

Prologue

September 29;
Present Day England

“Lords and Ladies!” announced the page to the seated crowd. “We are gathered here this den at the Shire of St. Mark’s, where we have been bid by the good Queen herself that this is to be a festive day to one and all!” Cries and cheers of “Huzzah!” were heard throughout the crowd, as people rose and began to disperse through the Fair grounds.

Seana Kelly was nervous. She was in a foreign land almost by herself. She was at this Renaissance Faire in Jolly Ole’ England with her re-enactment group she was a member of, The Guild Internationale. The Guild, as it was called, was an international organization, sponsored chiefly by Oxford University.

Sean and the rest of the reenactors were there with The Guild program from Troubadour College, a small college of Oxford that sponsored the Renaissance Faire every summer, in various countries. This year it was Great Britain.

What drew Sean to going this year was that the Shire of St. Mark’s, and its surrounding towns of Lincoln, Warrington, and Blackwater, were all real places with castles and manor houses during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Sean remembered what little fuss her boyfriend back home in the States, Christopher Marks, had put up. Actually, he had just waved his arm at her and said “Whatever.”

Now, in an unfamiliar land, she started to fidget, as this was where Robert, a Guild member from London, would meet her to discuss the afternoon.

The crowd jostled her, and she saw Sir Robert wearing his usual Ren Faire attire, light blue tights and a dark blue tunic with silver threads running through it, approaching her. Robert was a good foot taller in height than Sean and about the same height as Christopher.

“Lady Seana,” he addressed her, bowing.

“Sir Robert,” Sean said, nodding her head. “’Tis good to see a familiar face,” she smiled. Sir Robert was to be Sean’s opponent at the demonstration.

“Lady Seana, we are set up and ready to begin at the hour of 1 in the afternoon.” He bowed again.

Sean pulled her drawstring bag off her shoulders. It wasn’t exactly from the correct time period, but it was like an oversized pouch made from khaki-colored cotton cloth, and designed to be worn about her shoulders. She rummaged through it, pushing aside her small flip cell phone, pen knife, tiger balm, passport, traveler’s cheques, a disposable lighter, bills, coins, a stray ponytail holder for her hair, a few sanitary pads, a roll of toilet paper, a billfold for her driver’s license and credit card; and finally pulled out a digital watch with the band removed. It read 12:00. She replaced it, drew the bag back together, slung it over her shoulders again, and looked up at Sir Robert.

“After lunch, I shall join you at the field. You and I can practice our match again?”

“Yes, milady,” Robert said, bowed, and left.

Sean watched Robert greet a few others in the crowd, some were there for the Faire, others were Guild members. She should have asked him to have lunch with her, but he was

already gone from her sight.

As she walked around the Faire grounds and sought out lunch, she passed the vendors selling jewelry and trinkets, and the lunch booths smelled wonderful. As she ordered a meat pie for her lunch, she remembered some of the Faires she'd dragged Christopher to.

"I wouldn't be caught dead wearing tights," Christopher had told her more than once. Sean had just glared at him.

Why did he ever bother to come with me if he was going to insult my opponents? she wondered. She had just smiled at Christopher, and said sweetly,

"I rather like men in tights."

Christopher had looked at her like she had spoken in French.

Sean, as she liked to be called, was the tomboyish daughter of Rona and Jordan Kelly. She'd been going to Ren Faires many times in the previous years, several times each season, and something about it always brought her back for more. She couldn't say for sure what that something was: the time period, which she always liked, the food, the costumes, the actors, or the fact that when the day was done you could get into your car and drive home.

The youngest of four, she'd graduated from the prestigious Smithville Business College only the year before. In addition to her business administration major, she had minored in the History of English. But she'd disappointed her parents by joining the Guild, an organization that cooperated with groups that coordinated Renaissance Faires and Festivals. She was fascinated by Old English, and with her knowledge of the English she studied in school, found it easy to learn.

And now, she was at this Ren Faire in England to demonstrate fighting with swords and staves with another member of the Guild.

Through her older brother Patrick, she had met Christopher Marks. He'd said this fantasy role-playing dress-up just wasn't for him, but Sean had convinced him to go to a few Faires to see her demonstrations. Grudgingly, he'd gone, because they were nearby. But this time, she was on her own.

The times he had gone with her, he'd gotten the costume discount merely because he was with her, and she paid for them both. He had worn just a black t-shirt, black jeans, and black sneakers. Combined with his short blonde hair, blue eyes, and pale skin, he looked washed out.

Sean assembled her usual attire from everyday clothes, and a very special blouse. She wore black leggings with black flat steel-toed knee-high boots. Her long black blouse had ruffles on the sleeves and a v-neck collar with a flouncy yoke. The blouse was very important to her; one of the Guild seamstresses crafted the blouse for her from silks which were Guild-spun, and that Sean helped dye, and cut the pieces. Her friend, Lady Martha, as she was known in the Guild, was a very talented woman, and she fashioned the pieces into the elegant blouse Sean now wore.

On both wrists she wore gauntlets made out of soft leather she'd purchased at one of the Faires from Gunter, the best leather-worker in all of the Guild. At her throat she wore a necklace of a pewter dragon holding a blue crystal. The hand-crafted long blouse was belted twice: once with a gold-covered belt that held a small money bag, and once with a black leather belt that was part of her sword sheath, which she wore diagonal across her back,

underneath the cotton drawstring rucksack. Weapons were only permitted if they were “peace-sheathed;” that is, tied, belted or buckled so that they could not be easily drawn. Sean’s sword was peace-sheathed for now; she would be using it later on. Weapons here were merely for decoration. Sean’s costume, combined with her dyed-black hair, dark brown eyes, and tanned skin, suited her perfectly.

During her time with the Guild, she’d learned to be a skilled fighter with a sword, and with a staff also. The sword she carried was custom made for her. Sean stood 5-feet tall, and the sword was just about half her height. This combination caught enough of her opponents off guard, and they felt she would be an easy match. They *were* easy matches - for Sean. After each of her wins, she received compliments on her skill, cunning, and use of the sword. The Guild had given her several medals and honors of achievement. She placed some of these authentic jewels onto her sword belt, and embedded a few into the hilt of the silver sword.

A half hour later, Sean and Robert were practicing with the fighting staffs in a wooded area near where the actual demonstration would take place. No one was there to interfere with the practice.

Earlier, both had untied the ribbons that held their swords. Sean’s sword was now accessible with her right hand over her right shoulder, and Robert’s sword was in reach of his right hand at the left side of his waist.

Sean had tried wearing her sword at her waist, but found that it got in the way when she moved. So, after watching enough *Xena: Warrior Princess*, Sean figured out how to wear the sword on her back. She even got the placement to work out while wearing her drawstring rucksack, which was a bonus, as she didn’t slice the drawstrings every time she unsheathed her sword.

For this practice bout, Robert was wearing a heavy surcoat that matched his tunic, but Sean couldn’t figure out why. It was extra fabric, possibly weighing him down, and, more than likely, hindering his movements. She only had a brief moment to wonder why he was wearing extra fabric, but he raised his staff to signal their start.

Robert matched her every move. Sean felt as if they were doing a strange dance. When she lunged forward, he stepped back out of it. When she spun around and lashed out the staff, he blocked her. When she held the same end with both hands and came at him, he ducked, and then came up swinging right back. This was how they’d rehearsed it before the Ren Faire. It seemed Robert’s surcoat didn’t have any effect on how well he used the staff. She wondered how she could use this against him when she won their bout.

During one of Sean’s counter attacks, she stepped out of turn. She called to Robert “Time!”, their signal for Robert to stop at once, but he heard her too late. Instead of raising the staff to shield herself, Robert’s staff struck her on the right side of her head, sending her to the ground in total darkness.

One

The first thing Sean was aware of was the pounding of her head. The next was that she was lying on the grass, near a thick forest. The third observation was that it was too quiet. She sat up, felt the blood rush to her head, and she fell back on the grass, on her sheathed sword. She moved her right hand. The staff was still there, too. She sat up again, this time a bit slower. She opened her money bag. Everything was still there. She pulled her bag off her shoulders (which was still there), and everything was still inside. Slinging it back on her shoulders, she then looked in the inside top of her left boot. Her little dagger was still there. She felt her hair, her face, examined her clothing. Everything was in place.

It seemed the only thing she'd lost then, was her senses.

Where was everyone? Why was it so quiet? If everyone was still at the Ren Faire, where then, was she?

Standing up, with the help of her staff, she then drew her sword with a blinding flash of steel. Then she put it back in the sheath. At least that reflex worked. She tested her strength on her legs, then used a tree as an imaginary opponent with the staff. That was in working order as well. She drew a deep, cleansing breath. And it was cleansing. Sean didn't smell any car fumes or burning cigarettes; in fact, the air smelled cleaner than she'd ever remembered.

That was when she heard the cheering from across the field.

Leaving the grassy spot, she walked with the forest to her back until she'd climbed two very green hills. *The grass was never this green, she thought, even with those lawn services.*

Above the second hill she saw a crowd of people milling about.

*Wow, she thought, I didn't think I was hit on the head **that** hard!* Sean looked back at the forest from where she came. It was quite a distance, and had taken her about 20 minutes just to get back to the Faire. She scanned the crowd.

There were knights on horseback in full armor except for their helmets, there were people wearing clothes that looked like they hadn't been washed in years, there were children and animals running around the dirt paths.

Beyond the Faire was one of the largest castles she'd ever seen. Up close that is.

Wait a minute...dirt paths? she thought. *Why is **everyone** here in costume? Where is Robert?* Her thoughts didn't progress farther than that because a metal hand came down on her shoulder. She turned around and was faced with an armored breastplate. She looked up at a face covered with a shaggy, red beard.

He spoke in something that sounded French. Seeing her apparent confusion, he spoke again, this time in English. "Welcome to St. Mark's, Milady. I do trust that you have an escort here, do you not? And excellent reasoning why you are wearing that?"

"Y - yes," she stammered. Middle English hadn't been spoken since Medieval times, and someone at the Faire was quite fluent in a dead language. Something was terribly wrong. And this knight was not fooled by her costume into thinking she was a young man.

"Are you well, my lady? Your escort?"

Sean stammered for a moment. "My escort?" she repeated. It was then she heard horse hoof beats heading her direction, and a huge black horse carried another knight, wearing the

same colors as the first knight, red and gold. The second knight had dark hair and dark eyes and was clean-shaven. He dismounted and stood before her.

“My Lady,” he bowed to her. “I was beginning to think you had taken ill when you did not return for the joust.”

“Sir Malcolm, I am sorry, I did not know the lady was with you,” said the bearded knight. “I am Sir Devlin, at your command, milady.” The bearded knight bowed slightly and turned away.

“I trust you have a good explanation for who you are and what you are doing here at St. Mark’s?” Malcolm asked in English once Devlin had gone.

“No, Sir, I do not. I’m surprised I know my own name.”

“Very well, we shall start there. What are you called, milady?”

“Seana Kelly. But my friends call me Sean. Why do you call me ‘milady?’”

“You are a lady, are you not?” At her nod, Malcolm continued. “I would trust there is good reasoning for your braies?”

“Sir Malcolm, this is my usual attire at times such as this.”

“Why are you here at St. Mark’s?” Sir Malcolm demanded.

“This is the Shire of St. Mark’s?” she asked, her mind spinning to come up with a plausible story. *She was still at the Ren Faire, right?* she asked herself. Why was this Malcolm demanding to know about her leggings? And why was he speaking in the English of the Middle Ages?

“Nay, Milady,” Malcolm was saying. “this is the Shire of Lincoln, the Castle of St. Mark’s.”

“I was visiting my brother,” she said softly.

“Milady?”

She spoke up this time. “I was visiting my brother in York. I must have lost my way to arrive here in Lincolnshire.”

Malcolm seemed to accept this as he continued on. “You have a sword, milady.”

“Yes.” Sean answered. Having been on interviews for many jobs, she’d learned the hard way to always just answer the question. There were many jobs that she’d wanted that didn’t hire her because of her wordiness. So she was stuck in a dead-end clerical job, filing, answering phones, and doing data entry.

“Did you travel to St. Mark’s alone, milady?”

Tough one to answer straight, she thought. How *did* she get here?

“Yes.” She figured that would explain the sword.

He was silent. He looked at his horse, covered in the colors of St. Mark’s, the red and the gold. He turned back to Sean.

“Lady Seana, can you ride?”

“Yes, but I’d rather not.”

“As you wish. Let us come watch the jousting. This day is a joust of peace as we celebrate the Feast Day of St. Michael.”

“Michaelmas,” she muttered, and Malcolm heard.

“Aye, Milady.” He guided her by the elbow with his right hand, and led the horse with his left hand until they came to the stands for the joust. It was a covered dais; in the center sat two very well-dressed people, whom Sean guessed to be the lord and lady of that huge

castle on the hill. Malcolm and Sean stood off to the side. Malcolm kept glancing at Sean, watching her, wondering who she was, how she came to be here, and what to do about it.

When the joust was over, and the knight in red and gold the victor, and the knight in gold and blue led his horse off the field in defeat, Malcolm touched the well-dressed man on his shoulder. Malcolm had made up his mind about the new woman. She was a curiosity, but that didn't mean she had to be questioned unmercifully for it. He'd talk to her later.

"Uncle Garrick," he said when the man turned round.

"Nephew!" and he clasped hands with Malcolm.

"Uncle, I would like to present to you Lady Seana, a...distant cousin on my father's side. She came by...unexpectedly. Lady Seana, this is my uncle Garrick Warrington, Earl of St. Mark's."

"Lord Garrick," Sean said, curtsying as best she could wearing leggings. Lord Garrick took her hand and kissed the back of it. "Lady Seana, you are most welcome here at St. Mark's. This is my wife," he turned to the woman who now stood beside him. "The Countess of St. Mark's, Lady Marta."

Again, Sean curtsied awkwardly. Lady *Marta*? It couldn't be Lady Martha from the Guild... could it? Allowing herself a glance, Sean knew it was merely a similar name.

"Lady Seana, do stay, have a seat with nephew Malcolm," Lady Marta offered. If she noticed Sean's double-take, she made no indication.

"Thank you, milady. But please, do call me Sean."

Malcolm eyed the strange girl with curiosity. It was obvious she was a stranger to the area. But where was she from? She was wearing strange clothes, even if she was dressed as a man. Her traveling clothes, he surmised. She even had a man's name! She spoke with an accent he had never heard before! She was certainly not nobility, but *where* was she from? Why was she dressed as a man? And why did he come to her aid when Devlin confronted her? He suspected she could be a pickpocket or a criminal; they were known to frequent fetes such as this. He would have to question her further about who she really was. And then he looked at her again, really looked at the lady that was under the leggings and tunic. She reminded him of his mother's young lady-in-waiting, Beatrice.

Sean noticed Malcolm watching her, and she didn't like it. He was watching her with lust in his eyes, like he'd never *seen* a woman before, let alone one dressed as a man. Why did he help her out? And why *did* he introduce her as his cousin? The truth would have to come out sometime.

In the distance, she heard the drum roll, and heard hoof beats on the jousting field. For this last joust of the day, the opponent was someone named Sir Robert of Lincoln, wearing blue and silver. Lord Garrick's knight was wearing the red and gold, but his shield, and in a corner of his surcoat, was dark green with crossed silver swords.

Sir Robert? she thought. Who was the lord's knight then? Was he not introduced because everyone already knew him?

Sir Robert sat on his horse and faced the crowd, now with his helmet off. *It was Robert!* she thought. *I'm okay, I'm at the Faire. Robert just didn't tell me about this part. Or so she tried to convince herself.*

The crowd booed, which was expected.

Lord Garrick's knight raised his lance to signal he was ready to begin.

Although this was a joust à *plaisance*, a joust of peace, the two knights looked like they wanted to kill each other. During the joust, both knights became unhorsed, and were now fighting with swords. Having fought Robert in the Guild, she knew this was the Robert she was supposed to demonstrate the sword and staff fighting with.

What had happened when she was blacked out? Was this a change of plans? And the other knight - he seemed to know every move Sir Robert would make. Was Robert also at the Ren Faire to show jousting? This joust had all the earmarks of something Robert and the Guild choreographed.

But when Lord Garrick's knight knocked Robert's sword out of his grasp with a maneuver that Robert should have blocked, Sean realized this joust was over. Robert lay on the ground on his back, the other knight's sword raised above him.

The crowd cheered.

The Earl's knight acknowledged the crowd's cheer, then sheathed his sword and held his hand out to Sir Robert, and helped him up. The crowd cheered again, this time there were some hollers and whistles as well.

The knight clicked his tongue for his horse to come. The sleek black horse trotted over, and knelt down on the grass next to the knight, who was then able to mount the steed. This left Robert to gather himself together and still leave the field with his dignity. As the victor paraded around the field, the crowd stood and cheered louder than before. When he was right in front of Lord Garrick and Lady Marta, the knight bowed his head, then sat upright as he took off the helmet.

As the helmet and chainmail hood came off, blonde hair spilled out onto his shoulders, and Sean stared into those piercing blue eyes.

Christopher!

Two

It's *Christopher!* she thought. But it *couldn't* be. He was adamant against this sort of thing. He would *never* compete in a joust! He wouldn't even know which end of the sword was up! And where did that long hair come from? And what the hell was he doing in *England?* All these thoughts came into her head at once. Malcolm nudged her from where he was standing beside her.

"That is Christian of St. Mark's, formerly of Cornwall," Malcolm told her softly when she turned her head to face him. "I am Captain of Lord Garrick's Guard, and Sir Christian is my second-in-command. Do I see you recognize him?"

Sean was silent for a moment, thinking how to word her response.

"He reminds me of someone I once knew," she said softly. "Sir Malcolm? May I ask you something?" she asked after a moment.

"Anything, milady."

"I hope you don't think me crazy or anything, but I need to know. What year is this?"

"You are right, I do think you daft. This is the Year of Our Lord 1275."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"Kidding you?" Malcolm was puzzled.

"Jesting, teasing, pulling my leg," she offered.

"My Lady! I would never pull a lady's leg!"

"It's just an expression. You're just jesting about the year, right?"

"No, milady, I do not jest. It is unbecoming a knight."

1275! she thought. *How did I get here then?* she thought, only the hundredth time since she'd woken up outside the forest. Woken up! That was it! And when Malcolm first saw her in the throng, she was thinking what a heroine from her time travel novels would say. But that was just fiction. Christopher *had* told her to go to England. She'd been seeing him for over a year and a half, and nothing seemed to be wrong. Maybe that was it, that nothing *seemed* wrong. Maybe everything was wrong, and Christopher needed some time away from her, which is why he didn't argue with her about England.

But that didn't matter - she had to get back to her own time. She didn't really belong here.

"Lady Sean?" It was now Lady Marta's voice cutting into Sean's thoughts.

Sean looked up at the Countess.

"We would wish it for you to join us in the Great Hall for our Michaelmas Festival supper." She said, gently putting her hand on Sean's arm. It lingered there, feeling the silky material. "Interesting," she murmured.

"I'd be delighted," Sean said. As if she had a choice. She'd figured out it was the blow to her head in the mock staff fight with Robert that knocked her unconscious, and it was that same blow that brought her back to 13th Century England. *This was too strange*, she thought, as she followed Lord Garrick and Lady Marta, and the entire crowd of people up a dirt path, through the gates of the Earl's estate, and onward to the huge castle.

At once, many women surrounded Lady Marta and Sean. They were all young, younger than Sean, she guessed. But if she really was here in the Middle Ages, at 23 and unmarried, Sean was an old maid. That thought made her head hurt, and she put her fingers to her temples. One of the younger women was suddenly at her side.

“What ails ye, milady? I am called Una. We must find ye something more suitable to wear for the Michaelmas Feast!”

“I’m Seana, but please call me Sean. I just have a headache.”

Una gave her an understanding smile with the nod of her head.

“I am not unfamiliar with headaches. I will brew ye an herbal tea with supper,” Una offered.

Valerian tea, no doubt, Sean thought, wrinkling her nose. The last time she had a bit of a headache at a Guild function, one of the ladies brewed her such a tea. It took her hours to get the awful taste out of her mouth.

“No, thank you, Una. I just remembered I have something,” she said, remembering the tiger balm in her money bag. “You were saying something about a gown?” *Ugh*, she thought. *More fabric to get in the way.*

Una sized her up. “I think we are of a size. Let us find ye something to wear. Ye cannot simply wear that!”

“Una,” Lady Marta called. “Lady Seana will be staying in the quarters next to my solar. You will see to her needs while she is here. She is Malcolm’s cousin on his father’s side, dear.”

Una curtsied. “Yes, milady,” and grabbed one of Sean’s gauntlet-covered wrists and playfully, yet meaningfully, pulled Sean to the stairs in one of the corners of the great hall that they had entered into.

With all the women that had surrounded her, the Earl, the Countess, and Malcolm, she only briefly noted the rich tapestries hanging from the ceiling, the St. Mark’s Coat of Arms prominently displayed behind the head table, and the clean rushes on the floor.

Sean followed Una from the great hall to the stairs in the corner of the castle. When they got to the second floor, Una led Sean into a hallway.

“The bower is this way,” she pointed down the hallway. At Sean’s momentarily confused look, Una explained, “Where I and the other ladies sleep,”

The bower, Sean noticed, had soft carpeting on the floor. Una was looking through one of the trunks along the wall.

Sean was curious herself about why Malcolm had covered for her, yet she followed the ruse.

“It’s been quite sometime since I’ve seen cousin Malcolm. How did he arrive here?” Sean asked, wanting to know more about the knight who had lied for her, and useful information if she were ever questioned.

“Malcolm’s mother, that is, the sister of the Earl, she died from...well, they say it was consumption, ten years past now. Malcolm came here with only a few men, and the Earl took him in. He has been like another son to the Earl. A-ha!” She held up a hunter green kirtle trimmed with gold on the round neck, the flowing sleeves, and the hemline. From another part of the trunk, she brought out a white, almost see-through chemise.

“Try these on. If they are too big, ye can use your girdle.”

Girdle? Sean thought. Then her mind clicked. *Ah, yes, The belt.* But why was Una still standing there? Was she supposed to change in front of Una?

“Uhm...could I be alone to change?” Sean asked.

“Aye, milady. I will be right outside. And Lady Seana? Ye will not need your sword.”

“I will put that in the quarters on our way down to supper. And Lady Una? Please call me Sean.”

Una smiled, and went out of the room to the stone hallway and closed the door most of the way, but not all the way. This “Sean” was an interesting lady, and as Una watched through the cracked door, Sean also wore things on her body that looked uncomfortable and impractical. But Una liked the skimpy lace covers Sean left on before pulling on the chemise. Una noticed Sean had left her odd-looking boots on. As Una watched Sean put on the girdle, she noted that the kirtle fit perfectly.

