clouds parted, bathing the contentious scene in a pale silver brilliance, just as the silhouetted figure pulled a knife from his coat pocket and repeatedly stabbed his enemy in the gut, and the victim dropped to the ground.

Shocked by the brutal act of violence, Elaine stifled a gasp of horror, as she would not betray her presence. But when the villain suddenly glanced in her direction, she discovered the identity of the blackguard. It became readily apparent the moonlight illuminated her, too, as he moved toward her, and she clutched fistfuls of her skirt and sprinted from the tiny enclosure.

For a few minutes, she darted down various avenues, as terror drove her into a state of confusion, and she lost her orientation amid the dense foliage. With her pulse pounding in her ears, she dashed along the wrong path and located naught but a dead end. Pounding footfalls brought her up short, and her pursuer continued the chase but bolted past her hideaway. So she raced in the opposite tack but could not locate the exit.

A fervent contest ensued, as she labored to evade her would-be attacker, while he tried to run her aground, and she uttered a silent prayer for guidance and redemption. To her inexpressible vexation, she stumbled upon another impasse, just as telltale treads heralded the danger that advanced.

With a hand at her throat, and dangling on the precipice of unconsciousness, she backed into a corner, anxiety simmering in her veins as a caged animal. Myriad images played her personal history, and she rued the missed opportunities that marked her unremarkable biography. In preparation to scream, that she might raise the alarm and save herself, she inhaled.

“Elaine, are you there?” Sir Ross inquired.

Emitting a sob of relief, she flung herself at him and burrowed her face in his chest, but words failed her. As he held her, he rocked in a gentle rhythm, and she clung to him.

“You are shaking, and you are crying.” He cradled her head. “What is it? What happened? Talk to me.”

Elaine shifted in his grasp and met his gaze. “I just witnessed a murder.”

ABOUT BARBARA DEVLIN

Bestselling author Barbara Devlin was born a storyteller. A Texan, through and through, Barbara hasn't been without a book in her possession since she was in kindergarten. She wrote her first short story, a really cheesy murder-mystery, in high school, but it was a Christmas gift, a lovely little diary with a bronze lock, given to her in the fifth grade that truly inspired her love of writing.

After completing part of her undergraduate studies at the University of London, where she developed a love of all things British, Barbara returned home and began a career in banking. But the late 80s weren't too promising for the financial industry, and every bank that hired Barbara soon folded. So she searched for a stable occupation, and the local police department offered the perfect solution.

And then one uncharacteristically cold and icy day in December 1998, Barbara was struck by a car and pinned against a guardrail while working an accident on a major highway. Permanently disabled, she retired from the police department and devoted her time and energy to physical therapy.

Once Barbara got back on her feet, she focused on a new career in academia. She earned an MA in English and continued a course of study for a Doctorate in Literature and Rhetoric. She happily considered herself an exceedingly eccentric English professor, until success in Indie publishing lured her into writing, full-time, featuring her fictional knighthood, the Brethren of the Coast.

Connect with Barbara Devlin at BarbaraDevlin.com, where you can sign up for her newsletter, The Knightly News.

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