Sean finished dressing, aware that the door wasn't fully closed, and that Una was probably curious at the mistress she'd been suddenly saddled with. Lady Marta had told Una she was to be Sean's lady while Sean stayed with them. *How long is that? Sean wondered. I have to return to my own time, to America, to Christopher, to my family...* She looked down on the bed that she'd put her clothes on, and at the sword on top. She'd noticed that she was getting strange looks when the sword was on her back. Fortunately, the belt was adjustable to hold the sword at her waist. Maybe she was getting odd looks because she was a *woman* with a sword and men's clothing.

Just as Sean finished dressing, the door opened, and Una was in the doorway.

“I will show ye to the guest room. There is a trunk in there for your...garments. Your sword can go in there also.”

Sean followed Una out into the hall and down a few doorways until they were at the room Marta spoke of. As promised, there was a trunk waiting for Sean's clothes. This particular room had several pallets along one wall, and a trunk on the opposite. There was a coat of arms tapestry hanging in front of a slit window that let in a bit of light onto the bed. On one side of the bed, there was a night stand with a taper candle in a holder on it.

Sean quickly put her clothes and rucksack in the trunk against the wall, and hid the sword under the clothes. She leaned the staff up against the wall next to the bed. Once her belongings were safe, she followed Una down the same stairs to supper. This would be her first real Medieval Feast.

She smiled then. At least she was *used to* feeling out of place.

Three

Sean re-entered the Great Hall, and was now able to linger with her observations, unlike when she first arrived. The Coat-of-Arms was gold with a red rampant reguardant lion in the center. The tapestries on either side were of a hunting scene. The rushes on the floor were clean, and where there were no rushes, a thick, dark green carpet. Lord Garrick certainly saw to his people's needs.

Malcolm looked up from the head table, and saw Sean by the staircase she had been whisked up when they first arrived for the feast. He saw her for the first time wearing proper garments. He would have to question her further about how she came to St. Mark's. That was why he asked his uncle to seat her next to him. There were many things to find out about this woman, and he wanted to know them all.

Una nudged Sean's elbow and motioned her to look up. Malcolm was approaching them. When he was in front of Sean, he offered her his hand.

"M'Lady," he said, clearly indicating she was to come with him to her seat.

Curious, Sean looked at the head table. There were two adjacent spaces at the head table to the left of Lord Garrick. Sean looked to the right of the space. Sir Robert of Lincoln! Malcolm dismissed Una curtly, saying for her to return at the end of the meal.

Una curtseyed, and backed up away from Malcolm, all the time watching Sean, and took her place near the head of one of the trestle tables. Malcolm took Sean's elbow gently, and escorted her to the empty place at the head table, stopping only to tell her who the people sitting there were.

"You know Devlin. This is Lady Asta, one of Lady Marta's ladies."

Sean noted the woman with the long flowing blonde hair, which was almost white. Lady Asta was wearing a pale blue gown that matched her eyes.

"You saw Sir Robert at the joust. He is also our guest this eventide. On the left of Lady Marta is the heir to St. Mark's, Dalton," Malcolm told her. Dalton had dark hair, like his father, Sean noticed, but piercing blue eyes, like that of ice.

"Then there is the Earl's youngest daughter, Kyra," Malcolm supplied. Kyra looked a bit like Sean with dark eyes and dark hair. There was laughter in her eyes, whereas Christopher had always told Sean there was mystery behind her own dark eyes.

"There is Justin, the Earl's second son. He lives in a village not far from here called Blackwater," Malcolm commented. Justin and Dalton looked nothing like brothers, Sean thought. Justin had light hair, as did Lady Marta.

"Sitting next to Justin is Lady Enid, another of Lady Marta's ladies," Malcolm said. Lady Enid had brown hair and brown eyes, and Sean thought she defined "mousy." Lady Enid looked delicate in her soft yellow gown, as if she would break if looked at the wrong way.

"At the end of the table is Gilmore, another of my men."

Sean noted the knight, not as scruffy as Devlin, but Gilmore's beard was neatly trimmed. Gilmore probably took care in his appearance, as it appeared Devlin did not.

By the time Malcolm was done telling her who everyone was, they were seated, and Malcolm was pouring her something into a mug.

"Some spiced wine, milady?"

“Sure.” Sean was silent for a moment, going through her mind about table manners and etiquette she’d learned at the Guild. Where she was having trouble was that the Guild was mostly Renaissance, and here she was in Medieval England. The lords and ladies present at the head table and at the heads of the trestle tables were dressed much as they would be at a Guild function. Did the Guild truly have history that wrong?

“Milady?” Malcolm’s voice interrupted her thoughts. She turned to him. Over a soft blue tunic, Malcolm wore a chainmail collar, as did all his knights. *There was a funny thought*, she mentally made a note of. *Just the other day I was sending email, now I’m sitting next to someone wearing chainmail.* She laughed out loud at the thought.

“Milady?” Malcolm asked again. “Care to share the jest?”

“No, you wouldn’t understand.”

“I have separated the best pieces of beef in the stew for you. They are here.” He pointed to her side of the trencher. *Ahh, that was it*, she remembered. Two people always share, and the lesser serves the more important, the younger serves the older, and the man serves the woman. That was why Malcolm poured her wine and saved the best pieces of meat for her. Until she found a way back home, she might as well try to fit in here.

“Milady, I must ask you a few things.” Malcolm said between bites. “I must know how you arrived at St. Mark’s without using the main road from the village. We have many...unsavory characters in the nearby forests, including Sherwood...” he stared at her suspiciously.

Sean stopped picking daintily at the meat, since the only utensil was a knife.

“I came from near the forest. I am not a thief. I know how to use a sword and a fighting staff. If I have to, I can ride. Does that answer your Inquisition?”

“My what?”

“Questioning. Never mind.”

“It will do for the time. But even though you speak our language, your words are quite odd at times.”

“I’m not from here.”

“This is what I am asking you. From where do you hail?”

“Far away from here, I can tell you that. But for now, I’d rather not say. You may think me daft. Trust me on this,” she requested.

“Aye, I will, milady. But you will tell me. And it will be soon.”

Sean turned back to her portion of the trencher. She wasn’t going to correct him to call her Sean, not “milady.” She could see that wasn’t going to happen. She hoped she didn’t have to tell Malcolm, or anyone for that matter, where she really was from. They’d condemn her for witchcraft in an instant. Or laugh at her, and tell her she’d had too much wine. No, that she must never do. She must remain sober at all times.

After the delightful meal, the entertainment began between the trestle tables. Sean was watching some jugglers when she saw Devlin at the end of the left trestle table talking to some knights. They too, had chainmail collars on over tunics, and Sean noticed one in particular. Christian was wearing a dark green tunic, almost the color of her kirtle. His hair was pulled back somehow, but a few stray locks fell across his forehead.

How would she arrange to meet him? What would she say to him?

The jugglers were replaced by a minstrel, singing about people and stories he had seen in

his travels. This night, he told of a young Saxon knight who had been disinherited by his father because the knight joined forces with Richard *Coeur-de-Lion* to fight in the Crusades.

This fascinated Sean, because this minstrel was telling Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. She'd seen a movie version of it, and it was remarkable how similar the story was. Of course, this was the origin of the novel.

She was so deeply involved with the tale from the minstrel that she jumped when Malcolm said in her ear, "Milady?"

"Don't *do* that!" she hissed at him. "Don't ever sneak up on me again!"

"I did not, milady. I have been beside you throughout the feast."

"That's not what I mean. You caught me off guard, unawares."

"If you really can use your sword as you claim, you would do well to be aware at all times."

"Oh, and I suppose *you're* constantly alert?"

"It is a knight's duty to be constantly alert," he retorted. Then, softer, "I see the minstrel impresses upon you?"

"It's a fascinating story. Maybe some day someone will write it down, and publ —" She cut her words off before she went too far.

"Write it down? Interesting. Can you write and read, milady?"

"Been reading since I was little."

"You are right. You are not from here." Devlin appeared between her and Malcolm, and whispered something to him.

"I shall return, milady," he said apologetically.

Again, she turned her attention to the minstrel, who was now singing about the outsider Lady Rebecca, and her crimes of witchcraft to seduce a Knight Templar. In her mind's eye, she saw Sam Neill, who played the Knight Templar in the movie she'd seen. And when the minstrel sang about the champion who arrived to face the knight, Sean pictured Christopher. No, it was Christian. Studying the blonde knight who looked like the man she'd been dating the last year and a half, Christian had subtle facial differences as well as having long hair. There was a depth behind Christian's eyes, and something more, something well hidden. Something that was never there in Christopher. Sean wanted to find out what was behind Christian's mysterious eyes.

Four

“Lady Seana?” Sir Robert had been watching Sean throughout the meal. He had seen her enter the Great Hall, and noted the look on her face when she realized where she was seated. He couldn’t decide if it was a look of puzzlement or surprise.

“Lady Seana?” he asked again.

“It’s Sean,” she snapped. And then, a moment later, she turned to him.

“Sir Robert!” she gasped. “I’m so sorry, milord. But please, do call me Sean. I prefer it.”

“Sean, then.” he said, tasting the name on his lips. It was different, much like the lady to whom it belonged. *Who was she?* When he saw her before the joust, she was wearing hose and a tunic, like the men. Now, she wore a dark green kirtle that accentuated her dark eyes and dark hair. But she had worn a sword. She was most different indeed.

“Lad – Pardon me. Sean,” he started again, awkwardly. “You seemed puzzled to be sitting next to Sir Malcolm.”

“No, milord, I was surprised to be sitting next to you. I thought you were somebody I knew.”

“And who was this person?”

“His name is Robert, like yours. He looks like you. He even fights like you.”

Robert was startled at her statement. Someone that looked like him?

“How do you know of this other Robert?” he asked.

“We fought together many times,” Sean answered, thinking of their many sparring matches they had. Would she have them again?

“You fight then. You use your sword?”

“Yes, as well as a staff.”

“I should like to see that sometime. It is not a far ride into Lincoln, and I am on fair terms with some of the knights here at St. Mark’s.”

“I would like that. How about tomorrow on the practice fields? I do like to ...” she paused, searching for the right words, “stay fit for battle.”

“As you wish milady. Where is it that you are from that women fight with swords? I heard you speaking to Sir Malcolm on that matter.”

“From far away. I don’t wish to discuss it.”

“But surely - ”

“No, Sir Robert. I will see you on the morrow.”

She pushed her seat out from under the table, stood up, and left the great room from where she had entered at the beginning of the meal. The food, the wine, and the crowd in the Great Hall suddenly had made her stomach churn.

Una watched Sean head towards the stairwell, and followed. By the time Una caught up with Sean, Sean had closed the large wooden door that lead to the guest quarters most of the way. Una could hear a voice, and realized it was Sean’s. *Was she mad, talking to herself like that?* Una thought. And she thought she heard crying.

“Damn, damn, damn.” Sean muttered to herself, unaware that Una was listening at the door. “I gotta get out of here somehow. I don’t know how I got here, but I have to go back. I don’t belong here. So much for *driving home* when all this is over. Was this your doing, Chris?” she asked through the invisible time barrier. “You were going to break up with me, and now I’m here? Isn’t that right, Christopher Marks?” She closed her eyes, the tears unwilling to come.

The wooden door scraped on the floor. Sean’s hand went under the pillow to her sword as she demanded, “Who’s there?”

“‘Tis I, Una, Lady Sean.”

Sean relaxed her hand, and bade Una to enter.

“Sean,” Una started, addressing Sean as she requested. “Would ye like a bath sent up to you?”

A *bath*? Sean thought. “That would be wonderful. Thank you, Una.”

“Lady?” Una asked again. At Sean’s nod, Una continued. “Who is Christopher Marks?”

Damn, she heard me. “Someone I knew once, seems long ago,” was all Sean offered.

“I did not mean to listen in, milady, but did he send ye here?”

“I have no idea,” Sean admitted. But she had her family in her own time. She had something to go home to. Or did she? Her parents practically disowned her when she didn’t apply for management-level positions in business. Her oldest sister, Meghan, was married and lived across the country. Her oldest brother, Grady, was two years younger than Meghan, was also married, and he lived in Europe. She never saw either of them once they moved out of her parents’ house.

There was at least Patrick. He was two years younger than Grady, and two years older than her. Patrick was a good friend, and she often thought of him while she was away. Her gray cat Smokey was her best friend in the whole world. Smokey was always there to listen to her, and purr in response. And now she’d never see either again.

“Milady? Sean?” Una asked, breaking into Sean’s thoughts.

“Yes?” she asked.

“There is someone here named ‘Chris.’ Sir Christian. He was the knight in the joust earlier this day.”

“Yes, I remember him,” Sean said, remembering all too well those sparkling blue eyes. “I’d like to speak with him....eventually. But, please don’t tell anyone about what you overheard me saying, okay?”

“Aye milady. Sean.” Una said, and left the guest quarters to ready her mistress’s bath.

The tub was brought up by two servants, directed by Una. The water was warm, and Una brought a pot of hot water up with her.

“This is just from the fire, so it may yet be hot, Lady Sean. I have brought many flowers for the bath. I do not know what ye like, but if ye tell me, I will remember for the next time. Would ye like me to wash your back?”

When Sean shook her head no, Una said, “I will come back when ye are ready for me to take the tub away. Sleep well, milady Sean.” And Una left Sean with a large round wooden tub. There were linens and flower petals that Una brought, the thick linens Sean supposed were towels.

She undressed, putting the kirtle on the trunk, and tossing the chemise and her own

underwear on the bed. She took out the tiger balm in a small, round, metal tin from her rucksack. She used the salve on her sore muscles, but found it soothing for her headaches as well. She found some rose petals, sprinkled them on the water, and then sank into the tub. It was still warm, and relaxing. She used one of the cloths to wash herself all over, trying to scrub away her journey. As she rubbed the tiger balm into her temples for her headache, she thought about her baths at home. No more running hot water. No more showers, the hot water pounding on her back almost like a massage.

She rose from the tub, dripping wet, and almost catching a chill, she grabbed at one of the “towels” to dry herself. She put on her panties, her link to her own time, and then pulled the chemise over her head.

Being a stranger in a strange land, she laughed at the cliché reference, and flopped down on the bed, and buried her head in the pillow, where she felt reassured by her sword she felt under the pillow. Tears never came, but sleep did. *Maybe*, she thought, *when I wake up, I'll be back at home again. There's no place like home*, she repeated, even though no one had ever heard of the Wizard of Oz yet. And it worked for Dorothy, so why not? *There's no place like home, there's no place like home....*

When she awoke, sunlight was pouring through the slit window. Fumbling for her money bag on her belt, she opened it, and pulled out her watch. The face was blank. *Maybe it was the battery*, she thought, turning it over. The back was sealed, and it would need a professional tool to open it. *Damn, well that's no good, is it?* she thought.

There was a knock on the door, and it started to open. Sean reached for the sword under her pillow, and again demanded,

“Who’s there?”

“‘Tis Una this noon, milady. I thought ye would like to break the fast.” She had a tray of food with her.

Noon! I never sleep that late! Sean thought. After she told Una it was okay to enter, Sean remembered that Una mentioned Christian last night. Would he have some way to help her back?

“Una, about last night....”

“Yes, Lady Sean?”

“I think would like to see Sir Christian sometime today.”

“Oh, nay, Lady Sean. He has ridden out at dawn with Sir Malcolm and some of the other knights to collect the earl’s taxes.”

“Oh, I see.” Even though she didn’t know when Christian would return, she figured she wouldn’t see Malcolm, and wouldn’t have to face him for not being in the Great Hall when he returned. She didn’t know exactly what made her hastily leave the Great Hall. It may have been the minstrel. It may have been Christian. It may have been Sir Robert being friendly.

It may have been the realization that she was no longer able to hop in her car and drive home once the day was done. There was the possibility of never seeing her own time, her own country, never sending email, never driving her car, never being able to watch TV or use the computer. She wanted to go home.

Una left a tray of bread and cheese and some wine with Sean. Then she curtsied and left the room, realizing that Sean was deep in thought about something Una didn't quite understand.

Later that day, after the noon meal that Sean had in the room, Una escorted her new mistress to the practice fields where Sir Robert was waiting for her. He was wearing a tunic of chain mail and tan hose. He was sparring with one of the men-at-arms when he looked up and saw Sean. His opponent was able to knock the sword out of Sir Robert's hand as he was distracted.

Sean was again wearing a gown, this one was deep blue. Under it, she wore her leggings and her steel-toed boots. Aside from being the only pair of shoes she had, they were comfortable, and that was important to Sean. Her sword was at her waist again, and having worn it there the past day as well, it was starting to become comfortable. It was also a hand rest for her left hand. She almost laughed at that thought.

"Are ye certain ye wish to do this, Lady Sean?"

"Yes, Una. It's only a game. I won't get hurt," she told Una.

"As ye wish, Lady Sean."

Sean sighed. "Lady Sean" was all she could hope for in this prim and proper, and very structured society. Sean watched Una back away from the practice field, her eyes never leaving Sean, until Una reached the door in the inner wall that led to the keep. The practice field was outside the inner wall of the keep, but protected by the outer wall of the entire castle. Beyond the outer wall was the village to one side and the forest on the other.

Maybe, she thought, It's not Christian after all. Maybe if I can get Sir Robert to re-enact the mock battle with me exactly, I'll be able to return home again. She immediately dismissed the thought. In this time and place, Sir Robert would not willingly slam a fighting staff into her temple.

"Lady Sean," Robert said, bowing to her.

"Sir Robert." Sean curtsied. This seemed eerily like the way she met the Robert at the Ren Faire for the practice match. What happened to Robert when Sean arrived back in the Middle Ages? She didn't need those thoughts on her mind as she sparred with a real knight. Even though she was wearing her gauntlets, Robert's sword would be able to slash her hand off.

"A gown, Lady Sean?"

She smiled at him then, showing her two rows of neat clean white teeth. Robert smiled back, pleased that she wasn't missing any. She took off her sword belt with the sword on it, and she pulled the gown off over her head. At first, Robert and the other men that were on the field gasped, but under the gown was the black shirt that Sean wore when Robert first noticed her the previous afternoon.

She tossed the gown aside, and it felt wonderful and non-confining now that all that yardage was removed from her. She buckled the sword belt back around her waist, and put her right hand on the hilt.

She thought she saw a sparkle in Robert's eyes, that same sparkle she'd seen in all her other opponents. The ones that always lost. He put his sword on the ground, and picked up

two wooden practice swords, and tossed one to Sean.

“Hmm,” she said, unbuckling her sword belt again, “I supposed I won’t be needing this, then?” She tossed it to land on the dress she’d cast aside.

The practice was underway. It was that strange dance that warriors did, battling with swords, the clunking wood.... Sean thrusted, Robert moved back. Robert lunged, Sean sidestepped. After many minutes of swords clunking, Robert stepped into Sean, the cross bars connected, and Sean’s sword went flying in the air. Sean was now face to face with Robert, with only his sword between them.

“Excellent, Lady Sean,” Robert said as he smiled. His teeth weren’t too bad, she thought. And he smelled like leather, sweat, and horses. “You will best me one day. We must do this to-morrow.”

“Tomorrow then,” she smiled back. Sean backed away from Robert, her eyes never leaving him, as she retrieved her sword, and then her gown. Like Una, she walked backwards to the gate to the inner wall. Sean didn’t like to turn her back to anyone holding a weapon, even if it *was* just a game.

It was supper on the first day of their journey, and Christian was thankful for the rest and respite. He was hungry, and thankful for food, even if they weren’t having an elaborate meal, as they did just the night before, after the joust.

Christian, Malcolm, Devlin, Gilmore, and a young knight, Owen, had dismounted, reined in the horses, and made camp outside one of the earl’s villages, Warrington. This was where the earl hailed from, but Lord Garrick had obtained permission from King Edward to build the castle at St. Mark’s.

Warrington was to be Malcolm’s reward for good service to his uncle when Garrick deemed it the right time. Malcolm was restless, wondering when that would become reality.

Thoughts of Sean reminded him again of Beatrice. She was one of his mother’s ladies-in-waiting, only a year older than him, and he still a lad of fifteen. Beatrice was sixteen, and she was wise in the ways of men, but he was never to tell his mother, Lady Alyssa, the Earl’s sister. Aye, he would be lord of Hampton Castle, had not his father found Malcolm with Beatrice that afternoon the gardens. He would not be here, he thought bitterly, as he looked around at the men with him.

The five knights were to be in Blackwater, the third of the earl’s holdings, in the morning. Blackwater belonged to the earl’s second son, Justin. *Why didn’t Justin join the clergy, as many second sons do*, Malcolm thought. *Then Blackwater would be mine.*

As the knights were setting sleeping places round the fire, Christian remembered supper from the previous night. More importantly, he remembered the woman with the dark eyes and the green gown. He’d seen her earlier that day, at his joust against Sir Robert, and she wore a sword.

She, whatever her name was, was wearing men’s clothing. He hoped she had a good reason for it. And when he’d *won* the joust, and removed his helmet and mail, she’d looked right at him, as if she’d seen a ghost. It was unnerving.

Especially now. There would be no one for Christian of St. Mark’s.

Not ever.

The noon meal had long since ended that next day when the five knights returned to the Great Hall, the pack horses' bags were filled with food, fine material, and wool, and there were several bags of money for the earl's treasury.

Malcolm handed Christian a parchment that was an accounting of all the goods and moneys that were brought into St. Mark's. It was now Christian's duty to see the steward for these amounts to be entered in the books.

Taking the parchment from Malcolm, Christian glanced around the Hall. He saw her sitting at the head table, in the same seat as supper *that* evening, and he cursed to himself for wanting to seek her out. She was wearing a deep red kirtle, her dark hair resting at her neckline, and her graceful hand holding a wine goblet. She was sitting next to Sir Robert, and laughing. He could see her eyes smiling even. What was it about her that made him want to look for her?

He was Christian of St. Mark's, formerly Cornwall, and he had vowed to himself that he would never fall to the charms of any woman again. But this woman, whom he didn't even know her name, was causing him to have his doubts.

"Sir Christian?" It was Malcolm. "Alfred needs that parchment while there is still light in the sky."

"Aye, milord," Christian mumbled, thinking about the woman at the head table. *Why does she carry a sword?* No doubt that was everyone's question, he thought as he followed the stone corridors to the steward's office.

Upon being allowed to enter, Christian gave the parchment to Alfred, a proper man with white hair and pale skin, and a magnifying glass around his neck on a leather thong.

Alfred scanned the list, then opened his large record books and entered the numbers and figures from the list. When he was finished, he looked at the lists, and looked some more. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He looked at the numbers with the magnifying glass. He cleaned the glass with the hem of his tunic.

He looked at the list of numbers again, and squinted through the magnifying glass again.

"Is there something wrong, Sir Alfred?"

"Just call me Alfred, Christian," he said with a hint of a Scot's lilt. "Dinnae fash yourself with formalities."

"Is there something wrong, Alfred?" Christian repeated.

"Yes, Christian. It appears we have a problem."

Five

“What do ye mean, ‘We have a problem.’?” Christian asked. Since the failed crusade of King Edward, Christian was intolerant of problems, and they must be remedied at once. Perhaps Alfred, who was getting old, may have written down something incorrectly.

“You can read and write, Christian?” Alfred asked, not as a question, but as a confirmation of a fact.

“Aye, I can.”

Alfred turned the large book around for Christian to read the numbers.

“Here,” Alfred indicated a column of names and times, “is a list of the knights who rode out with you, and when you left and when you returned. This list is for my own record keeping. This column here,” Alfred pointed to some numbers this time, “is what you bring into the castle. It is much more than what was brought in last time you rode out. Not you, exactly. Malcolm and a few others rode that time. You, I believe, were in charge of the falcons that day.”

“Aye.” Christian remembered that day, only about a month before. Malcolm entered the barracks where the Guard was housed. Malcolm was the only knight who was quartered in the keep, because he was the earl’s nephew.

Malcolm addressed the knights, and then selected only three others to ride with him. Christian, Malcolm told him, was to teach young Owen falconry that day.

Owen seemed to be frightened of the birds, but didn’t say anything to Christian, putting on a brave face that didn’t fool Christian. But after entering the mews, Christian held his arm out to his falcon, Snowy. She swooped down to Christian’s forearm, and as the older knight turned to face Owen, the younger knight panicked, and ran to the horses, jumped on his, and rode as far away from the mews as he could before Christian caught up with him.

Since that day, neither Christian nor Owen told Malcolm about the incident. Nor had Owen been near the falcons either. But Christian knew Owen would have to face his fears.

“I believe I understand, Alfred. When I ride with Malcolm, we bring in twice as much in half the time as what Malcolm brings in without me.” Alfred nodded at Christian, letting the knight know what he said was indeed correct. “What would you have me do?” Christian asked Alfred.

“I charge you with bringing me an accounting of everything that happens. There must be a pattern to this. When you return, I want a list of who you were with, when you left, when you returned, and a list of everything coming into the castle.”

“But Sir Malcolm tallies that for me.” Christian said,

“I wish you to observe Malcolm. You will know what taxes you collected. Keep your own tally. When Malcolm returns from a trip without you, write down on parchment who was with him when they left, and then when they returned, so you do not forget it. Then bring it straight-away to me.”

Christian looked at Alfred. The man was old, yes, but he was wise. In his younger days, he must have been a powerful man at the castle he oversaw. Or maybe Alfred was always with Lord Garrick. Christian was only in the service of Lord Garrick since five years prior, when Christian returned from his own personal crusade. Lord Garrick sent Christian and a few

men with Prince Edward on his crusade in 1272. Christian returned to St. Mark's, after witnessing Edward crowned King of England. What happened at St. Mark's before 1270, Christian did not know.

"I have been steward here for many many years," Alfred began, as if he knew Christian's thoughts. "I was steward a good 10 years before Malcolm arrived. Before, I was a knight like yourself, but when the old steward died, Lord Garrick had no one to replace him. I confessed I knew how to read and write and tally numbers. Lord Garrick gave me this duty." Alfred paused.

"I knew Malcolm's mother, the Lady Alyssa," Alfred continued, "the Earl's sister, and I know some...family secrets. And so does the Earl."

Alfred stared hard at Christian. "But do not repeat what you have heard here this day. Now, get you to the Great Hall, for I believe it is time for supper."

"Aye, Alfred." Christian bowed slightly to Alfred, then turned with a swoosh of his mantle, and left the steward's small chamber, headed for the Great Hall.

And the woman, a voice inside his head added.

Christian saw her re-enter the Great Hall with Una, and he saw Malcolm bow to her, and then wave his hand to dismiss Una. Christian saw that neither Una nor the woman was happy about that motion. When the woman and Malcolm reached the head table, Sir Robert, who was still visiting St. Mark's, stood up, and helped the lady into her seat. Why was he so drawn to this strange lady who dressed as a man?

As Christian poked at the pieces of meat with his knife in yesterday's trencher, he heard some of the knights noisily take their seats next to him.

"I have been witness to a feat of some importance," said a scruffy, dark-haired, unshaven, large knight called Roland.

Christian looked up.

"Aye?" he questioned.

"Aye," Roland responded. "When ye were out gettin' the Earl's taxes, Sir Robert yonder was practicing with the lady in red next to 'em."

"Practicing?" Christian almost choked on the piece of meat he'd just put in his mouth.

"Practicing. With those wooden swords. The lady was good, from what I could see."

"When was this?" Christian was pretending not to be interested. But he was very interested. He would have to witness this act for himself.

"The day ye rode out, the day ye came back, and then before the noon meal this day," Roland said slowly, as if thinking about it was a great task.

"Hmmm," was the blond knight's reply. Christian returned to picking the meat from the trencher, but couldn't help glancing up at the lady in red at the head table. Why was she seated there? She was an outsider, Christian knew. Any lady who fought with a sword and wore men's clothing was an outsider. *And not a lady either,* he amended the thought.

After a few more pieces of meat and a swallow of wine, he looked at the lady again. She was watching him. He wanted to put his head back down and stare at the trencher and pretend he was eating. He wanted to rip off a hunk of bread and soak up the gravy and stuff

it in his mouth so he really was eating. But she held his gaze, and he couldn't look down. Then Christian saw Sir Robert lean over to the lady and say something. She laughed, broke eye contact, and broke Christian's trance.

What was it about this lady? She was so unlike any other he knew. Christian thought, then cursed silently to himself. *No. I made a vow. Not after Lady Felice. I will honor my vows. I am a knight.*

It was a very good thing that Sir Robert said something to her at that moment. Her eyes were locked with Christian's. Those blue eyes held many secrets, and this time they told her of confusion. *Why was he so confused, and what about?* she wondered.

She'd seen him poking around in the trencher, and pretending to eat, and talking to the big knight that sat next to him. She thought she saw him watching her, so she watched him, and then their eyes met. In that brief moment that seemed like an hour, it felt as if someone put a spell on Sean. And then Sir Robert mentioned something about having another go at it, with armor and shields.

Sean laughed, and then turned to Robert.

"You have armor that I could wear?" Sean asked.

Robert motioned to the trestle table opposite Christian. At the end sat a young knight with short black hair who looked barely high school age to Sean.

"That is young Sir Owen. I believe the Earl has given permission for you to wear some of his armor that he is too large for," Robert explained.

"The Earl knows about our bouts?"

"Aye." This was from Malcolm. "He is aware of your practicing, and would like to see you out on the field. As would I, very much."

Sean was quiet as she thought. She'd gone to the Ren Faire several days ago to demonstrate this very thing. So why was she hesitant now? *Because these people know a hell of a lot more about it than you do*, she thought. But it wasn't those thoughts that spoke. She'd always been accused of being impulsive, and that was what spoke for her.

"Sure thing. Practice field after the morning meal or the noon meal?" she asked.

"After we break the fast." This from Sir Robert.

"After the noontime meal." This from Malcolm at the same time.

Sean thought about the past few practice times. She'd been on the field both times of day, and suggested,

"How about an hour after the morning meal. The field is not in the sun at that time, so neither of us will have an advantage in that regard." She turned to her challenger. "Sir Robert, would you like to use the practice swords, or the armor and steel swords, or shall I test you with the staff?"

"I believe we shall commence the original challenge with armor and the steel swords. I would like to see you use that sword you arrived here with," Sir Robert said. Malcolm nodded once, and then turned back to finish his meal.

"So, then, tomorrow, one hour after the morning meal on the practice field. Will I have a squire to assist with my armor?"

“But you are not a knight,” Malcolm said, more interested in eating at the moment, and finding that he was, in fact, interested in seeing if this woman could use her sword as she claimed. Malcolm had been told by his uncle that Sir Robert and Sean were using the practice fields, and it was the Earl who first suggested watching a practice session.

“I will assist you, Lady Sean,” Sir Robert said.

Sean thought she found some irony in that statement. She’d never worn armor before, because all the Guild’s sword fights and staff bouts were choreographed, and her and her “opponents” knew the moves to the dance. But this was serious. Using a real sword on the practice field seemed to remind Sean of a duel with pistols at dawn. She could get seriously injured. But, she had to remind herself, this was the Age of Chivalry, and because she was a woman, Sir Robert would stop before he would hurt her. Or so she hoped.

“If you best me at the sword on the morrow,” Sir Robert was saying between bites of meat, “I will accept your challenge of the staff.”

Sean looked up at Sir Robert from her side of the trencher she had somewhat been sharing with Malcolm. An odd thought surfaced, and she remembered the Robert in her own time gave her the staff she used when she first expressed interest in the staff fighting. She’d noticed her staff remained unmoved since her first night here, from where she’d left it leaning against the wall near the bed in the guest room.

“Lady Sean? Are you all right?” Sir Robert asked her.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she answered, still distracted by her thoughts.

“The tables are being cleared, for this supper is over.”

“Pardon me, Lady Seana,” Malcolm’s voice intruded in the conversation. Sean turned to Malcolm.

“My Lady aunt requests an audience with you in her solar. Shall I escort you there?”

“Ah, no, thank you, Sir Malcolm, for here comes Lady Una,” Sean replied, noting that Una had indeed risen from her seat and was walking towards the head table. Sean started to stand, Malcolm rose also, and Sir Robert stood to assist Sean. She noticed that Malcolm looked like he was scowling. *Was there something wrong with Sir Robert helping her?* Sean wondered. Had she violated some code of etiquette she was not aware of?

Lady Marta was an elegant woman. Her dresses were similar to the style that Sean was wearing, but the material seemed to be some sort of velvet, and the neckline and sleeves were trimmed with gold cording. Lady Marta's hair reminded Sean of the Lady Jessica's style in the original movie *Dune*, piled in two rolls on the top and back of her head, meeting in the center of her forehead in a point.

Una curtsayed to Lady Marta as they entered, and Sean did the same. Although the dresses were long and were made of yards and yards of too much fabric, Sean was adjusting to all that material, and it was easier to curtsy.

There were three women with Lady Marta in her solar, one poured her a goblet of wine. The other two were embroidering what looked like to Sean different parts of the same tapestry.

"I would like to be alone with Lady Seana," the mistress of St. Mark's said to the three women. Sean realized it was up to her to dismiss Una. *It's finally nice that someone allows me to dismiss Una myself*, she thought. Sean nodded at her lady, and Una left the solar, with the others, leaving Lady Marta and Sean alone.

Sean did not know why she was called here. She fidgeted, knowing that the first rule of an interview was that you were asked to have a seat; you didn't just sit down without permission. Sean was aware that Lady Marta had no idea about interviews, and it was probably more proper to stand in Lady Marta's presence.

Lady Marta gestured to the chair next to her where one of the women had been sitting moments before.

"Please, have a seat," Lady Marta motioned towards the wooden chair with the intricate carvings on the back.

Lady Marta's chair was at a desk that was directly under a small square south-east facing window. Now, the chair was turned with its back to the desk. The chair Lady Marta offered was at the countess' right side, yet facing her.

Once Sean was comfortable, Lady Marta looked her over. For a long while, she did not speak. Sean was growing uncomfortable. *This is the oddest "interview" ever*, she thought. Finally, the lady of the castle spoke. It was a soft, lilting, almost musical voice.

"Are you enjoying your stay here at St. Mark's?"

"Yes, I am. Everyone has been most hospitable."

"The Earl tells me of your practicing on the field with Sir Robert."

She knew too? Word spreads fast, Sean thought. "Yes, Lady Marta. We will meet again on the morrow." *On the morrow? Where did that come from?* Sean thought.

"I would like to see this. When is it to take place?"

"An hour after breakfast," Sean said. This was the most interesting conversation. And why would the *mistress* of the castle want to watch an armored practice session? Didn't the ladies embroider and sew and gossip? That was not for Sean. She didn't like talking about other people behind their back. Sean would rather be outside, working with her sword or her staff. When a bout was over, Sean felt as if all the stress had left her, and she was refreshed, renewed. And being here was certainly stressful for her.

Besides, whenever Sean had tried to sew anything by hand, she pricked her fingers with the needle. Sean even smiled a little at that thought.

“You are the one.” Lady Marta spoke, interrupting Sean’s musings.

“Excuse me?” Sean was taken aback. Marta smiled.

“I expected your coming.” *Now she’s being cryptic*, Sean thought.

“I’m sorry. I don’t understand.”

“I have the Gift of Prophecy. I saw that warrior woman would come and lift a great burden from one of the castellans,” she said, as if still in the trance that had predicted this future.

“Uhm, I hate to tell you this, but I’m not a warrior.”

“Ah, but you are, Sean. You have a man’s name, you fight like a man. In this day, that is a warrior. Maybe where you are from you are not a warrior. But here, you are. And someone here will find great happiness that you have arrived. I know not who it is, but you bring hope with you.” Marta was warmly smiling at Sean; Sean was ready to run out of the chair and desperately try to find a way back home.

“You don’t understand, Lady Marta. I don’t belong here. This isn’t my time.” As soon as she said those words, Sean wished she never spoke them. But Marta smiled again.

“Please, call me Marta, and I will call you Sean. I know you are not from this time. You are from the future.”

“Did your Gift tell you that?” Sean fought off the sarcastic edge. She thought all psychics were phonies, but there was something about Marta’s manner that rang true.

“No, it did not have to. The day you arrived, I touched your sleeve. I knew you were not from this time in that moment.”

“Did you know how I fight before the Earl told you of my practice sessions?” Sean was curious now.

“This window looks out onto the field. I have watched you and Sir Robert. You are very skilled.” Marta explained.

“So you don’t know who I’m supposed to bring hope to?”

“I know not. But there will be fire between the two of you, the Gift has revealed to me this much.”

“You won’t tell anyone I’m from the future? They’ll think I’m a witch,” Sean was concerned.

“My dear, if I were to tell even my most trust-worthy lady-in-waiting, the entire castle would think *me* a witch. You are the only one I have told about my visions. Your secret will stay with me. But there are those who suspect. Nephew Malcolm for one. That was most courageous on his part to accept you and introduce you as his cousin.” Marta sipped from her goblet, and offered it to Sean. Sean cupped the large vessel in her hands and sipped the contents. It was warm spiced wine.

“Fire?” Sean asked Marta. “You said your Gift showed you that there will be fire between me and this mysterious person. It must be a guy.”

“A ‘guy’? Your manner of speech will reveal that you are not from here. You should be careful, Sean.”

“A guy, a man. One of the knights, perhaps...” She let that thought trail off. *Christian?*

she thought, but dared not to suggest it. Marta would say the Gift hadn't revealed it to her.

"So, you believe I was sent here for a purpose?" Sean asked. At Marta's nod, Sean asked, "When I have fulfilled that purpose, lifted that burden, will I be sent back to my own time?"

Marta was quiet for a moment, accepted the wine goblet back, and leaned back in the chair. *This chair really was comfortable*, Sean thought. After a while of deep thought, Marta spoke in her melodic voice again.

"The Gift has not revealed that to me. But, I believe it will be your choice. *If* it is a man and you find love, returning would only break two hearts. I could not bear to have someone here, as I am fond of all the men as if they were my own family, have a broken heart."

"Christian," Sean said softly, placing the very few pieces together. The way he reacted when their eyes locked, the confusion and the hurt she saw in his eyes.

"I did not hear you," Marta said pleasantly. *This was her castle, her family*, Sean realized. If something was afoot within these walls, Marta would want to know, or already know, about it.

"Christian. He was hurt by a woman. I've seen it before." Sean supplied. The Robert of her time was burned by a woman. Stood him up on their wedding day. The tramp ran off and married Robert's best friend. Robert had confided that in Sean one night after a Guild Faire, after Robert had far too much wine. In the morning, he'd wished he'd never told Sean. And Robert vowed that he wouldn't be hurt like that ever again.

"You are very wise, Sean," Marta observed. "You must tell me more at a later time. It is late now, and you must have a good morning meal. Sir Robert is very good with a sword also. However," she smiled, "not good enough to win the joust at Michaelmas."

Marta rose, and offered her arm for support as Sean stood up from the chair. "I am certain we will find the ladies waiting outside, wanting to know what we were gossiping about. Asta is the worst. But I must tell you: if my Gift leads you to Christian, be alert for Asta, for she has venomous claws, and an eye for Sir Christian. *This I have seen.*"

"I will, M'La- Marta." Sean started to curtsy.

"Do not worry about formalities when it is only the two of us. You are a good person, Sean. I do like you. Good luck on the morrow, I may be there with the Earl and Cousin Malcolm." Marta opened the wooden door, and as predicted, Asta, and the two other women that were there after supper were just about leaning on the door, straining against it, no doubt, to hear what their mistress was saying to this outsider.

Una was the only one not by the door. She was leaning against the hallway opposite the doorway, and when she saw Sean, Una came forward.

"Ye were speaking for a long time. We were starting to wonder what ye were plotting in there," Una said, somewhat teasing, as Una walked with Sean back to the guest room.

"Plotting?" Sean raised her eyebrows. "No, we were not plotting. We were just talking. About women's things." Sean said. "I'd like to get some sleep now, Una. Please see that I am awake to break the fast with Sir Robert and Sir Malcolm. I'm sure you are aware of what will be happening tomorrow."

"I do not understand all your words, but I do know that ye and Sir Robert will be meeting on the practice field as men do in battle."

"Battle? No, no," Sean said, but then realized that Una meant they would be wearing

armor. “I understand you now, Una. I’m sorry. I know I sound odd to you,” Sean said by way of explaining her speech.

“However, it is late, and I am tired. I have a big day on the morrow, and would like to be refreshed.”

Una left Sean to go to her own bed, and Sean entered the dark guest room. Sean remembered the lighter she had in her rucksack. She searched for it blindly in the trunk since it was quite dark, and brought it out. She lit it to get her bearings in the room, and went over to the bed, where she sat down to light the taper in the holder on the night stand.

She had to return the lighter to its hiding place in her rucksack, else someone suspect the witchcraft she spoke of to Marta. Sean had to keep a close watch on that rucksack, as there were some damning things in there, should someone find it. Sean was surprised that Marta accepted Sean as she was. Marta was an extraordinary woman, and Sean had started to wonder if Marta hadn’t come from sometime in this time’s future to set something right with Lord Garrick. Maybe that was how Marta knew about time travel and its strange properties.

Sean took off her belt and pulled the red dress over her head. She fought the urge to just drop the dress on the floor and crawl into the bed, but instead stood up and took the dress over to the trunk and placed it on the top. Then Sean did crawl into the bed, under the covers, blew out the candle, and closed her eyes.

*Did I really say “on the morrow” **again**?* was the last thought before she fell asleep, thinking about the upcoming morning. What was happening here?

Seven

Breakfast looked like the previous night's bread, cheese, and wine. *What I wouldn't give for an Egg McMuffin*, Sean thought, reminded again of things from her own time, that she probably wouldn't have, ever again. Although this meal was less formal than the other two, Sean was still seated at the head table between Sir Malcolm and Sir Robert. Sir Malcolm sat to the right of the Earl, who sat on the left of Lady Marta.

Many of the places on the trestle tables still had remnants of breakfast where the knights and other of the Earl's men ate in a hurry and rushed off to morning chores. Of all the men, there were still two remaining at one table. Sean did not recognize the big bearded man, but she did know who the blond knight was. *Why is Christian here to watch me? He doesn't even know me. He's a thirteenth-century knight. I'm not his type. Why am I worried about all these people watching me? This is what I was to have done before I came here.*

It's Christian - she thought. Christopher was a bystander, not caring about sword fights, jousting, fencing, and staff fighting. Christian was a *knight*. This was part of his life. Even Sir Robert, Sir Malcolm and the Earl were all skilled fencers. Sean was skilled, but to her it was a hobby. To these men, it was a way of life. *What have I gotten myself into?*

Then again, she thought, *If I win this practice round, it may gain me some sort of respect that if I wear a sword, I know how to use it.*

"Lady Sean, are you still with us this morning?" It was Sir Robert, his voice breaking into her many thoughts, none of them telling her to actually back out of this. While it was not a real fight, she would be wearing armor, and someone could get hurt.

That morning, when Una had roused her while the sun was still rising, Sean grumbled something about a snooze button, and then became fully awake when Sean realized that it was Una waking her up. For her part, Una looked as if Sean had mumbled something in tongues, and looked at her Lady as if she had lobsters crawling out of her ears. Sean had dressed in the clothes she wore when she arrived, knowing that later she would be wearing a full suit of armor, something that might hinder her movements.

However, the armor Sir Robert later helped her don was only a padded vest of sorts, a chain mail tunic, a chain mail hood, and a helmet, which was too big for her. She noted briefly that it was her opponent who was trying to help her. But this was a friendly bout. Hopefully.

Robert seemed flustered helping Sean into her armor.

"Lady Sean, I cannot put this on for you. I suggest we ask young Owen to assist. It was his armor."

Sean looked over to the side of the field, where Owen and the bearded knight Sean met her first day here, Devlin, was, watching her. Owen was partially behind Devlin, as if hiding.

"Owen is quite shy of women. I think he is in awe of you, Lady Sean," Robert explained. Sean smiled then, and waved to Owen. He ducked behind Devlin again.

"Sir Owen, you know this armor better than I. Please assist me." Sir Robert called out. Slowly, his head bent down, his face and tips of his ears bright red, Owen approached them.

Sean smiled at the boy - that was the only way she could think of him, he seemed so young - and he gingerly helped with the padded vest and then the tunic.

The tunic was very heavy on Sean's shoulders, and she mentioned this to the two knights helping her.

"Your girdle may help with that," Owen spoke softly, reaching for her sword belt, and gingerly putting it around her waist for her. He adjusted the tunic over the belt, "blousing it," as Sean would have called it, and the weight was a bit less. It still weighed on her shoulders, and as she moved to the practice field, the heaviness and awkwardness of the tunic made her feel as if she were pregnant. She briefly wondered if she would actually ever feel that way.

"M'Lady," said Owen tentatively. "These are for you to keep. I own a new pair now, and I was hoping you would use these." He held out an old pair of well-used leather gauntlets. "They are in excellent condition still, M'Lady."

"Thank you, Sir Owen." Sean smiled as she took the gauntlets, and Owen helped her tie them on. Owen started to go back next to Devlin.

"Sir Owen?" Sean said. Owen stopped walking and turned back to Sean. "Please, call me Lady Sean."

"Lady Sean, then." Owen bowed, and then returned to his place on the side of the field.

She followed Robert to the practice field, surveying who was there to watch the bout. Lady Marta and Lord Garrick were seated on chairs brought by Christian and the bearded knight. *Which means Christian will be watching me. So why am I nervous?*

Sir Owen and Sir Devlin were there, and a few others of Malcolm's men were also on the grassy area. Sir Malcolm, of course, was there, standing with the rest of his men, all with curious looks on their faces.

There was the woman with white-blond hair, who Sean remembered was Lady Asta, seated next to Lady Marta, but Sean saw Lady Asta watching Christian's every move. Lady Marta had warned Sean about Asta. *So why was she here?* Sean wondered.

On the field, Sir Robert and Sean faced each other, her back to the onlookers, and he bowed to her slightly. Sean returned with a nod of her head. Then Robert raised his sword, and Sean did the same. Although she finally admitted to herself she really was nervous, she kept the sword steady.

From the first time their swords clashed, Sean felt that adrenaline rush she'd felt so many times before at bouts and demonstrations with the Guild. She felt alive, wonderful. She also highly suspected that Sir Robert's movements were carefully choreographed to match their earlier practices. *I'll take care of that,* she thought.

After what seemed like forever, but what was really about seven minutes of dancing back and forth with clashing steel, Sean started to rotate her direction. They danced and clashed, and thrust and parried, and after some time, Sean was now facing the watchers. A brief glance told her that Christian was watching just her, but she had to concentrate on the bout, and not getting sliced by a medieval Ginsu knife. She did notice that now Lady Asta was much closer to Christian than before.

Where did she learn to fight like that? Christian thought. *I must remember to ask Sir Robert. She handles the sword too well.*

So, the lady wasn't bluffing, Malcolm thought. This certainly was interesting, something to think on, and remember for later, should the need arise.

I like her, Lady Marta thought. If only my Kyra could learn from her. I'll speak to Kyra after the noontime meal. Lady Marta returned her attention to the field.

On the field, instead of stepping to the left, Sean feinted to the right. Although Sir Robert quickly caught Sean's feint, it wasn't soon enough. Sean stepped toward Sir Robert, and one of her slashes caught the base of his sword. Sir Robert's sword went flying in the air, and Sir Robert was staring face to face with Sean.

Who had a triumphant grin on her face.

"Well done," he told her, returning the smile.

"Not bad for wearing an empathy belly." She still smiled.

"Beg pardon?" Sir Robert asked.

"Nothing to worry about, Sir." Sean sheathed her sword, and retrieved Sir Robert's for him. When she returned it handle first, Lady Marta rose from her seat and applauded. Quite a crowd had amassed during the bout. It was unheard of for a woman to fight this way. But now that the spectacle was over, the crowd was dispersing.

"Well done, Lady Sean," Marta said warmly.

"I am amazed, Lady Seana," Lord Garrick rose after his wife, and joined the complement.

"Remarkable," Sean thought she heard Malcolm say. Asta was quiet, giving Sean a good looking-over. Sean looked for Christian, to know what *he* thought. She saw him and the other knight returning to the castle with the seats they brought for the lord and ladies.

She resisted the urge to call out to him and follow him. She had no reason to do that. After all, why would he care anyway? She was an outsider. He was a knight. Sir Malcolm and Lady Asta returned to the castle, following far behind the two knights.

"Lady Sean?" It was Sir Robert.

"Sorry. Lost in thought."

"Do you find your thoughts comforting? You visit them quite frequently," Sir Robert observed.

Sean glanced at Lady Marta, and then looked back at Sir Robert.

"Not really. I don't really want to talk about it, either," she said softly. Sean lifted her voice a little, and said, so Lady Marta and Lord Garrick might hear,

"I would like a tour of the estate sometime today. Perhaps after the noon meal?"

"Certainly, dear." said Marta. "Now, I would allow Sir Robert to help you remove your armor, Lady Sean."

"Aye, M'Lady," Sean chuckled. This was probably what Sir Robert was going to ask anyway. She smiled. Somehow, this small group of people accepted her for who she was, no questions asked. And in this era, that was asking a lot. But it made Sean feel wonderful.

As Lord Garrick, Lady Marta, Sir Robert, and Sean entered into the Great Hall, there was a loud applause. The entrance to the hall was at the end where the trestle tables were, so the four had to pass everyone seated there to get to the head table. As they passed by, Sean and Sir Robert received nods from those seated.

Sean looked to the other trestle table, opposite from where they entered the great hall. The bearded knight was there, but Christian was not. Why should she worry about where he

was? Was she seeking his approval? Then again, maybe he wasn't hungry, or had chores to attend to.

Sir Robert escorted Sean to her seat next to Malcolm. Malcolm did not look pleased. Was there something she was doing wrong? Sean wondered. Other than the obvious.

Sean felt a nudge from Sir Robert, but when she turned to her right, Lady Asta was leaning across Sir Robert to get Sean's attention.

"Stay away from him," she hissed.

"From who?" Sean returned, confused. She'd never said anything to this woman, and now she was being warned against someone.

"From him. I have seen you watching. I have seen your stares. He is mine." Lady Asta still sounded like she was hissing.

"Sir Christian?" From what Sean could tell, Christian didn't belong to anyone.

"Stay away from him, else you will regret it." Lady Asta started to turn back to her noontime meal.

Sir Robert now leaned forward, having had this cat fight taken place right in front of him.

"Ladies," he said, looking mostly at Asta as he spoke, "we are enjoying our noon meal, let's not let this pettiness spoil this meal." Glancing hard at Asta, he then turned back to his left, towards Sean, leaned over and whispered,

"They say Asta's mind is not right. I would proceed with caution."

"But I didn't do anything," she said quietly back to him. He sat up and spoke as soft as Sean.

"If she suspects you of something, I would be cautious nonetheless. I am starved. Let us eat."

Sean had to smile at that. She looked toward Lord Garrick, but could not avoid Malcolm's gaze.

"You acted unwise this morn, Lady Seana," Malcolm said. He was about to speak again when a trencher of stew was placed in front of him.

"We will discuss this later. This is not a good time." Malcolm turned towards the Earl, denying Sean her portion of the meal. Some code of chivalry *this* knight had.

She felt a hand on hers, and turned to see Sir Robert offering some of his stew.

"Thank you, Sir Robert, but I don't think I am hungry after all." She stood up, and as she rose, Una stood at her place, ready to assist Sean. Sean shook her head, and Una sat back down.

"I'd like to be alone for a while," she told Sir Robert, but hoped that Malcolm heard her as well.

As she left the Great Hall, she vaguely noticed not all of the knights were at their seats, probably having eaten already, and on guard on the wall.

Sean left the castle, and for the first time in the week she'd been there, walked around the grounds. She was wearing her modern clothing, what she'd worn under the padding and the chain mail, and she was still wearing the leather gauntlets Owen had given her. They were comfortable, much more so than the ones she had made.

She had to find a way to get back to her own time. Although there were people here who didn't ask her questions, there were those who looked at her as if she were an outcast. In a

way, she was, but the only one who knew the truth was Lady Marta. She did not belong here, yet there was nothing at home for her, either.

If she were to find a way to return home, she would have a difficult time deciding if she really did want to return. What was Christopher to her now? A friend of her brother's. Chris had been distant in the past few months, and now Sean could see that he wasn't happy in the relationship. She knew he insulted her Guild friends and functions, and she wanted someone to accept her as she was, warts and all. Gads, that was cliché-ish, she thought.

Her wanderings brought her to a part of the estate she'd never seen before. It was a sort of stable, for birds. *The mews*, she told herself. There was a voice coming from inside. Sean stepped in to look.

"Snowy," Christian called, holding up a gauntleted arm for the white falcon.

"Hi," Sean said tentatively. Like Owen was shy around women, Sean felt uncharacteristically shy around Christian. Christian turned towards her.

"Good day, M'Lady," he said, bowing, and then turning back towards the bird. "I cannot retrieve her this noon. I know not why." he told her, and then smiled at her. *Why was she here?* he asked himself. *She knows nothing of me, yet I think on her more than I should.*

He smiled at me. Good God, what a smile, Sean thought. He's not Christopher, I don't know why I ever would have thought that. Other than looks, this knight is nothing like the Chris I know.

On a whim, she raised her forearm out toward the bird, who was screeching, flying near the mesh ceiling of the mews. Surprisingly, Snowy landed on her gauntlet.

Eight

Christian was somewhat shocked as he watched Snowy land on this woman's forearm. This was remarkable because Snowy never went to anyone else before. This was also disconcerting to Christian because it was, after all, *this* woman.

Now, however, he had more of a reason to speak with her. He was Sir Malcolm's second, and as Second-in-Command, he had every right to question why she was here, and demand her to turn over her sword. But after watching her earlier that day against Sir Robert, he wondered if now was the time to see how good she really was.

The night before, Sir Robert and Christian had been in the Great Hall after Lady Sean had excused herself to get some sleep. Over a few mugs of ale, Robert had confided in Christian Sean's ability.

"She is good, Christian. And this is only from what I know of the practice swords. In the morning, I shall see how good she is with steel. However, I do expect to best her in the morn."

How wrong Robert was, Christian now thought. Although before he and Robert parted ways for the night, Robert had suggested to Christian that *he* ought to try a bout against Lady Sean. Christian had laughed at the idea then, but now he was seriously considering it.

"Snowy likes ye," he said to a smiling Sean.

"I think so too," Sean responded. How was she supposed to act in a situation like this? This was all new to her, and even though he looked like Christopher, this was someone completely different. He was a knight. And from what she could tell of him from observations, he was carrying more of a burden than he should be.

"I am Sir Christian, at your service, M'Lady." He remembered his manners and bowed to her.

"I'm Seana Kelly, but please call me Sean." She attempted to curtsy wearing her leggings.

"I have heard ye called Lady Sean," he said. "So that is how I will address ye."

"Yeah, I guess that's the best I can do here," she muttered.

Christian noticed the falcon was becoming restless, and he offered to take Snowy from her. He offered Snowy a piece of meat in reward. As he removed the falcon from her gauntlet, his hand brushed hers. Unlike his, callused and rough, hers was the soft skin of a woman. Which was not surprising, since she was a woman. But Christian was not expecting her to have soft hands. He was expecting them to be similar to his. But maybe her life wasn't as hard as his had been.

"From where do ye hail?" he asked over his shoulder, as he returned Snowy to her post.

"Well, uhm....far away from here. A long journey, I would imagine." It was the best Sean could tell him, even though she wanted to tell him everything.

What was she hiding? he thought. He recalled that Malcolm said Devlin spotted her, unescorted, on the castle grounds the day of the Michaelmas Faire. He also remembered Malcolm saying something about her asking the year, and being very confused once she learned this. There was more to her than what she was telling.

As to what Alfred asked him to keep alert for, Christian really couldn't do anything until it

was time to collect taxes again, and that wouldn't be until at least Yuletide.

But something strange was happening to him. The more he watched her walk around and coo at the birds in the mews, the more his hatred of Lady Felice started to diminish. *Did Lady Sean have this calming affect on everyone?* he wondered. This was very strange to him. Especially after Felice left *him* at the altar to marry his eldest brother, Victor, Christian vowed he would never love again.

He joined then-Prince Edward on a crusade in North Africa, and stayed with the Prince until Edward was crowned August of the previous year. And in that year, Christian found peace among the birds at St. Mark's.

"Lady Sean," he said to her. She looked away from a brown-and-tan falcon to look up at him.

She smiled, disarming Christian. He stammered,

"I, ah, 'tis not of all that import, Lady Sean." Then he continued, rushing to get the words out.

"I, ah, could we. . . this is something I am not able to say properly. Sir Robert told me yestereve he intended to best ye this morn. It was somewhat bragging I should think. What I am asking, my lady, is that I, as Second in Command, should see for myself how skilled ye are with the sword."

There, he thought. I said it. I'm certain she will refuse. And then I can return to my birds.

"Sure," he heard her say. What did "shur" mean? He looked at her, confused.

She smiled again, her smile threatening Christian's every vow he'd ever made.

"Yes, Sir Christian, I would like to test my sword skills with you. However, it may have to wait, as I have promised to best Sir Robert with my fighting staff."

"Ye did?" Christian asked, his eyebrows rising.

"Aye, I did. It was part of the deal."

"Deal?"

"Yesterday, when Sir Robert suggested the challenge with steel swords, he said if I bested him with the swords, he would accept my challenge with the staff." Sean was silent while Christian seemed to process the information. Then she said,

"You were talking to Sir Robert about me?"

"Aye, milady. Robert was quite in his cups when he insisted he would best ye this morn. I have not the heart to remind him of what he said."

"In his cups?" Sean repeated, surprised. From what little she knew of Robert, she did not think of him as one to drink to excess. Christian smiled, his eyes seemed to twinkle. It was as if talking to Sean seemed to take away his pain and hurt that Sean saw in his eyes. Her Chris once told her that pain and hurt were behind her eyes, and she never knew what that meant until she met Christian.

She didn't know exactly why her Chris had said that, maybe it sounded romantic. She'd had other boyfriends, and some were jerks who left her, but in most cases, they'd just grown apart from each other. As her and Chris Marks had been doing.

Sean returned the smile.

"I - " Sean started to say she should return to the castle.

“Mayhap - ” Christian was about to ask if they could meet on the practice field the next day.

Sean giggled. Many of her good friends were men, and she felt comfortable around them. With Christian, it seemed different. *No*, she told herself, *it was different*. Different time, different culture, different everything. Christian motioned for her to speak.

“I should be getting back to the castle. They’ll be wondering where I am,” Sean said, regretting she had to leave Christian. She felt more comfortable around him than a few days ago. And from where she stood, he felt less uneasy around her.

Christian nodded.

“Ye mean Sir Malcolm will be wondering where ye are.” Christian suggested, smiling.

“Well, actually, yes. He does seem to think I’m the suspicious sort. He hinted that we are near Sherwood Forest,” she confided.

Christian made a noise that got caught in his throat. Then he did it again. Sean looked up at him, hoping he wasn’t choking. Then she smiled when she realized he was laughing. It was stifled at first, but then it turned into pure laughter. Sean started laughing too.

Between tears and laughing, Christian asked her,

“Sir Malcolm thought ye an outlaw?” He roared with laughter this time. Sean was still laughing as well. She had to admit it was pretty funny.

“Well, he didn’t say it in as many words, but yes,” Sean said.

Christian stopped laughing, and dabbed at the corners of his eyes with the back of his hand. It felt strange to him, not having laughed in many years, but it felt good. He liked it. And he was starting to like this Lady Sean.

Sean turned to leave the mews.

“Lady Sean?” Christian asked. “In the morn, might we be able to meet on the practice fields?”

Sean smiled as she turned around.

“Yes,” she said. “After we break the fast, I’ll meet you there.” She left the mews and returned to the castle.

Christian was still smiling by the time the evening meal was served.

“What’re ye grinnin’ at like a loon?” asked Morgan, a knight about the same height as Christian. Morgan sat at Christian’s left, while Roland took his place at Christian’s right for the evening meal.

“‘Tis naught,” Christian muttered to Morgan. Morgan looked similar to Christian, except his hair, while the same length, was black as night. And he had a scar that started at his temple and ended at his jaw. Everyone said he’d gotten into a fight and killed a man. Morgan figured it was better than what really happened, so he never said anything. He wasn’t about to admit he was well besotted and was fooling around with his own knife a bit too close for comfort.

“Naught, eh?” Morgan asked, taking his seat, and then taking a large gulp of the ale in his mug. “Don’t think we haven’t seen ye.”

“Seen me? What are ye blathering about? Have ye had enough ale, Morgan?”

“This is my first mug of ale. I’ve seen the way ye look upon the woman at the head table. Malcolm told us she was ‘is cousin. Somehow, I reckon not.”

“Why do ye say that?” Christian asked, sounding neutral. Or leastways he hoped he did. Christian knew just from listening to Lady Sean’s accent alone and talking with her that afternoon, she was not even from England. *Where, then, was she from? he wondered. And how far a journey?*

“‘Tis most obvious from the way she fights. I have never seen a lady use a sword,” Morgan clarified. “And ye, Sir Christian, ought to see if she’s a foe with that to us.”

Christian gulped down a piece of venison.

“What would ye have me do?” Christian was quite curious now. Morgan had to have been at the bout after the morning meal that day.

“Have a bout with her, same at Sir Robert yonder. Think she is fancy on ‘im?” Morgan asked, indicating that Robert and Sean were in a deep discussion at the head table.

I hope not, Christian thought. Then, *where did that thought come from?*

“I know not,” he answered truthfully. “Sir Morgan,” Christian turned to face the man who was speaking with him, “I will be meeting with the Lady Sean in the morning on the practice fields to do exactly what ye requested of me. Is that to your liking?”

“Aye, ‘tis, Sir Christian. I should have known ye’d be a step ahead of me.” Morgan turned back to his meal.

Christian turned his attention back not to his meal, but to Lady Sean and Sir Robert. Lady Sean had changed her clothing from the afternoon when they met. Now she was wearing a kirtle of dark green with gold trim around the collar and sleeve edges. He looked at the two of them, deep in conversation, and thought about what Morgan asked him. *Was Lady Sean sweet on Sir Robert?*

Christian felt an unflattering emotion stir inside of him, and he did not like it one bit. Jealousy.

“After the noon meal, we must look for a staff for you for our challenge,” Sean was saying to Robert.

“We shan’t have to look very far, Lady Sean, as I have a staff already,” Sir Robert explained. “I use it mainly to aid me when I walk long distances. ‘Tis quite useful.”

Wow, Sean thought, *a walking stick in the Middle Ages. It’s true what they say: You learn something new every day.*

“It’s sturdy, and will hold up to combat?” she asked.

“I believe so,” Robert replied, moving bits of venison to the side of his trencher for Sean.

“Where is Sir Malcolm tonight?” Sean asked. “I haven’t seen him since the noontime meal.”

“I know not,” Robert said, finishing his portion, taking a swallow of ale, and then wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

Sean looked up, glanced around the room, and then looked toward Christian.

Just in time to see him glare at her, get up from his chair, and stalk out of the hall.

“Nay, I cannot ‘collect taxes’ before it is time, my lord,” Malcolm told the well-dressed man who sat on a large throne in his own Great Hall at Grenville, a few hours ride from St. Mark’s. “If I collect anything before Yule, someone is bound to get suspicious.”

“This is not satisfactory, Sir Malcolm,” said the Duke of Grenville. “You know Grenville will be yours when I do pass on.” The Duke rose, and strode - waddled, Malcolm thought was more accurate - towards Malcolm. Grenville had no children who would inherit, so he enlisted the services of Sir Malcolm. Malcolm was to be the Duke’s heir as long as his services were satisfactory to the Duke. And he would then inherit the Duke’s estate and possessions when Grenville passed away

Which ‘twill be soon, I am certain, Malcolm thought but did not dare say aloud. The Duke was too large in size for his own good. His hall had several mirrors, which the Duke did like to admire his reflection in.

Grenville was not a rich town, not until the Duke summoned Malcolm to help him restore it. Now, the people were no longer starving, and there was money in the coffers. All on the part of Malcolm and a few of his knights.

“‘Tis the start of October, Sir Malcolm. Collect yer Earl’s taxes in three weeks time,” the Duke said, stopping in front of a full floor-to ceiling mirror to admire his paunch. Malcolm inwardly groaned in disgust. Grenville continued, “Tell the people it is for the good of all souls, that if they give, they will be rewarded with prosperity; and if they do not, they will have fallow land come spring. Make up what ye will. I want that money!”

He rubbed his sausage-like fingers together, watching himself in yet another mirror, as if feeling the money already.

Malcolm backed away in deference.

“Aye, my lord.”

Sean watched Christian leave the Great Hall, torn between just watching him leave and going after him. They seemed to have clicked that afternoon, and now she couldn't figure him out.

Maybe he needed time to sort out all they had spoken about. It was good to hear someone laugh. Sean had tried relating funny stories to Christopher, but all her stories were Guild-related, and Chris wanted nothing to do with that.

But if Sean followed him, there was bound to be gossip, especially from Asta. Sean didn't need that woman's venom, nor did she need enemies. Unknowing if Sean would remain in this time, or suddenly return to her own time as quickly as she arrived here, she decided it would be best to have no enemies. That was something to avoid, too.

She thought back over their conversation in the mews. Hopefully, she had said nothing to offend him. And now, at dinner - *That was it*, Sean thought. He'd seen her talking to Robert, and Christian had been talking to a knight with dark hair that could have been Christian's brother right before he glared at her.

What had that knight told Christian? She briefly wondered about the rumors about her if she asked the knight himself, but then decided against it. It probably wouldn't be proper.

Again, she fought the urge to seek out Christian, even under the pretense of confirming they would meet on the practice field. Sean would have to take the chance that Christian would be there after the morning meal for a practice with wooden swords. But for now, she turned back to Sir Robert before he retired for the evening.

"Sir Robert, when shall we have this challenge?" she inquired.

He thought for a moment.

"In two days time, after the morning meal. That should give us time to ready ourselves."

"As you wish," she smiled, and reached for her goblet to finish her wine. Sean scanned the trestle tables, caught Una's eye, and nodded to her, and Una hastened to her side. Sean got up from the table and then leaned back to Robert.

"The staff is my forté," she told him.

"Forté?" asked Robert, not knowing this word.

"My strong point," Sean explained, then was silent for a moment before adding, "Next time you and Sir Christian talk about me, please invite me. I do love to hear others brag," she smiled.

Robert turned in his seat to face her, a stern look on his face.

"I do hope you know of what you speak, Lady Sean. One might think that was a threat of sorts."

"Oh, no," she said, smiling again, really wishing she was speaking to Christian and not Robert. "'Tis all a jest. I hope."

Robert smiled at her then, yet somewhat wary of how she knew about him and Christian talking of the bout they fought just that morn. He'd spoken with Christian the previous night. How had she known?

"My lady? I would walk with you," Robert stood up.

Una started to speak.

"It's okay. Una. You may accompany us," Sean allowed.

“How is it that you know I spoke with Sir Christian last eventide?” Robert asked.

“I spoke with Sir Christian this afternoon,” she replied.

“After our bout, no doubt.” Robert stated. “What did he have to say?”

“Just that you were certain to best me, is all, Sir Robert.”

Robert smiled.

“’Tis the first time Sir Christian has passed along gossip. I had not thought he would do that.” Robert was still smiling, seemingly pleased his friend would say that sort of thing. And to Lady Sean, of all people. There was hope for Christian yet, Robert realized.

Robert first met Christian on Prince Edward’s Crusade, and it was on crusade they learned to trust each other. Robert had also learned of the Lady Felice and Christian’s vow. Christian was resolved to never lose his heart to a woman, only to have her break it again. But this was not for Robert to tell. This was Christian’s story, and only he would be the one to relate it.

“Sir Robert? You find your thoughts comforting?” Sean asked, intruding into Robert’s thoughts.

“Some of the time, Lady Sean,” Robert replied, smiling, realizing she’d used his words of earlier that day.

“Mistress?” This was from Una, behind them.

“Yes, Una?” Sean asked.

“We should be returning. ’Twill soon be dark,” she pointed out.

Sean looked at where they were. They were a good distance now from the castle, almost back to the forest where Sean arrived. Was something subconsciously leading her back there?

“Lady Sean?” This was Robert’s voice. Sean was quiet.

“I know this place. This was where I arrived,” she muttered.

“I did not hear you, Lady Sean,” Robert said.

“Not important. Never mind. Yes, let’s return.” Sean said, decisively.

“Mistress?” This was Una again, while they were on the way back to the castle. Sean looked back at Una and nodded for her to continue.

“Was there reason we have walked here, if I may be so bold to ask.”

“It’s fine, Una, ask me whatever you want. I don’t know how or why we ended up here. I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going,” Sean explained. After her practice with Christian - if he showed - she would have to return to the wooded area to see what drew her there.

It was nearly dark by the time they returned from their walk. Being an early October evening, and the fact that dusk was just starting to fall when they set out, the darkness was no surprise.

Malcolm was there to greet them at the entrance to the great hall.

He nodded in greeting at Robert, then started to dismiss Una.

“No,” Sean stopped him. “I wish it for Una to remain with me.”

“As you wish, milady,” Malcolm said, and she could tell by his voice he was not happy that Una was staying, and that Sean had spoken against him.

“You missed an evening meal of quite delicious venison, Sir Malcolm,” Sean said, trying to

make conversation.

“M’Lady, I will begin the conversations here. You should not speak until you are spoken to.” Sean just glared at him, “Now then,” he continued. “I understand you had an unescorted tour of the estates earlier this day?”

“Yes, Sir Malcolm,” Sean answered properly. She wished they were at least sitting at a table, and not standing just inside the entryway of the hall.

“Was there anything of import in your journey?” he asked, trying to sound merely curious.

At that question, Sean knew what he was asking. What did Malcolm care if she saw Sir Christian? “What do you mean by ‘import,’ Sir?” Sean asked, playing the innocent.

“You saw my second-in-command, did you not?” he demanded.

“And what if I did?” she challenged.

“Do not be insolent with me, Lady Seana. You saw him, and I must know what you spoke about.”

You could ask him yourself, she thought, but decided against riling Malcolm any further. “May I ask why this is important?” was what she asked, her voice softer now, no longer challenging.

“Before the evening meal, he was happy. Milady, do you know when the last time was Sir Christian had happiness?”

“A long time ago,” she murmured, and Malcolm heard.

“Now, he is as he has been. What did you say to him?” Malcolm asked again, this time not as demanding.

“Sir Christian thought, as your second-in-command, he would like a bout on the practice field to know my level of skill.”

“Aye, this is Sir Christian. You bested Sir Robert this morn. Not a wise move, however. Sir Robert is the Earl of Lincoln’s champion.”

“As Sir Christian is Earl of St. Mark’s champion,” Sean observed.

“Correct, milady,” Malcolm was pleased she was learning her place at St. Mark’s.

“I am to meet with Sir Christian on the practice field in the morning after we break the fast, Sir Malcolm. He has not changed his mind, I trust?”

“Aye, he will be there. It has been said that he wishes to challenge you much like the challenge of Sir Robert.”

“And if I best him?” Sean mused aloud.

“You will not,” Malcolm assured her.

“Supposing I do,” Sean suggested.

“Will you accept my challenge?” Malcolm asked.

Sean was silent for a moment.

“Ah, Lady Seana, you are not so confident now?” Malcolm asked, with an air of superiority.

He will be an easy opponent, then, Sean thought. Aloud, she responded, “Captain of the Guard, as you wish. Should I best Sir Christian in our challenge, I will accept *your* challenge, milord.”

Malcolm smiled then, the first time Sean had seen him do that. She didn’t realize he had it in him to show humor. He was always serious, and that, she supposed, was why he was Captain of the Guard.

“Lady Sean, please continue on your way, since you are meeting with Sir Christian on the field on the morrow.” He spun on his heel and went through the hall into the kitchens. If only Grenville hadn’t kept him so long, he wouldn’t have missed the evening meal. But soon, Malcolm grinned wickedly. Soon, he would have two titles, and two estates. Soon.

“’Tis so exciting, Lady Sean!” exclaimed Una on the way to the guest room. Una led the way, as Sean was still trying to learn her way around the castle. After all, Sean thought, what would be the point of learning her way around if she were to return to her own time?

The countess’s words came back to her then, “*If it is a man and you find love, returning would only break two hearts.*” Sean was certain it was Christian. She needed to know what happened. It seemed like it was something important to him.

“What’s exciting, Una?” Sean asked, her mind occupied on wondering if this time travel concept worked in such away that she could go to sleep one night in 1275, and the next morning be back in her own time. That would be devastating, as she had begun to grown fond of Una, and Sir Robert, and Lady Marta. And especially Christian.

“Ye’r practicing with Sir Christian. They say he has never spoken to a maiden since he’s been the earl’s knight.”

“Never?” Sean’s curiosity was piqued.

“Never a word. If ye was a maiden, he rightly ignored ye.”

“What about Lady Asta?”

“Lady Asta? Who told ye that?” Una was shocked, although to Sean it looked as if Una was about to burst out in laughter. Sean smiled at Una, and a small giggle came forth.

“Well, I was just wondering, is all. She seemed, uhm, friendly towards him this morn at the challenge with Sir Robert,” Sean pointed out.

Una leaned into Sean, as if about to impart a great secret. They were just about at the guest room; Sean was starting to recognize the hallways.

“They say she has no mind,” Una whispered.

“You mean she lost it?” Sean whispered back.

“Yes,” Una responded in kind. The two women were giggling by the time they reached the guest room door.

“Will ye be wanting a bath, Lady Sean?”

“Ah, no thanks, Una. I will be okay for tonight. Please wake me in time for the morning meal?” Sean requested.

“Aye, Lady Sean.” Una nodded her head. “Have pleasant dreams, milady.” Una practically skipped towards the bower. Sean watched her go down the corridor, and then she turned for the guest room door.

The past few days, she’d been careful about her lighter, and did not use it. She knew privacy seemed to be somewhat of an unknown here, and she never knew if someone would see her using her lighter. And, it was disposable, so once it was empty, it was useless. She reached for one of the torches that lined the hallway.

A hand stopped her. The lady Sean turned to face was all in white: her dress, her hair piece, and her hair was almost white. Lady Asta.

“Watch it!” Sean exclaimed, “I could have dropped this on me!” she said, meaning the torch.

Asta just smiled.

“All the better.” Asta said, still smiling. *It was really quite wicked*, Sean thought. *Let me*

guess, Sean was thinking, *she's here to warn me away from Christian again.*

"Sir Christian is *mine*," Asta said, emphasizing the last word. Sean nodded to herself. *Score one for me*, she thought, and smiled.

"I didn't realize you could own a person, Lady Asta," Sean said softly.

"I knew you would be trouble. Sir Christian is in love with me," she said, returning to her hissing sound from the afternoon meal.

"That's interesting," Sean said sweetly. "I've heard that he hasn't spoken to any of the maidens since he came to St. Mark's."

"Until you got here." Asta accused.

"He didn't even speak to me until today," Sean pointed out.

"He is mine," Asta repeated.

"Why don't you ask Sir Christian who he belongs to," Sean retorted.

"You will stay away from him, and do not tempt him," Asta warned.

"Well," Sean said casually, "that's gonna be kinda hard." She took the torch this time and opened the guest room door. Lady Asta followed as Sean entered the room; Sean lit the taper on the night stand, and put the torch on a rack in the room.

"What say you?" Asta asked.

"I said, I cannot stay away from Sir Christian."

"Yes you can, and you will."

"And what if I don't?" Sean was purposely leading her. It was dangerous, Sean knew, but she wanted to see if there really was a threat, or just idle words.

"Sir Malcolm will send you away," Asta threatened.

"Really?" Sean raised her eyebrows. "Well, in the morning, I will be meeting Sir Christian on the practice fields," she told Asta.

"What say you?" Asta asked.

"You said that already, Lady Asta. Sir Christian has asked me to meet him on the fields for a practice match."

Sean watched the knowledge slowly creep into Asta's eyes. Suddenly, Asta widened her bright blue eyes.

"As with Sir Robert?" she asked.

Sean nodded. "Just think of me as one of the guys," she explained.

"One of the guys?" Asta repeated.

"Yeah, as in, I'm one of the knights, and I practice with them?"

"You are a disgrace to womankind, Lady Seana," Asta said.

"I'm sure I am. If you will, Lady Asta, please return the torch to its post in the hall. I must get a good rest if I am to practice after the morning meal."

Lady Asta realized this...*outsider* had just dismissed her. In a huff, she took the torch from the wall in the guest room and started towards the door.

"You have not heard the last from me," Asta warned. "This is not over, Lady Seana. I will be back." *Asta seemed to be threatening a lot*, Sean thought.

"Ooooooh," Sean said to the closed door once Asta had left the guest room. "Dumb blonde," Sean muttered, taking off the green dress and draping it over the trunk. She kept her chemise on, to use as night wear. She still had her bra and panties, and still wore the

panties, but lately she'd been keeping the bra inside her rucksack which usually found it's way to the bottom of the trunk. Her leggings and blouse she kept right on top inside the trunk, along with the gauntlets from Owen.

She made sure the bar that locked the door was in its place in the hooks, particularly so Asta couldn't come in in the middle of the night. It took her a long time to fall asleep that night. She was thinking of Christian's laugh that afternoon, and how good it sounded.

Sean was barely functioning when Una summoned her for the morning meal. Although she didn't let the snooze button comment slip again, Sean would have liked a snooze button. More sleep would have done wonderfully, since she'd been up most of the night, thinking about Christian.

Ugh, she thought, *the practice is going to be interesting*. There were muscles that Sean thought she had conditioned, but apparently they hadn't listened because her whole body ached from her challenge the previous morning with Robert.

She would take it easy this day on the field, maybe let Christian win a few...

He had no reason to be jealous.

Christian kept telling himself that over and over until it became almost a mantra. Tossing aside the fur that kept him warm at night, he sat up on the pallet where he slept in the barracks.

He had slept in just his braies the previous night, and now stuffed his feet in his boots, stood up, and pulled on a white woolen undershirt, and then the tunic he'd worn the night before. He retrieved his sword from the bed next to where he'd been lying, and now buckled it at his waist.

From the other end of the barracks, he picked up two wooden swords, since this was only a practice day. But he'd told some of the men the previous night, including Morgan, that he would like to witness first hand her skill with the steel. There were nods and grunts of approval, but as Christian was trying to sleep, he thought he heard some of the men talking about him and Lady Sean, and he wished they would return to the Great Hall if they were going to be bawdy about it.

It had taken him quite a while to get to sleep that night. He was thinking about Lady Sean, and something he thought he had locked away inside. Laughter. It felt good to laugh.

Now, holding the wooden swords so they rested up on his shoulder, he walked to the practice field. *Would she be there this morn?* he thought. He had seen her as he left the Great Hall the previous night, and knew she saw him leave.

Part of him had wished she followed him. Then he wouldn't have had to spend the night in the company of the men. He would have been able to laugh again, he knew. But had she followed after him, there would be talk. And Lady Asta would have something to say about it, too. Christian had decided a long time ago he did not like Lady Asta. Her personality was like her looks: pale. *There didn't appear to be much to her*, Christian thought. *Lady Sean*, he thought, *now there is someone with depth. She certainly was a mystery.*

Christian heard a faint grumble and realized he hadn't broken the fast, and the morning meal was just about ending. He could always get something from the kitchens after the practice.

He saw her on the practice field from a distance away. She was wearing something red, then as he got closer, he realized it was a kirtle. She was dueling with an invisible opponent with her sword, and moving about quite well for wearing all that material, even though some of it was hiked up in her belt. As he came upon the field, he noticed that Lady Una was just outside the practice area, as was Sir Malcolm.

From a distance away, a figure in white hurried towards the field. Christian groaned inwardly when he realized who the new arrival was. It was Lady Asta.

Sean looked up, and noticed Christian had arrived at the field. Seeing him again made her blood race. She'd always thought Chris Marks had a body to die for, and that could have been her unconscious reason for staying with him. That, and the sex was great. Other than that, a piece of corrugated cardboard had more personality than Chris.

It was then Sean had noticed that Lady Asta arrived at the practice field. *Was she going to join in with her claws?* Sean wondered. Lady Asta was again wearing white, and her skin looked pale and washed out against the light colored dress. Almost flat. *Hmm*, Sean thought maliciously, *I wonder how Chris Marks and Lady Asta would be as a couple?* She almost laughed aloud at the thought.

"Something has made you smile." Christian observed once he was next to Sean.

"It's silly," she said by way of dismissing her evil thought.

"Silly?" he asked, arching his brow.

Sean wasn't sure if she'd done it again, used a word that hadn't been invented yet.

"'Twas a jest, 'tis all," she said.

"If you please," he said, slightly bowing to her, handing her a wooden sword, "I wish to know your jest."

Sean sheathed her own sword while she thought for a moment.

"I knew someone," she began, choosing her words carefully. "Who was as interesting as the flat of this sword," she said, indicating the wooden sword she was just handed. "And I was thinking he might be a match for the Lady Asta."

Christian smiled broadly. From Sean's vantage, it looked as if he would start laughing again.

"Lady Sean, 'twould appear we think the same thoughts. I was thinking Lady Asta to be as sharp as these wooden swords," he explained.

Sean just looked up at him, then lost control and started laughing. She noticed Christian was starting to laugh too.

"C'mon, laugh. It's good for you," Sean encouraged.

The laughter was catching, he thought, but couldn't help noticing her odd way of phrasing it. *There is more to her than she is letting known. I must find out.* But he didn't want to find out because she was an outsider; however, the countess had taken a liking to her. It was more than that, Christian reflected. He wanted to know about *her*.

"Your kirtle, Lady Sean?" Christian asked, indicating her dress.

"I wish to have but one practice in my skirts to see if I am able to fight attired as such,"

she said slowly, thinking about what she wanted to say. She'd seen Christian's face deep in thought when she'd told him laughing was good for him. She knew he was pondering her sentence and phrasing and finding it odd. She always was odd, but here, odd wasn't always a good thing.

"Well, then, shall we begin?" Christian asked.

Sean nodded once.

Her aching muscles loosened up once she was moving about. And she seemed to have forgotten about her skirts. She was able to move as if she were not wearing them.

Christian's moves were easy to follow. It was as if he and Sir Robert had the same teacher. It was no surprise then, that she recognized most of his moves, and he was an easy opponent. Gone was her resolution to let Christian win a few. When the morning was over, the only reason she lost the one bout she did was that Lady Marta and her daughter Kyra appeared to watch them. Sean was caught off guard, misstepped, and her sword flew out of her hand. Christian was directly in front of her, almost close enough to lean forward and kiss her. She remained motionless for a moment, wondering where that thought came from. Christian retrieved her sword and returned it with a slight bow. She smiled at him.

As for the other bouts, Sean couldn't help but wonder if Christian purposely or carelessly misstepped, lost step, or just plain planned on losing. The whole thing seemed weird to Sean. First, she was struck on her head, sending her back to Medieval England, and all she wanted to do was return home. Now, she was realizing she had more here than in her own time. There were people here who accepted her, people who made her laugh, and people who confided in her. Well, that last one was Una, but did Una confide in Sean because Una wanted to, or was just keeping her up to speed on some of the goings-on?

For Christian, the day went exactly as planned. Well, except for the time he won. That was purely accidental. He was testing her, to see how good she was with that sword. *And she was good*, he reflected. When he would be using the steel with her, he didn't plan to be so easy. That would be the true test. He also noticed that she seemed more sure of herself since the day of the Michaelmas Faire when she'd first arrived at St. Mark's. *Didn't Malcolm say she was visiting a brother?* Christian remembered. *Had she gotten word to him where she was?* Christian wasn't the type to worry over things like that, but this was different. He couldn't place exactly what it was, however. He certainly wasn't interested in *his* family.

When Lady Marta and Kyra left the sidelines, Sean figured it was time for lunch, or dinner, as the noon meal was called. She returned the wooden sword to Christian, who smiled as he took it. He had a killer smile, and Sean felt warmth throughout her body that no one else had made her feel before. Not even Christopher.

Why was she still thinking about that jerk? she wondered. The pieces had fallen into place why he was so indifferent when she said she was going to England. Besides, she wasn't planning on seeing him again - she had realized that this is where she wanted to be - this place, this time. She knew she was taking a chance in trying to win Christian's heart, but to her it seemed he at least liked her. And that was a start.

As Sean and Christian headed off the practice field in towards the Great Hall, he casually

asked her,

“Shall we meet here in two days’ time for a session with the steel?”

Sean smiled. This is what Malcolm had told her Christian was thinking.

“Certainly, Sir Christian,” she said. *Was this the first time she’d said his name to him?* she wondered.

Christian smiled. He liked the way his name sounded from her. He’d always kept the notion that everyone had a soul-mate, even after Felice burned him. His rational mind had told him Felice wasn’t for him. That same mind was now telling him that maybe it was Lady Sean. Another part of his mind wondered if she would disappear as quickly as she’d arrived on Michaelmas.

He turned back to her to ask yet again where she was from when Una approached them, curtsied to both, and announced the noon meal was served. Una accompanied them the remainder of the way back to the Great Hall. Christian would seek out Sean later in the day to speak to her. If, his heart told him, he didn’t lose his courage.

The afternoon meal would have been uneventful, had not Asta again threatened Sean. In only the short time she’d been at St. Mark’s, Sean was getting quite tired of Asta. It was becoming tedious.

Sean felt the tug on her kirtle sleeve at the meal, and she knew that Asta had yet again reached across Sir Robert.

Instead of recognizing Asta, Sean turned to speak to Sir Robert.

“Shall we have a go at the staves after this meal?”

“Have a go?” Sir Robert asked her.

“Lady Seana,” growled Asta over Sir Robert. Sean sighed, and told Robert,

“Excuse me for a moment, please, Sir Robert.”

Sean leaned over Robert to speak to Lady Asta. As much as she wanted to threaten Asta into leaving her alone, Sean knew she couldn’t. This wasn’t the proper time and place; she didn’t know how much power, if any, Asta really had. Sean knew how powerful even the smallest rumor could be.

“Lady Asta,” Sean said formally, “What is it you wish?”

“You know what I wish of you.”

“What is that, my lady?” Sean was pretending to be innocent, for the benefit of Sir Robert, who was hearing the entire conversation.

“You are to leave Sir Christian alone. He is mine,” Asta hissed, silly of Sean’s games.

“Have you asked this of Sir Christian yet? Who *he* belongs to?” Sean asked.

Asta was quiet for a moment; Sean could tell Asta’s mind was working to find a reasonable response. When there was one coming, Asta instead said,

“You keep your distance from him. He is spoken for by me. I have very powerful people at court.”

Sean couldn’t tell if Asta was lying with her last comment, but she also knew it could be true. If it *was* true, this was not the time and place to ruffle feathers. Sean leaned back to Asta and spoke again.

“I know not why the Lady Marta has taken a liking to me, and Lord Garrick has extended his hospitality to me, yet I am grateful for it. My sincerest apologies if I have trespassed where I should not be. If Sir Christian is truly yours as you claim, he will seek you out. If not, then that is Sir Christian’s choice, is it not?”

Wow, she thought. *I guess I’m more of a diplomat than I thought. And Chris said I’d never amount to anything.* Sean settled back in her seat and watched Asta digest her words. First, Sean thought there was anger, how *dare* Sean, the *outsider*, speak to her this way. Then confusion, and then finally Sean recognized the look of resignation.

“As you wish. But do not seek him out,” Asta finally returned.

“Well, I will be meeting him on the practice field the morning after my staff bout on the morrow, but after that, you have my word.”

“Your word? What does that mean to me?” Asta sneered. Sean didn’t reply. Let Asta think she got the last word in. When Sean finally returned to her trencher Malcolm had hastily shoved her direction when he left the meal, Robert lightly put his hand on hers.

“I am most curious as to what just transpired between you and Lady Asta,” he said.

Sean swallowed a piece of cold meat and it was her turn to push the trencher away. No wonder Malcolm left hastily.

“I, too, am curious. I’d like to think I told her Sir Christian has the right to decide whom he should court, should he decide to court. Lord Garrick, Lady Marta, Lady Una, and you have all been most kind to me, and I thank you for that. What I asked of you earlier was if you would like to practice with me with the staff after this meal.”

“I believe I finally understand what you have been saying, and why Lady Asta bears you ill will. You are in love with Sir Christian,” Robert smiled.

Sean just stared. She was, sort of. She’d been in love with Chris Marks at one time in her life. Now there was someone who reminded her in almost every way of the Chris Marks she fell in love with. Yet Sir Christian was vastly different. There were many layers she had not revealed, those same layers that Christian may not have revealed even to himself. So was she in love with Sir Christian? *Not yet*, she told herself. But it would be quite easy to fall the rest of the way.

“No,” she told Sir Robert softly. “Not yet.”

“Tis not a bad thing, Lady Sean,” Robert said just as softly. Sean smiled, glad that someone else was on her side. Una had been ecstatic the previous night.

“Thank you, Sir Robert. It means a lot to me.” She put her hand on his and smiled. “Now, about that practice bout?”

“Nay, Lady Sean, for I must return to Lincoln for the evening. But I shall meet you on the field in the morning. After the meal?” he questioned.

She nodded, and then watched Sir Robert leave the Great Hall. Her wandering eyes then searched out two people. One was Christian. Maybe if he saw her leave, he would follow. The other person was Una. Sean never had anyone to help her, except her parents, and they were only interested in helping her with her school work, so she could land a prominent job. *If you could call “rewriting” helping*, she thought. *My papers and résumé were never good enough when I wrote them*, she thought bitterly. *Isn’t that ironic?* she thought. Now she was stuck in a time where résumés didn’t even exist.

Una was talking to some of the women that Sean recognized as some of the other ladies-in-waiting. Only Asta, and Lady Enid, Sean remembered, were the only ladies-in-waiting at the head table.

Una glanced up, caught her mistress' eye, and then mumbled something to her companions. Probably excusing herself, Sean thought. So why was she willing to wait for Una? In any other situation, Sean would have just helped herself. All she wanted was to change into her leggings and blouse and practice with one of the straw dummies she'd seen on the field her on her many visits there. *Because*, she told herself, *she was keeping up appearances*. She was glad that she was back in the Middle Ages, and not sometime like the Victorian or Regency era. In those societies, she would have a proper place and be forced to conform to a behavior fitting of that station. She shuddered. Sean was never one to conform. At least here, in 1275 at St. Mark's, they hadn't figured out how to completely pigeonhole people in proper society. Yet. In ways, she was still in barbaric times. That thought made her smile, as Una approached.

"Lady Sean?" Una asked. "What has made you smile?"

"Just a pleasant thought. I could have ended up anywhere, but I'm here," she smiled.

"Ended up?" Una asked, as she assisted Sean from the table, and back to the guest room. Sean was silent on the way, fighting her inner turmoil to tell someone the truth. Una seemed trustworthy enough. Lady Marta knew about Sean. But the one person Sean wanted to tell hadn't seen her leave the Great Hall. He was too busy eating and drinking with the other knights.

Finally, Sean and Una reached the guest room.

"Bolt the door, Una," Sean told the other woman once they were in the room. Sean yanked off the kirtle, and pulled on her familiar rayon shirt that had caught the Countess' attention weeks ago. She sat down on the bed and started to put on her leggings. Una was now standing next to her at the bed.

Sean stood up to finish pulling on the leggings. "Maybe it should be you who has the seat, Una. Please."

Una looked at Sean questioningly. Sean had walked over to the corner where her staff had been safely stowed.

"No, no, I'm not going to hurt you. I'm getting ready for practice," Sean replied to Una's horrified look when Sean reached for the staff. Una was sitting on the bed facing the door, and Sean sat at the foot of the bed facing Una.

"You may have noticed my odd dress and my odd speech?" Sean asked, looking at Una. At Una's nod, Sean plowed ahead.

"I'm not good at keeping things inside, you know that. You knew I wanted to meet Sir Christian from the start." Sean felt the bed move and a quick glance told her that Una had shifted to face her. No doubt Una was intrigued.

Sean put her face in her hands, unsure of how to continue. She picked her head up and looked at Una. She took a deep breath. *Here goes*, she told herself.

"I'm from the future," Sean said, looking right at Una. *There, it's out. Someone else knows. Do I feel better?* she asked herself. She did when she saw Una smile.

"I knew ye were different the moment Lady Marta took a liking to ye. She is usually a

most reserved, quiet woman, but since ye arrived, she has not been herself. She has been kinder to us, more giving, and more thoughtful. Ye have done wonders for us all. I knew there was something about ye, but did not know what. 'Tis not a surprise to me, but do not tell the others of it."

"Thank you Una, for understanding. There is only one other I must tell, and the time is not right now." Sean smiled at the woman, glad to have found someone she could trust.

"'Tis said," Una spoke again, quietly, almost conspiratorially, "that the Lady Marta herself is not from this time, as ye are not. There are whispers she has the Gift of Sight. I have never enough courage to ask her myself," Una confessed. Sean had been wondering that very prospect herself, but did not say anything.

"What is it like where you are from?" Una was curious now, like an eager child Christmas morning.

"It's so much more different. I couldn't even begin to explain without you thinking I've lost my mind," Sean explained. "And there are so many things that even I don't know how they *work*, just how to use them: cars, computers, electricity..." Sean stopped herself before she went too far.

"Of what we have spoke does not leave this room, Una," Sean stressed. Una nodded in agreement, stood up from the bed, and offered a hand of assistance to Sean. Sean took it warmly, and smiled at Una, now that they shared a secret.

Una opened the door, and the two women turned down the corridor toward the Great Hall. Sean carried her staff upright, the top barely reaching the ceiling.

Behind them, outside the guest room, a lone knight, who had been leaning against the door to listen to the women speak, now sat down along the wall, knees drawn to his chest. What she said made so much more sense than her being Malcolm's cousin.

He hadn't meant to have overheard the conversation. He noticed her leaving the Great Hall, and wanted to follow, but he didn't want it to appear obvious. He waited until he was done his drink and conversation, and then went to the guest room to seek her out, maybe for a practice. There would be other men on the field, making use of the grassy practice area while there was still daylight yet.

He'd heard Lady Sean tell Una something about her "odd dress" and "odd speech." He too, had wondered. But his ears had perked when he heard her mention his name; he felt a warmth course through him when she said it. But who was the person she had yet to tell? Could it be him? And what reason would she have for telling him?

When he'd heard the door unbolt, he flattened himself against the wall, hoping *she* wouldn't see him. Fortunately, they'd turned the opposite direction. When he saw her with the staff, where he thought she was headed was confirmed.

His mind made up to follow her, Christian left the hallway and headed for the practice fields.

Eleven

Sean was winning. Well, it was only a straw dummy, but she was beating it hard, fast and furious, as if taking out all her frustrations on it. While she did feel better having told Una, it was only marginal. What if Una *did* tell someone? Was this really such a wise choice she made? She didn't really expect Una to tell her secret, but when she thought about it, did she *really* know Una all that well?. She kept whacking at the straw figure with both ends of the staff, then whirled around, and as she came out of the spin, slashed at the straw with her hands at the end of the staff as if it was a sword. She slashed at one side, then the other, then back to the first, but couldn't bring the staff down again. Something had caught hold of it. She turned to look.

It was Sir Christian. And he was smiling. Sean smiled back at him. Sean looked at the other men practicing; there weren't as many as in the mornings, but a fair number. No one seemed to notice Christian. *And why should they?* she thought. *Because he'd be sparring with a woman, and Christian tended to make himself scarce around women,* a voice in her head told her. Ahh, the voice of reason. She wanted to shoot it.

Sir Christian released Sean's staff, and it was then that Sean noticed that Christian had a staff as well. He nodded to her, and an informal practice was underway.

When they were through practicing, Sean noticed a bit of a crowd had appeared at this small, back section of the field; this seemed to be the case whenever she practiced, and began to wonder if it was normal, or just her.

Of course, it was her. For as long as she'd been there, it still wasn't enough time - or the right time - for the men to accept her as the swordswoman she'd proved herself to be. This practice was just for fun, to blow off steam.

And Christian was just as good with a staff as he was with a wimpy wooden sword. Several times when their staves clashed together, the movement and inertia pushed her closer to him, or him to her. One of those times, they stopped for a moment, inches away from each other. Breathing hard, Christian moistened his lips with his tongue. Sean's knees almost gave way. But then Christian pushed off with his staff, whirled around, and brought the staff down, both hands at one end. Sean had no time to think, just react. She ducked down and did a somersault out of the way.

Christian's staff struck the ground. He looked up, in search of Sean. When he spotted her, he didn't hesitate to smile. She'd out-thought him, and now knew for certain that in two mornings' time, she would prove a very formidable opponent.

Sean and Sir Christian continued to practice with the staves, sometimes against each other, sometimes they would team up and spar against a pair of knights. Christian then took some of the knights to another part of the field. As daylight was waning, Sean noticed Lady Marta and her daughter with the dark hair and eyes approaching her; Sean remembered the daughter's name was Kyra.

Holding her staff upright, Sean bowed slightly to Lady Marta.

"There is no need, Lady Sean," Lady Marta told her. Sean straightened up.

"I wish it that you would be of some assistance to my daughter, Kyra," Lady Marta explained. "It would serve her well to be able to use a sword such as you do."

Sean looked at the girl. She was young, still a teenager. Even up close, Sean's initial assessment - that Kyra resembled her - was correct. Kyra's eyes were dark enough to look black, and her hair was as dark as Sean's had been dyed.

Dyed! Sean suddenly thought. Her hair had a bronze cast to it, and sometimes it turned red in the summertime. But she had colored it black before she left for England. *How long ago was that?* she wondered.

"Certainly, Lady Marta. I would be honored to help Kyra. In a few days - "

"A few days is acceptable. I do know you are to meet with Sir Robert in the morn, and Sir Christian the morning after. I would like Kyra to stay by your side and learn from you until you are ready. These are the wishes of the Earl and myself."

Sean thought briefly. "It may not be until four days hence, m'lady," she said after a moment.

"Four days? Why is that?" Lady Marta was quite curious now.

"If I best Sir Christian, as I did Sir Robert yestermorn, I am to meet Sir Malcolm on the field on the third day," she explained.

"Hmm, very interesting," she murmured. Then Lady Marta added, "Well, it will do young Kyra some good to watch you best the Captain of the Guard, would it not?" She leaned in towards Sean as she said the last. Sean smiled at the Countess' words. If Sean ever needed it, Lady Marta could be a true ally.

Gracefully, Lady Marta walked back towards the castle alone, since the preparation for the evening meal had probably been completed. The meal was usually served not long after the sun had set.

Sean turned to the young girl left in her charge.

"Let's follow your mom and go in to eat?" Sean asked.

Softly, looking at the ground, Kyra said "Yes, let us go."

This was a surprise to Sean. Kyra didn't seem to be the shy sort in Sean's mind, but now she began to see why the Countess sought her out. Maybe Sean could teach Kyra how to be more self-confident.

Christian approached them then. Sean and Kyra stopped walking, and Christian bowed a bit to Sean, and then a full bow to Kyra, took her hand and gently kissed the back of it. Kyra's cheeks reddened. She looked down and withdrew her hand.

"Hello," Sean said, amused at his actions.

"Good eve to you, Lady Sean and Mistress Kyra." The three of them walked together to the castle for the evening meal.

"A very fruitful practice, was it not, Lady Sean?"

"Yes, it was," Sean agreed. "I believe I am ready for Sir Robert. He is at Lincoln tonight, he told me."

"Aye, 'tis correct. Robert and I were on crusade together, fought together, and became close. As brothers, almost. He is a good, loyal friend," Christian told her.

Sean could feel Christian relaxing around her. He was not nearly as awkward around her as he had been the first few times they spoke. Christian himself was beginning to feel comfortable around Lady Sean. She was different than the women - no, he realized, just the *woman* - who'd wrecked his life. And now he was rebuilding. It would take time, and it

would be difficult for him to learn trust. But if something was that easy, it wasn't worth the fight, he recalled more than one person telling him.

The evening meal was relatively peaceful. The afternoon meal was the only one that the Earl and Countess required everyone attend at the same time. The morning and evening meals allowed the castle inhabitants to dine when they were ready. Many had done so as the sun was setting, at about the time Lady Marta and Kyra were speaking with Sean.

For a moment, Sean had forgotten about Kyra, she was so quiet. Since there were only about a dozen people in the Great Hall - Sir Malcolm and Lady Asta not among them - Sean moved her seat to be next to and share with Kyra.

Christian sat at his usual place, and there were a few men at his end of the table. The men were raising their mugs and tankards of ale to Christian, and wishing him luck in two days' time.

Sean recognized some of the men from out on the practice field. Others she recognized as they were at their regular place for a meal. It was Christian she watched intently, until she heard a small voice next to her.

"M'Lady?" It was a soft, melodic voice, and not quite as timid as the one that agreed to go into supper. Sean tore her gaze away from Christian to look at Kyra.

"Sorry 'bout that," Sean said. "I wasn't paying attention."

"You like him, do you not?" Kyra observed.

Funny that Sir Robert had mentioned that she was in love with Christian, and now she was being told by a teenager. Sean smiled.

"How old are you, Kyra?"

"This is my seventeenth winter. Father says soon I will have to marry."

"Well, he is your father," Sean said, not really knowing what to say.

"But I don't want to marry. I want to fight, like you. My brothers tried to show me..." she trailed off.

"So your mother thought I should teach you. Why didn't your brothers?"

"They said I fought like a girl!"

Sean had to suppress a laugh. *Some things never changed, did they?* she thought. That was exactly what Patrick told her the first time she'd picked up a sword. But it was heavy, unwieldy, and not her fault. *Patrick...* she thought, wondering about her brother. But no solid thoughts ever came. They just didn't materialize. She couldn't even remember his face. Some time ago - maybe it was only the day before, Sean didn't know - she'd decided there was more for her here than in her own time. If she could teach Kyra to fight with a sword, maybe one of the ladies could teach her cooking, or - no, *not* embroidery. Sewing she could handle, as she made a few of her clothes, but there would be no electric sewing machine here.

"Kyra, you *are* a girl. My brother told me the very same thing," Sean told the teenager.

Kyra smiled.

"I like you," she said. "Celine - our elder sister - was married a few winters ago, and I've missed her. They live in Yorkshire now. I miss her," she repeated.

"I understand," Sean said.

The meal did not take long to finish. But afterwards, Sean felt very tired. Which was not surprising. She'd practiced in the morning, confronted Asta in the early afternoon, and then practiced again in the late afternoon. Once it was morning again, she would see how well Robert knew the staff.

Sean and Kyra left the Great Hall, walked to the guest room, and parted ways at the door.

"Good night, Kyra." Sean said. "Shall we meet in the morning to break the fast?"

"Yes, I do not see why we would not. Shall I knock for you?" Kyra asked.

"No, I will ask Una. Maybe I can get a bath this evening," Sean said, opening the door.

"Good night, then, Lady Sean," she said as she turned to continue down the corridor to her chamber that she once shared with her sister.

"Oh, Kyra," Sean called after her. When the teen turned back, Sean told her, "Please, do call me Sean."

"I will. Good night, Sean."

Sean could have sworn Kyra skipped down the corridor.

Fully opening the door to the guest chamber, Sean saw in the candle light the large wooden tub in the center of the room. There were rose petals floating on the water, and as Sean's fingers skimmed the surface, it registered that the water was still quite warm. She heard the door close behind her; it was Una. Sean was relieved, and let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding.

"I'm glad it's you," Sean told Una.

"Ye were thinking I was Asta?"

"Well...you never know, do you?" Sean smiled. "Did you read my mind?" she asked, indicating the tub.

"When ye were on the field as long as ye was, I thought it best," she explained. "And I was thinking on what ye told me earlier this day." Una helped Sean peel off her clothes and settle into the tub. Una washed Sean's back while Sean splashed the water on her face. The roses smelled wonderful.

"What about what I told you? It doesn't leave this room."

"What if ye are here for a reason, to do a task, set something right?"

Sean leaned back against the wall of the tub when she saw Una sit on the bed. Sean allowed her eyes to close.

"Maybe - " Sean started, "Maybe I was. We have these places, called libraries," she explained. "They contain books. Lots of books, that you can borrow, read and then return. Some of the books are love stories." Sean opened her eyes. Una was sitting on the bed, listening very attentively, as if Sean was spinning a fantasy.

"Anyway, some of the love stories are like mine: a woman goes back in time and falls in love." Sean slid down into the water, dunking her hair, and when she came back up, reached for a towel. The water had gotten cold.

"So, 'tis true," Una said.

Sean looked at her, and raised an eyebrow.

"What's true?" she asked.

"Ye *are* in love with him," Una stated. When Sean started to deny it, Una held up a finger

to stop her. "Mayhap not at this time."

Why was everyone telling her this? Wasn't love a two-way street? Sean had stepped out of the tub, and Una helped her put on the chemise.

"Una?" Sean asked. Una looked at her.

"Thank you," Sean told her. "You don't know what it means to have a friend here."

"I do know, m'lady," Una said. Sean smiled.

"What time do ye wish to awake?"

"For the morning meal, please, Una." Una nodded in acknowledgement.

"I'll have someone remove the tub in the morn after I wake you." She then opened the door, and disappeared in the corridor. Sean bolted it, as she did every night, crawled into bed, blew out the candle, and immediately fell asleep.

The next few days were much of a blur to Sean. She'd developed a devotee in Kyra, who diligently practiced with her wooden sword against a straw dummy, and sometimes Sean.

As for Sean herself, she was starting to feel like D'Artagnan from the *Three Musketeers* movie she'd seen. The character had set a time for a sword fight with each of musketeers an hour apart, at the same field. For the next three mornings, Sean was occupied after the morning meal.

That first morning was her staff bout with Sir Robert. It was eerily reminiscent of her mock fights with her Robert at the Ren Faires, even down to the movements and the choreography.

Sean remembered what Christian had told her the previous evening, that he and Robert were friends. *It was possible...* she thought, *that Christian had demonstrated with Robert after the evening meal how the morning should proceed.* No, she told herself. Christian seemed the honest sort, and besides, Robert had been in Lincoln, and arrived just in time for the morning meal.

They fought close together, the staves knocking together, each pushing against the other. But neither Sean nor Robert seemed to have the upper hand. Robert swung the staff like a baseball bat, but Sean blocked the blow with her staff. Sean swung the staff out along the ground; Robert was quick to jump over it.

After some time, the two would lock staves just to catch a breath, and then start all over again. Finally, when it had seemed like she was on the field all day, she heard a commanding voice behind her. It was the Earl.

"I believe it has been proven that Sir Robert and Lady Sean have the same abilities. Let us adjourn this meeting and retire to the Great Hall for the noontime meal. As you know, we have harvested some of the crops, and we have a bountiful supply this year; let us dine to celebrate."

No one argued with the Earl, Sean observed. She held onto her staff with her left hand bowed her head to Robert.

"'Twas a good fight, Sir Robert," she said.

"'Twas a draw," he said.

"You don't seem happy about that," she asked.

“Well, I do suppose it could have been worse,” he said. “You could have won.”

Sean smiled. She supposed she could have been insulted, but she realized that Robert, too, could be an ally if she ever needed one. There was a note of grudging respect in his voice.

That afternoon, she did not practice, but remained with Una and some of the other ladies in the solar, where a large window allowed the sunlight to enter and light the entire room. Asta was in a corner of the room, immersed in some needlework and outright ignored Sean. Sean and Una had a length of dark green fabric they were discussing making into a long tunic for Sean.

In the evening, Sean spent time talking with Kyra, and sat next her again at the evening meal. *Where was Malcolm?* she wondered. Not that it mattered to her, but it had been a few days since she encountered him and had been told of Christian’s wishes. She hoped he would be on the field in the morning for that bout, if for no other reason than to see the look on his face, should she win.

The second morning came much too soon for her.

Although she didn’t make any comments about snooze buttons again when Una roused her that morning, Sean did not want to leave the warm confines of her bed. The furs she used for blankets were quite warm. Although the feather-stuffed mattress was lumpy and uncomfortable the first few nights, it had conformed to her body, and was like a warm cocoon she did not want to get out of.

And then she realized the import of that particular morning. Dressing in her leggings and a deep red tunic she’d made with Una’s help, Sean sat on the bed while Una helped her with her boots. They were her sturdy, steel-toed boots, and they were holding up very well for the boots that she wore every day. The boots were suede at one time, but it was starting to wear away, and they looked more like just leather.

She did not see Christian at the morning meal, and surmised he was already waiting for her. *Unless...*she thought, as she found she could not eat any breakfast, he couldn’t eat either.

Christian was nervous. *No*, he thought, *that’s not quite right*. He had been unable to sleep the previous night, and had saddled Magnus, his sleek black war-horse, who had been with him in the Crusades as well, and went for a gallop. He’d covered the grounds of St. Mark’s and its neighboring towns in too short of time, and had to return to the barracks to attempt to rest and relax.

The remainder of the night passed with him lying awake on his pallet, thinking of the dark-haired woman who had now turned his life upside down. He’d vowed never to love again, but from the start this “Lady Sean” had been on his mind. There was something warm and caring about her, some spark within her that Lady Felice never possessed. Lady Sean would never blindly do anything she was told without challenging it. And the Lady Felice wouldn’t even have gone near a dagger, let alone a broadsword! At that Christian smiled.

When he thought of their practice sessions, and how close he'd come to Lady Sean, Christian's insides tickled and jumped, like butterflies. Near dawn, he thought he'd identified the feeling, but by the time the rooster crowed, and he remounted Magnus for an early morning ride, he'd quelled those thoughts. There was no way he could be in *love* with her. He didn't even know where she *really* came from, or who she really was.

He returned Magnus to the stable about the time of the morning meal. He couldn't go in there and eat; his stomach was queasy at the thought of food. He put on his mail tunic, re-buckled his sword sheath over the metal, took his helm from the top of his chest near his sleeping pallet, and headed for the field where he was meeting the Lady Sean too soon for his indecisive heart and mind.

As he approached the field, he saw her coming from the castle. Behind Lady Sean were Sir Robert, Sir Owen, Mistress Kyra, and Lady Marta. The Earl was at the back of the group, talking to his nephew. *So, Malcolm has made an appearance at this*, Christian thought. *I should ask him where he was, and he should tell me of this the next time he plans to be absent.*

There was another question tugging at Christian's brain, and that was what he should do about Lady Sean.

The group with Lady Sean stopped at the edge of the field. Owen assisted Sean with her tunic of chain mail, and Robert offered her the helm. She shook her head, refusing. Buckling the sword at her waist, she walked stiffly to the center of the field to meet Christian.

"Sir Christian," she said, attempting a curtsy, "while I know this is a contest with steel swords - very *sharp* steel swords - I have no intention or desire to harm you. We shall not wear the helms."

Christian found the lump in his throat did not allow him to readily speak. He tried again.

"I do understand ye, m'lady." He walked several paces away from where they stood, set the helm down on the grass, and then returned to face Lady Sean.

"Unlike yestermorn," she said when he was again facing her, and loud enough for the crowd behind her to hear her words, "we will have a best-of-three tourney. Should Sir Christian win two or three, he is the victor. Should I win two or three, I accept Sir Malcolm's offer to meet him here on the morrow."

Christian looked directly at her when he spoke.

"Ye cannot mean that."

"It has been decided. The evening I won against Sir Robert was when Sir Malcolm told me of your intent for this morn. I asked what he would require if I bested you," she said only for Christian to hear.

Robert appeared beside them on the field.

"If you are ready to begin, we shall," he said.

Christian nodded, as did Sean.

Swords raised and crossed, Christian and Sean nodded to each other. Once Robert stepped back, the swordplay commenced.

Remembering Christian's moves and speed of the other day, Sean held her own for the first round. The swords clanged and sang as they clashed, the action moved around the field in a wider circle than with Sir Robert. Sometimes they were facing each other, sometimes

they were side by side, each trying to wrest the sword from the other.

Christian changed the dance midway through, and attempted to bring the sword down on her much the way he had done with the staff. He anticipated her dropping to the ground and rolling away, off to the side. When she rolled under him instead, and stood up behind him, he whirled around, surprised, and she swung at his sword. The blades met, and because Christian's hold was not as firm as it should have been, the sword flew up in the air.

It came down, point first, some distance away, and stuck into the ground. While Christian stood there, wondering how that could have possibly happened, Sean retrieved his sword and handed it back to him.

"Your turn," she said. "Let's try round two."

Christian nodded.

When they were underway again, Sean knew she was out matched this time. His thrusts were stronger, more directed, and he was actually making contact with the flat of his sword on her forearms. This had its desired effect, as he was able to wedge his blade between her gloved hand and her sword hilt. Sean had no choice really, but to let go of the sword. It flipped in the air, and came down in Christian's other gloved hand.

"Yer sword, m'lady. I believe that bout is mine," he said, handing it back to her, hilt first. She accepted it, and they were ready for their third time.

During the first two meetings, each had shown their strongest side. Now that all the tricks were out in the open, they circled each other, swords raised, each jabbing at the air, and the other fending off the sword. They stared each other down, wondering who would make the first move. They stepped into their circle at the same time with such force, the clanging of the steel made Sean's insides weak. She'd not only been fighting physically with Christian, but mentally with herself. Christian had been spending time with her a lot in the past few days. Was whatever he was keeping locked inside releasing its hold on him? she wondered. But this - the meeting of the swords - was too intense for her.

When the swords met, it was like a wake-up call to Christian. If she was like this with swords, what was she like in the most intimate fashion? From the moment he saw her approaching the field that morning, he knew those thoughts and feelings were right. There was no way to deny that. Oh, he could deny it if he had to, but if he wanted to also keep his sanity, he would have to leave again. And he did not want that. He wanted this rare find, this young woman who had won the heart of the Earl and Countess, to call his own. And as his final resolve shattered, he dropped the sword.

It clattered when it fell, and he looked after it. It had fallen on another sword. Lady Sean's. When had she dropped hers? He looked up into her face, which was fixed on his with a look that he couldn't interpret. He knew that she had dropped hers the same time he did. Seconds after they met. She blinked, and looked down at the swords between them.

"I - I've never dropped my sword before," she said, as she knelt down to retrieve it. Christian knelt down facing her. "Me neither." Still crouched, and not caring who the onlookers were, he reached out, stroked the side of her face, and lifted her chin. Looking in her eyes as he softly spoke, he asked,

"I know this is not the best time to ask this of ye, but I would very much like to call on ye?" *And that question had come from where?* Christian asked himself, very surprised that he

had indeed asked that.

Sean searched her mind for a moment. It had seemed that since they locked swords that last time she'd lost the ability to think clearly, if at all. Ahh, that was it. Asking to call on her was like asking her out on a date. She smiled up at him.

"Yes, you may," she agreed.

Christian grabbed the swords, and helped Sean stand up. Not breaking eye contact with her, he handed her back her sword. She sheathed it, and slowly searched out Sir Robert with her eyes. She looked back at Christian.

"I think we shall call this one a draw," she told him. Robert had noticed the swords were now sheathed and approached them.

"It is over," she said to Robert. "'Tis a draw."

Robert looked at Sean, and then at Christian. Christian had sheathed his sword, and was now fiddling with the belt. Sean was standing with her left arm resting on the sword, looking very confident.

"What else has happened here?" Robert asked.

"Happened?" Sean asked.

"What else? I was unaware there was something else," Christian told his friend.

Robert looked at Christian suspiciously. Something was different all right, and it had to do with what he'd told Sean the other evening, of that he was certain. Robert turned around, and announced to those who were watching with rapt attention:

"This morning's meeting has ended in a draw. Sir Christian has won one, Lady Sean has won one, and the final bout was the draw. Thus it is over."

"No, I think not." Malcolm had stepped forward onto the field.

"I will still challenge the Lady Seana on the morrow. *With* the helms." So saying, Malcolm strode off the field, back to the castle.

Twelve

Malcolm sat atop Conqueror, his elegant chestnut war-horse, the next morn, at the practice field where he would meet Lady Seana in less than an hour's time. He thought over the previous few days, when he had again met with the Duke of Grenville.

And then Sir Christian had questioned his absence. He supposed Christian was correct, and should have been made aware that Malcolm would not be in residence for a few days. But how would he have explained *this* absence to Christian? Christian was too honorable, and must not be made aware of Malcolm's agreement with Grenville.

While at Grenville, Malcolm and one of the Duke's men rode with Malcolm to fill some of the Duke's coffers with grain, fine linen, and gold. Malcolm was pleased with the visit, and knew in a week it would again be time to collect Uncle Garrick's taxes, but this time, Malcolm knew he would have to use extra caution.

A rider approached the field from the direction of the guard house, and knew it was Sir Christian. There was something more to Christian and this Lady Seana, Malcolm suspected. This was the happiest anyone at St. Mark's had seen Christian. Well, that would no longer matter, Malcolm thought, for at the afternoon meal he intended to speak with Uncle Garrick about courting the Lady Seana. That would put her in her rightful place as a Lady, and the Duchess of Grenville, Malcolm thought greedily.

When it was time to ride out at the end of the following week, Malcolm would take Gilmore and Morgan, two men Malcolm could trust to remain silent. Presently, he heard voices, and a number of people approaching the field from the castle. Lady Seana had arrived.

It's only practice, it's only a trial run, Sean was thinking over and over, almost until it became her mantra and the only thing she concentrated on. She saw Christian riding towards her from the other side of the field, but looked away. She could not be distracted after how the previous day's third round ended. She remembered the feeling that shook her body and jolted her emotions so hard that she gripped her sword tighter.

She had to concentrate. Lady Marta and Lord Garrick were with her, as was Kyra, as well as Dalton and Justin, the Earl's sons. Asta was there mainly to see Sean fail miserably at the hands of Sir Malcolm. Robert and Owen walked alongside Sean, Robert carrying a shield, and Owen carrying the helm. Sean had already donned the mail tunic and her gauntlets.

At the edge of the field, the group stopped, Sean took the helm and shield, and approached Malcolm, who had now dismounted. Sean stopped a short distance away, and nodded to him. He remained upright. She rested the shield on the ground against her leg as she put her helm on, and noted Malcolm doing the same.

Robert approached them, looking directly at Malcolm. Sean didn't trust Malcolm here on the field, and it appeared neither did Robert. *So why was she here?* A voice in her head asked her. The only reason was to prove something - something that could get her killed if it didn't work. Malcolm's expression was invisible under the helm, but she suspected that this wasn't a game to the Captain of the Guard.

“Sir Malcolm,” Robert bowed, then turned to Sean and bowed to her. “Lady Seana,” he said formally. Then he turned and addressed the group.

“This is an informal bout. There will be three bouts; the winner will be the one who wins two of these. The Earl will not tolerate excessive bloodshed; this is *à plaisance*.” Robert turned back to Sean and Malcolm, and looked hard at Malcolm.

“Do not try any tricks, Sir Malcolm,” Robert suggested. “She is a formidable opponent, yet she is a lady. You would do well to remember that.”

Robert reached into a pouch he had on his belt and pulled out a faded ribbon, and tied it to Sean’s wrist. As he did so, he looked across the field, to where Christian stood. Robert tapped her wrist when he was done, and murmured only for her to hear,

“This is from Christian.”

Sean looked at Robert, and then followed his gaze, and saw Christian across the field, at the edge of the crowd. He was partially hidden, and Sean knew why. The bout yesterday had affected him the same as her; he’d even asked to call on her. Now, he’d given her a favor, which she now looked at. It was a faded red ribbon with a strand of long blonde hair stuck in it. Another look at Christian revealed his hair was unbound, and this was the ribbon that held it. When she caught his gaze, he disappeared behind the person next to him. She wanted to see him, yet at the same time, it was best he remain out of sight. That way was less of a distraction.

However, it was useless in the first bout. For when Robert told them to start, Malcolm went right for her wrist of her swordhand. It was then she wished she’d taken up the offer from the Robert of her time to learn to fence with her left hand. It was the first time in days she’d thought of her own time, and the round was over before it really began. With Malcolm’s sword constantly hitting her wrist, and Sean distracted and unaccustomed to the shield she held, she dropped the sword.

As the only courtesy he showed her, Malcolm took a step back to allow her to retrieve the sword. She bent down at her knees, looking at her opponent the entire time, and picked up the fallen sword. She stood up, took a step back, raised her wrist, and touched her lips to the ribbon. Her eyes never left Malcolm, and now she nodded at him, signaling she was ready.

The helm was very uncomfortable, hot, and hard to see out of. She was glad it was October, and not a time like July. The mail tunic was heavy, and her tunic underneath was surely soaked. And she hadn’t really done anything, except essentially get slapped on the wrist. She was certain Asta was snickering, if not giggling. This was the second time Asta had been witness to a bout; she was there the other morning when Sean first donned the armor. Asta was not there yesterday to witness the interaction between Sean and Christian. *Which was just as well*, Sean thought, her mind returning to the task at hand, where she and Malcolm were still circling each other, sizing each other up, waiting for the real action to begin.

Malcolm made the first thrust at Sean, who anticipated correctly, and jumped to the left, out of the way. She whacked at Malcolm’s sword then, and he pulled back, almost dropping the blade, unprepared for the force and strength of the blow.

She was strong, Malcolm thought. *This will not be as easy as I believed*. And with those

thoughts, Malcolm suddenly found himself having to parry away Sean's sword thrusts as she closed in on him. Having won the first round so easily, Malcolm mistakenly thought the same thing about the second round. He moved backwards across the field as Sean's thrusts came more rapidly, and he had to parry them and get out of the way. It was awkward holding a shield, since she'd never sparred with one before. But she held her own, and while her method of advancing on Malcolm was more of a hacking style, she managed to get him to drop his shield.

His shield now out of the way, she tossed her own aside, and continued to move the action across the fields. After a brief misstep, Sean felt a stinging sensation on her upper left arm, and realized Malcolm was way too close to her, but she'd deal with her arm later. She advanced, swiftly, and it was too quick for Malcolm. Either that, or whatever animals burrowed in the grounds in these parts decided to use the practice field as a home, there were divots on the field; and Malcolm tripped over a small mound in the grass, and fell on his back.

No, Sean mentally checked herself, *this was not the way to win this one*. After allowing Malcolm to rise, she seized her moment, and with a strong arc swing, his sword landed on the ground. He flung the helm off and tossed it to the edge of the field.

"I do not know what game *you* are playing, Lady Seana." He angrily retrieved his sword and pointed it at her. Sean removed her helm, her long ponytail popping out, and the tendrils at her face sticking to her. She tossed the helm as far as she could throw it, and it landed just about on top of Malcolm's. She had to smile at that.

"This is not a game, Sir Malcolm. I will not take victory against someone who cannot defend himself at that moment."

"Then you are naught but a lady, 'tis true," he spat. He surveyed the field, noticed his helm in the grass at the edge of the field, and the shield upside down at the other side of the field, near where Robert and Owen stood. Sean also took stock of Malcolm's equipment, and realized now they were evenly matched.

During the entire conversation - if it could be called as such - Malcolm had his sword trained on Sean, and now she moved it away with a gloved hand.

"I believe it is time for round three?" she asked.

He nodded once, and Sean did not like the malicious expression that crept over his features. She took one step back. Malcolm faced the crowd and laughed, thinking Sean a coward for retreating. She lunged forward and slashed upwards at his sword arm. The impact released the sword up into the air, and Sean caught it on the way down.

Malcolm was unaware of what had happened until people he thought were his friends and confidants started laughing back. He looked back at his sword arm, only the sword wasn't there. Sean handed it to him, hilt first, bowing.

"Sir Malcolm," she said, formally, returning the sword. He grabbed it, and jammed it back into its sheath, and stalked off to retrieve his helm and shield. Sean waited until Malcolm picked up his helm before she got hers. As she walked the short distance to her shield, she noted the design on it for the first time that day. It had the Earl's insignia, the red rampant regardant lion in a gold field, but the bottom half was half black and half green with crossed silver swords. She'd seen that before somewhere, she knew.

Picking it up, she returned to the side of the field where everyone was waiting for her. Malcolm had stomped past them all back to the castle, not in a very pleasant mood. The only person that accompanied him was Lady Asta.

“Very impressive, Lady Sean,” said a voice while she was removing her mail. Setting aside the chain mail shirt, she saw that it was the Earl.

“Thank you, milord,” she said softly, for some unexplainable reason, suddenly humbled. She attempted a curtsy.

“There is no need, Lady Sean. Please, rise. You are like family to us. Kyra tells me you are showing her how to fence.”

“Yes, milord, I am,” Sean said promptly.

“Sean,” the earl said, and that caused her to look into the earl’s face. He was handsome, really, maybe only old enough to be just an older brother. His face showed laugh lines, and his hazel eyes were warm.

“Sir Christian spoke to me after the meal yestereve. Although he had already asked you, he thought he should seek my approval to call on you. It is well known to me why he came here, but that he will have to tell you himself. You do make him happy, Lady Sean, and I am happy that he has found you. Sir Christian and you have my blessings.” He smiled at her then, and sought out Marta; and the lord and lady returned to the castle, glad to have set something right.

Sean, watching her benefactors return to the castle, remained standing on the field, mulling over the importance of her conversation with the earl, and the shield she carried.

Robert, and then a reluctant Owen, came over to congratulate her.

“But I really didn’t do much,” she protested.

“Aye, but you did,” Robert said. “You put Sir Malcolm in his place. He will not be questioning you in the future, Lady Sean.” Sean smiled at that, and Robert continued. “That may not be the good thing you wish it. You are now an adversary, and Malcolm may not pay attention to you being a lady. And,” he paused for a moment, “while what you did was indeed honorable, in battle, a man in that position would rather die.”

“But this was not battle,” Sean pointed out.

“In Malcolm’s mind, he treated it as such. I do not mean this maliciously, but there will come a day when Malcolm will return the humiliation,” Robert observed.

“I understand,” Sean replied.

“The sun climbs the sky,” Robert looked up. “Let us have our noontime meal.”

“I will join you shortly,” Sean said, and watched as Owen tagged behind Robert.

“I hope my shield is the only thing you toss away,” a voice in front of her said. She turned away from the castle to face Christian. He was close to her. Very close. *Close enough to...*she thought, but didn’t have to complete it, as Christian bent his head and his lips met hers.

Thirteen

Christian had soft lips, Sean noticed, as he gently kissed hers. She felt his thumb caress her cheek, and then his hands rested on her shoulders and upper arms. With a jolt, she pulled away from him, her lips still moist from the kiss. Her hand went to her upper left arm where Malcolm's sword cut her in the bout. She was surprised she hadn't felt it until now.

"Let me see," Christian said. He took out his small dagger and cut her red sleeve off at the shoulder and carefully pulled it from her arm. He ripped a strip from the sleeve and dabbed the drying blood.

"We'll fix it properly after the meal. This will do for now," he said, gently tying the remainder of the sleeve over the wound.

"Thank you," she smiled, wondering what "properly" meant.

By the time they entered the Great Hall, everyone had been seated and served. Sean knew everyone was watching her, not because she was late, not because of the silly bandage on her arm, and not because of who she was with. It was because she had bested the Captain of the Guard. *Well, maybe part of it was because of who she was with*, she conceded. She looked towards the head table, and noticed the seating had been rearranged.

For starters, Lord Garrick and Lady Marta had switched places. Sir Malcolm still sat next to the Earl, but Kyra now sat next to the Countess. And next to Kyra was Sir Robert. There were two places, and then Sir Devlin. She knew at once those two places were for her and Christian.

Sean noted who sat at the far end of the head table, almost at the end, was Lady Asta, seated next to Dalton, the Earl's heir. As Sean and Christian walked behind the trestle table up to the head table, people stopped eating to look up at the woman who won that day. As she passed them by, she could hear them talking in hushed voices. Sean felt her face getting warm. *Was she actually blushing?* she wondered. Were they really talking about her win today, or were they talking about Sir Christian? His hand suddenly felt warm on her lower back, where it was resting, guiding her gently.

Even though the walk from the Great Hall entryway to the head table was not very long, Sean was glad to finally sit down in the seat Christian offered her, and he seated himself next to Sir Devlin.

Lunch was superb, as best as it could get, Sean thought. At least she was eating healthier than all those fast food restaurants she used to stop at. All through lunch, she kept looking up at Christian, thinking about the kiss they shared right before they came in, and him dressing her wound. She idly wondered what Malcolm would have thought had he seen the kiss. Most curiously, she did wonder what Lady Asta's reaction would have been. Sean was glad Asta was at the other end of the table this time. Christian was strong, she thought, remembering the way he held her arms. That made sense, he was a knight. There were no wimpy knights.

Christian watched Sean as she picked at the pieces of meat in the trencher. Not for the first time did he wonder about her. She knew some of their customs, but she had an odd

manner of speech and dress. She knew how to fight with a sword.

And she kissed him back when he kissed her. They were so close, and when he'd asked her about his shield, she looked at him, her face turned upwards, he wanted to answer the question he couldn't get out of his mind. Everything about her was soft: her lips, her cheek, even her arm when he'd tied the sleeve about it.

He'd seen the Earl approach Sean and speak to her, before Robert and Owen had. Christian knew Lord Garrick told her that he gave them his blessing for Christian to call on her. Christian couldn't have been happier. He'd seen her studying the shield, and knew she'd made the connection.

"Sir Christian?" he heard her say. He looked up into her eyes and smiled. She continued on. "I know you gave me this ribbon as a favor today, but I wish to return it - for your hair," she said softly.

"'Tis a gift to you, milady. I have more," he said. She smiled, and her gaze went to the trencher where Christian had separated more bits of juicy meat to her side. Hungrily, she finished off the rest of the meal while Christian watched her.

After the meal, and after Christian cleaned and re-bandaged her arm in one of the anterooms of the Great Hall, Sean found herself with nothing to do. Well, almost. Making sure no one was watching her, she set out to return to the wooded area where she first arrived. Since the day that Malcolm challenged her, Sean wondered what had drawn her back to the woods. Was there a portal back home?

Part of her still wanted to return. This was not her time. Most of her wanted to stay. She was falling in love with Sir Christian, and was fond the people in the castle, and she was especially grateful to Lord Garrick and Lady Marta. So why was she going? She stopped walking halfway there and turned back towards the castle.

She saw Asta waiting for her at the castle gate. *Great*, Sean groaned inwardly. She wasn't up for a confrontation with Asta, and sincerely hoped the woman would get over her fixation with Christian. There was nothing worse than Asta setting herself up for a long fall, which was where Sean knew the lady-in-waiting was headed. She'd seen it before.

"Good day, Lady Asta," Sean called in a cheerful voice when she was close enough to be heard. Lady Asta just glared. She waited until she could reach out and grab Sean's arm. Fortunately for Sean, it was her good arm.

"What was the meaning of that?" she practically hissed.

"Meaning of *what*?" Sean asked, hoping she sounded more curious than tired of Asta's games.

"You know." Asta sounded more like a grade-schooler than the young lady she was supposed to be.

"Asta," Sean said sincerely. "I honestly have no idea to what you refer. If you could please let me pass - "

Asta gripped Sean's arm tighter. "You were sitting next to him - at the High Table," she spat.

Sean actually felt relieved Asta was up to her petty accusations again. At least she hadn't

seen the kiss her and Christian shared.

“I had no idea until we came into the Great Hall,” Sean defended herself with the truth.

“He is mine, and you are to stay away from him,” Asta warned. Again, Sean held herself back from asking “Or what?” because she had no idea what Asta might say. If Asta really had the powerful ties she claimed, Sean could be turned out with nowhere to go, or worse yet, be accused of being a witch. So she was silent. At least on that point.

There was something important she debated telling Asta, and wondered if it was really her place to do so. But, since Asta was under some misguided notion that Christian even *liked* her, Sean felt obligated to set the other woman straight.

“If you must know, Lord Garrick has allowed Sir Christian to call on me. You may speak with the Earl if you do not believe me.” Sean smiled as she pulled her arm free from Asta’s weakened grasp. She held her head high as she entered into the castle, leaving behind Asta, who had no idea if she should cry or scream.

From where he sat on Conqueror, Malcolm watched the exchange between the two ladies. Immediately following the meal, he’d asked Uncle Garrick about courting Lady Seana, and was quite surprised when he was refused. When Malcolm pressed for an explanation, Uncle Garrick refused him that as well.

And now, watching the confrontation between Lady Asta - a woman well-deserving of her title - and Lady Seana, Malcolm was reminded of his earlier suspicions. There were rumored to have been outlaws in the nearby forests for many years, dating back to before the turn of the century when Richard was king. Even if she was no outlaw, Malcolm knew she was no *lady*. *Maybe the Earl could refuse his nephew*, Malcolm thought, his mind calculating, *but could his uncle refuse the request of a Duke?*

Sean could barely sit through the noon meal several days later. Christian had asked her to meet him at the mews after the meal; he had something special for her. When Sean mentioned this to Una, the lady-in-waiting was just as ecstatic as Sean.

“’Tis wonderful to see Sir Christian happy again,” Una had said as they were getting dressed before the meal.

“So I understand,” Sean said casually. “Maybe if I knew what made him unhappy, I could better understand him,” Sean suggested.

“’Tis not my place to tell ye this,” Una started, but when Sean thought she wasn’t going to continue, the other woman did. “He would not speak overmuch when he first got here, and all we knew was that he’d wanted nothing t’do with the women. Didn’t want a thing to do with any of us. He has been here these past five years from Cornwall. He was supposed to marry a young lady there, and they say she had left Sir Christian at the altar for the eldest brother, who had lost his wife sometime before that.”

Sean sat down on the bed she’d been standing next to, holding her green gown she was in the process of changing into. Una’s story explained so much, and Sean had no reason to doubt it; Una was not the type of person to pass on unfounded gossip.

“Thank you for telling me, Una. I do understand now.”

“’Tis enough dwelling on what has past,” Una said cheerfully. “Ye have made him happy, and we are all glad for that,” she said, helping Sean put on the green gown.

“Not everyone is glad,” Sean said, remembering Asta.

“Ye should not worry about Lady Asta,” Una said, as if reading Sean’s thoughts. “The Lady Asta comes from a large family but her mother and father died when Asta was but four. She puts on airs to disguise her past that we already know about.” Una finished with Sean’s dress, and started to brush Sean’s hair.

“Lady Sean?” Una asked before Sean could assimilate what she’d just learned about Asta.

“Yes, Una?” Sean heard the puzzlement in Una’s voice, and knew it had to do with her multi-colored hair. *This one will be fun to explain*, Sean thought.

“Yer hair, milady, ’tis two colors.”

A thought came to Sean of how to explain her dyed hair.

“This gown that I am wearing. Did the fabric come green?” Sean knew it was a silly question, and smiled while she asked it.

“No, ’twas almost white,” Una replied, not yet knowing why she matched Sean’s smile. “What does it have to do with yer hair?”

“The fabric was dyed green then?” Sean asked.

“Aye, ’twas,” Una confirmed, starting to see where this was leading. Una smiled at the ingenuity of “hair dye.”

“Where I’m from, there’s a special kind of dye for hair.” Sean explained, but then noticed the smiling Una, because she’d already figured it out.

“Very different, Lady Sean. But why? This new color, the golden brown, is such a pretty shade. It ruins the rest of your locks.”

“Call me impulsive,” Sean muttered.

“Impulsive? ’Tis a word not known to me.”

“I like to do some things whenever they strike my fancy, sometimes without realizing what may happen. Like the dying of my hair.” Sean smiled. She’d watched in a crude mirror as Una braided locks at the side of her head and then bound them in the back with a ribbon, forming a sort of braided ring, while the rest of her hair was loose. Sean was nervous and excited. It was, after all, a first date.

“Mother says I am to accompany you this afternoon,” Sean heard, intruding in her thoughts of the upcoming afternoon. The voice, Kyra’s, brought her back to the present, and to her noon meal, which was surely cold by now. Kyra was leaning over Sir Robert to tell her this. *It only made sense*, Sean thought. Even though this was a simpler time, there were still chaperones when a couple went on a date.

Sean looked at Kyra knowingly, and then happened to look at Sir Robert. He smiled at Sean. Robert was glad Christian had come to his senses and asked the earl permission to court someone. Even though Robert knew he wouldn’t ever fully understand Sean - what man ever fully understood a woman? - he was happy for his friend.

“Certainly, Kyra. Are you ready now?” Sean said back. It felt oddly empty on her right side, since Christian had not been there, probably planning his surprise.

Kyra turned to her mother and asked permission to leave the table. After the countess

surveyed the room and the tables, she granted Kyra and Sean permission.

On the way to the mews, the teenager was just as happy as everyone else.

“I was but twelve winters when Sir Christian came here. He was moody all the time, never said much, unless Father or Cousin Malcolm asked him something. I am glad you made him happy, Sean,” Kyra chattered as they walked to the mews. Sean smiled, but wondered if Kyra as a chaperone was not the best idea. Kyra thought of Sean as a big sister, with whom she could share all her secrets. *What kind of a date would this really be?* Sean wondered.

Not that it mattered, for when they arrived at the mews, a big white falcon flew out and landed on Sean’s arm. She was about to shoo the big bird away - she wore no gauntlet on her arm and the talons threatened to pierce her skin - when she realized it was Snowy. Christian appeared in the doorway.

“I see ye’ve met yer surprise,” Christian smiled.

“She’s - mine?” Sean asked.

“I cannot get her to settle down, or get her to come to me anymore. I think she wants to have ye,” he explained, as he led Sean with Snowy, and Kyra into the mews.

“Of course, thank you. But I know almost nothing about falcons,” Sean said.

“Then I shall have to teach ye,” Christian said, knowing that she would not object to him as a teacher. “I should also like to teach you to ride,” he said.

“I know how to ride,” she said. “I just don’t really like what to ride on.”

“Horses are not bad creatures. In fact, they are better than some people I know.” Sean smiled, and then looked around to see if Kyra had heard Christian’s comment. Kyra was in the far corner of the mews, talking to one of the birds.

“That’s one of our messenger pigeons,” he said. “Mistress Kyra enjoys the birds as I do. But as to the horses - I shall allow you to select a horse for yourself, and care for it, and ye will see they are not as bad as ye think.”

“I shall have to think on that, Sir Christian.”

“I think,” Christian allowed, coming to stand face to face with Sean, “that when we are alone, ye can call me Christian. And I - ” He caressed her cheek, “will call ye Sean, since that is how ye wish it.” He leaned forward, and lightly touched his lips to hers. “I know not what it is you do to me,” he said softly.

“I know what you do to me,” she said boldly. “However, I would like to find Snowy’s perch. She grows heavy on my arm.”

“Of course,” he said in the same tone as before. He enjoyed her closeness, and wondered how he was ever able to keep his vow he’d made those five long years ago.

Several days later, Malcolm returned to St. Mark’s from a pleasurable - and quite successful in his own mind - journey. He was smiling and humming an unidentifiable tune, something he’d heard from one of the many minstrels throughout the years. Lady Seana would be his - in time.

After that vague meeting with his uncle some afternoons ago, Malcolm and Conqueror had set out for Grenville. Since *Uncle Garrick* had denied his request to court Lady Seana, he would have to find other means for the *Earl of St. Mark’s* to consent for Malcolm to court

Lady Seana. And for that, he needed a favor from the Duke of Grenville.

The Duke had once shown Malcolm an official parchment with the Grenville seal embossed on it, which decreed Malcolm was to inherit Grenville when the Duke passed on. It was the least the Duke could do after all Malcolm had accomplished in the name of the Duke of Grenville.

Malcolm was about to amend that proposition. Remembering all those mirrors in the Duke's hall, and that the Duke fancied himself a ladies man, well, then Malcolm had just the "lady" for the Duke. Lady Seana. Malcolm's hope was that if the Duke were to marry, and then *did* die, she would be part of the Duke's possessions that would be promised to Malcolm. And then the Lady Seana would belong to Malcolm.

The Duke listened with rapt attention to Malcolm as he described the young newcomer his uncle had extended his welcome to. Grenville was quite intrigued with her sword fighting ability, but couldn't help noticing the admiration and awe he heard in the Captain's voice. *Could it be that Malcolm wants this feisty lass for himself?* the Duke wondered, but kept those thoughts to himself.

"Yes, Sir Malcolm," said the Duke, rubbing his fingers together, then looking in the mirror he kept by his over-sized chair in his Great Hall. "Yes, she sounds like a lovely young woman. Lady Seana, you say? From where does she hail that she is thusly skilled?"

"I know not, my Duke. She is quite secretive on this matter."

"Ooh, I do love a good mystery," the Duke said, a gleam in his eye. "Sir Malcolm, it is my wish you bring this young lady to my estate, so that I may wed with her myself."

Malcolm tried hard to suppress his elation. This was exactly the reaction he'd hoped for. Now, he had to find a way to get the Lady Seana to go with him to Grenville. Willingly would be the best, but he was not above using other means in this instance.

Fourteen

The first snow fell just a few days before Yule. Excitement was in the air at St. Mark's, and it had a profound effect on everyone in the castle. Malcolm and his men had returned from collecting taxes, but at their first evening meal back, the Earl seemed wary of his nephew sitting next to him at the high table. Lord Garrick had been apprised of the strange goings on four months ago by Alfred, who told the Earl that the taxes and treasuries hadn't been matching up for many months prior.

At the Earl's inquiry, Alfred told Garrick that he had been keeping track of Malcolm's movements through Christian, who had noted the Captain of the Guard taking leave when the Earl did not require it. The young knight would record those times when Malcolm left the castle, how long he was gone for, and finally what monies and goods would be entered into Alfred's records. There were large discrepancies, Alfred told the Earl. These unauthorized trips, the last just before Hallowe'en, took twice as long and netted half the amount as the authorized trips, as Garrick noted when Alfred had shown him the two columns of numbers.

Now, Malcolm had apparently just returned from an unapproved absence, and Garrick knew it was only a matter of time before Malcolm's scheme was revealed.

Malcolm had not ignored his uncle's aloofness, but there was no way his uncle could know about Grenville. And even if his uncle found about his taxes going to Grenville, there was no way to connect it to Malcolm, or any of the knights. Malcolm's thoughts were now centered on that strange "lady" who had appeared those months ago at the Michaelmas Faire and had wormed her way into the good graces of his aunt, and into the heart of one of his best men. But he smiled wickedly at the thought of his plan that he had ever-so recently secured with the Duke that would establish Warrington and Grenville both as Malcolm's holdings.

Lady Asta, although Sean couldn't pinpoint the exact reason, had stopped pursuing Christian, and instead set her sights on Sir Malcolm. After each meal, a starry-eyed Asta would follow Malcolm out of the Great Hall, but would later be found silently weeping in the ladies' bower by one of the other ladies. But by the next meal, Asta was once again pursuing the Captain of the Guard.

Sean was relieved at this change of events, and she felt that she could breathe a little easier. There was still the matter of where she came from, and eventually telling Christian. *Did she have to tell him*, she wondered? Her reasoning mind told her that she had no choice *but* to tell him. She couldn't hide the truth forever, especially all those items in her rucksack, still hidden from view in the trunk in her room. Sean was more than ready to stay in this time with Christian, and she knew she would never be able to keep it secret. She would have to tell him. Eventually.

Christian couldn't have been happier. He'd won the heart of this strange - but in a good way - woman who suddenly dropped into his life. He knew he should tell Sean about Lady Felice, and soon. He needed to tell someone; it was something you did when you loved and trusted someone. And he was proud of Sean: for standing up for what she believed in, which was something *he* didn't always do; and for overcoming something she hated, and had inquired about learning to ride a horse.

And Sean felt like she was finally home. Sean hadn't quite understood Robert Frost's

quote, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in,” when she lived with her parents. But here, the Earl and Countess welcomed her, and especially Kyra; and she wanted to stay.

The Great Hall was buzzing with excitement as everyone helped clear the rushes, sweep the floors, air out the tapestries and make the Hall shine for the Yuletide festivities. But with the snow came a chill wind, which forced everyone to remain inside the castle walls.

Christmas Eve was the biggest celebration of feasting and dancing and singing Sean had ever seen, including the reenactments at the Guild. There was plenty of spiced ale to go around, both Christian and Sean quite enjoying it, and receiving stern looks from both Malcolm and Asta. Lord Garrick had spoken to his nephew, explaining that he was not Christian’s keeper, and that this was a time of celebration.

Late into the night, there was a troubadour who sang of lovers who could not be together because of a feud between their families. At the High Table, and bored with an early version of *Romeo & Juliet*, Sean rested her head on Christian’s shoulder. Weary from the preparations she’d helped with earlier that day, her eyelids felt heavy, and within moments, she’d drifted off to sleep. When her head slipped, it jolted her awake.

“I should return to my room. The hour is late, and I am sleepy,” she said to Christian.

“I will escort ye,” he said, helping her stand, and then rising himself. With his hand on the small of her back, he led her to where the Earl sat at the High Table.

“Lord Garrick, I will be escorting the Lady Sean away this eve. Thank ye for this wonderful meal and celebration.”

“’Tis naught, Christian. We are your family; do not worry about thanking us.” The Earl smiled knowingly at them as they left the Great Hall.

It seemed right, Sean thought. Right that it was *Christian* she loved. She’d realized it the day he’d given her Snowy almost two months ago. And now, they stood in the doorway of her room - still a guest room, but yet something more now - on Christmas Eve, and Sean suddenly felt shy. Should she ask him in, or take her leave from the doorway?

She stood in the open entry way, looking down at her fidgeting feet. Although she wore mostly long dresses or kirtles, she still wore her black boots, and they were becoming quite worn, she noticed as she looked at them instead of Christian.

Christian reached out his hand and lifted her face to look up at him.

“Shall I escort ye into yer room, m’lady?”

Yes, she wanted to say, but didn’t trust herself to speak. He was close enough to her she could feel his warmth. A lump formed in her throat, and all she could do was answer his question with a small nod of her head.

With his hand on her chin, he drew her closer as he leaned down and kissed her gently. His lips teased at her mouth, and she kissed him back, parting her lips against his. Christian released her and looked into her eyes.

“Sean?” he asked, his voice sounding as if he too had a lump preventing him from speaking. In reply, she kissed him again, and he guided them into the room and closed the large door behind them.

Only one candle was lit on the nightstand in Sean's room. She was glad Christian remembered to bolt the doorway, for she had started feeling a bit edgy, her stomach seemed full of butterflies. She had dreamed of this from the moment she'd seen Christian on the mock-battlefield all those months ago.

He stood in front of her, and reached out and caressed her cheek. She closed her eyes and felt the warmth in his fingers as they slowly slid down her cheek to her neck, to her shoulder. His fingers hesitated a moment, but then she felt his lips touch hers again, and his tongue parted her lips. Both his hands moved down her sides, and rested on her hips. He pressed her to him, and deepened the kiss; Sean ran her fingers through his hair.

His hands moved sensually, caressing her. Sean felt him growing hard through his braies, and she moved closer to him. Her hands slid over his back, over his tunic, and down towards his waist, where she pulled the loosely tucked-in tunic out of the braies. Sean moved her hand under the tunic, lifting it, feeling his warm, smooth skin under her hands. Christian's hands moved up her thighs, lifting her dress. Sean felt the heat from his hands on her skin, sending surges of warmth through her.

Christian stepped back, breaking the kiss, and Sean allowed him to pull the dress over her head. Tentatively, he reached out and caressed one of her nipples with his fingertips. Why had he waited so long to be with her like this? Ever since he'd met with her on the mock-battlefield, he had identified those butterfly-like flutters as love. Sean closed her eyes, feeling an electric charge run through her at his touch.

She felt his fingers leave her skin, and she opened her eyes to see him pull his dark tunic over his head and let it fall to the floor with her dress. She reached out and touched his chest with her fingertips, then slid both hands on his skin, front and back. Christian gently cupped her breast, kissing and teasing the nipple with his tongue.

Her fingers caressed his stomach and waist, tangling in the ties on the braies, and then loosening them. She slid her hands over his thighs and caressed his smooth skin. He took her hands in his and helped her slide the braies off, onto the floor with the tunic and her dress.

Still holding Sean's hands, he led her to the bed. She sat down on the edge, and Christian kneeled down in front of her.

"Are ye certain ye wish more?" he asked, breathlessly. Sean was only able to nod. His hands caressed her arms, then shoulders, then her breasts, his fingers lightly tickled her stomach. As his fingers slid into the waistband of her panties, he raised his eyebrow. He'd never seen anything like this before, and he'd seen some different things in his life. Sean knew she was risking a great deal, but she smiled at his confused look, and helped him slide the panties off, adding them to the other clothing.

"But—" he began. Sean put her finger over his lips to quiet him.

"Another time," she whispered. In understanding, he slid his hands up her legs to rest on her waist. She ran her fingers through his long, thick blond hair, and looked intently into his blue eyes, which watched her back just as intently. Sean moistened her lips and bent her head towards him, and he came up to meet her lips fiercely, their tongues intertwining.

Christian nudged her back on the bed, on her back, he covering her. He caressed her face, and neck, then her breasts with his lips. When his hand rested on her stomach, the butterflies returned. She reached up and intertwined her fingers in his hair.

Their eyes never broke contact, even as Christian, more aroused than any woman ever made him, slid inside Sean, her body arching up to meet his. As they started to move together, Sean hooked her legs around him, drawing him deeper into her. As they moved, she could feel a fullness building up - something that no one else made her feel before. Christian still watched her face, his eyes searching hers. He kissed her then, their lips and thighs knowing the rhythm on their own, as if it were meant to be.

Still kissing Sean, Christian moved his hands to rest on her thighs, thrusting more intensely. Not knowing what to do, Sean could only grab the sheet on either side of her, arching into him.

She wanted to close her eyes, to just *feel* the thrusts and warm sensations building up, and block out the outside world, but instead, she kept her eyes on his handsome face, as they moved together in this dance as old as time.

Christian was moving faster, and Sean felt a final surge of warmth and then a shudder. She called out his name. He stopped moving after a final forceful thrust in, and she felt his release inside her. No one ever made her do that before. The men in her life were always after satisfaction for themselves, never her. So this was what a “woman’s pleasure” was, Sean smiled, looking at Christian. He moved his hand to caress her cheek, and then he tenderly kissed her lips.

“I should return to my barracks,” he said, not moving from atop her. “’Tis quite late.”

“It’s Christmas,” Sean pointed out. “May I be bold?” she ventured.

“Aye,” he nodded, for she had already been bold.

“Stay with me tonight?” she asked.

Fifteen

Christian was silent at her question, torn between what he wanted and what he knew he should do. He rolled on the bed next to her and propped himself up on his elbow, where he could see her. She made no move to cover herself.

“I would very much with to stay with ye, Sean. What we must do, however,” he started to leave the bed, “is light the fire so it is warm.” So saying, he did get out of the bed, and went over to the fireplace, which was on the opposite wall.

While Christian was lighting the fire, Sean moved the pillows from the bed to the floor in front the of the fireplace. Then she picked up his tunic and pulled the oversized shirt over her head. It was very warm and comfortable, as was the pillow she sat down on. When the fire was lit, Christian put on his braies, and sat down on a pillow behind Sean. She leaned back into him, and he put his arms around her.

“I am most curious, m’lady, about that garment you wear,” he said, his mouth close to her ear, ready to nibble it. Sean put her head back against Christian’s chest and closed her eyes. Where to begin? She knew this day would come, just not as soon as it really did.

“They’re called ‘panties,’” she said, figuring just answering the question was the best way to begin, and remembering that more than once giving more information than was necessary had cost her.

“I know nothing of from where ye hail,” Christian said, hoping she would reveal the information to him that he’d overheard her telling Una some months ago.

“No one does,” she said softly. “It’s so far away, it seems like a distant memory.” Sean knew she should be sad, homesick, but the truth was, she wasn’t. “Since I arrived, you and Sir Malcolm have been wanting to know where I came from - as I am a woman who carries a sword,” Sean said. She plunged right in, as she did when she told Una.

“I’m from the future,” she said, and then was silent. She heard the crackling of the fire, and Christian’s calm breathing. “Christian?” she asked softly, turning her head to look up at him.

“I know,” he replied, just as soft. “And I thank ye for telling the truth.”

“How did you know?” Sean asked, curious, for she had only told Una, a person Sean felt would not betray her secret. The Lady Marta had known where Sean was from, which had taken Sean aback. But how was it that Christian knew?

“I must be honest with ye as well. That day I met ye on the practice field with the staves, I had heard ye speaking earlier. It was quite by accident, but - but I heard ye speak my name and I wished to hear more. I believe ‘twas Una ye were speaking with that morn.”

Sean turned to face the fire once more, the dancing flames mesmerizing her.

“Yes, it was.” Surprisingly, she was not angry that it was Christian who overheard her conversation that day. “I had to tell someone. I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t know you then. You would have thought I was crazy,” she said, but then added, “Sir Malcolm already thought I was a thief from Sherwood Forest.” Christian laughed.

“And while we’re being honest, there is something else I must tell you,” Sean said, rising, and going over to the trunk. She dug down to the bottom to her rucksack, to the small billfold of now-useless items, and removed a picture of her and Chris Marks. She returned to

Christian's lap.

"Do you remember the day we practiced with the wooden swords, and I said I knew someone who reminded me of those swords, and who might be a match for the Lady Asta?" she asked. Christian was silent for a moment, thinking, and then when he remembered the incident, he smiled.

"Aye, I do," he said. "But why do ye mention this now?" he asked, his lips almost touching her hair.

"This is called a photograph," she said, showing him the tiny picture. "I don't know if you can see who is in it in this light." Christian leaned forward over Sean, holding the odd colorful piece of paper towards the firelight. He looked at the people. He turned over the paper, examining it carefully.

"This is remarkable. How did ye get on this odd piece of parchment?" he asked. It was Sean's turn to be quiet, searching her memory.

Her brother, Grady, had always been trying new things. One week he wanted to be an accountant, but wasn't very good with the numbers. He'd been skydiving and hang gliding; had taken a biking tour of the US, and a camping tour of Europe. In the two years he'd been at their local community college, he'd had a dozen different majors before completely dropping out. Grady was four years older than Sean, and he was the reason her parents pushed her to succeed where they thought Grady was a failure. One of his hobbies had been photography one year, and he turned one of the bathrooms into a darkroom. Sean, many afternoons by the eerie red light, had eagerly watched him mix the solutions and develop the pictures on to the large glossy white papers and hang them up to dry. How could she explain all that to Christian? But then a different thought struck her.

"You have seen yourself in a looking glass, yes?" she asked him.

"'Tis an odd query, m'lady," he said, smiling, but then answered, "Yes, I have."

Her voice was a whisper when she spoke again. "Look at the other person in that picture," she instructed.

He said nothing for almost a minute. *How did I get on this odd piece of parchment?* he wondered, *and with Lady Sean?* He didn't know how to ask the question, either.

The longer he stared at it, the more questions he had. But, in a moment of clarity, everything clicked into place. She was from the future with an extraordinary picture of a man who looked like him, only who wasn't him. Lady Sean had told him the man on this piece of paper was a love match for Lady Asta, but that was impossible. The man on the paper was with Sean. That would mean...

"Ye searched for me because I look like this man on the parchment?" he finally asked in disbelief.

Sean sighed, exhaling raggedly. "Yeah," she admitted. "That was why I wanted to see you, meet you, talk with you." He was quiet. Sean spoke again. "You can leave if you must."

"And why would I want do that, m'lady?" Christian asked. "Ye have made me laugh again, something I never thought I would do after — " he cut himself off abruptly, realizing what he was about to say.

"After what?" she asked softly. "The man in that picture is Chris Marks," she said, feeling that if she opened up, he would do the same. "I thought he loved me, but was never

interested in anything I was. He didn't enjoy what I enjoy," she said.

"And what is it that ye enjoy?" he asked.

"Swordplay. And fighting. And historical reenactments." She said the last even though she figured he didn't know what it was.

"Ye enjoyed pretending ye were living *now*? That is most interesting." He became silent again, and closed his eyes, enjoying the warmth of this woman who sat against him, this woman he'd made love with, this woman who seemed to sacrifice everything - including the future - to be with him. He felt her shift position and opened his eyes. She was settling back against him, but he noticed she was watching the fire. He followed her gaze and saw the paper, in the fire, curling from the heat, the edges touched by the flames.

"I don't need that anymore. This is where I belong," she said softly, and rested her head back against Christian's chest.

"Her name was Lady Felice, and she was my betrothed," Christian heard himself say. "Her father owned the neighboring estate, which was her dowry. I was the fourth son, and landless. My father, Lord Boyce, saw this as an opportunity for me to have land and be a baron in my own right. And Lord Alric was a good friend of my father," he said with obvious contempt. "My eldest brother, Victor, had married when he was 20 and I was but six. Years later, Reid, the second eldest, joined the clergy. He claimed it was his calling." Sean thought she heard cynicism in his voice. Christian continued, "Grant, only a year older than me, became a mercenary, and joined the Crusades. I followed Grant.

"Five years ago, I returned to Cornwall, expecting to be married. I was a year older than Victor was when he married, but I had seen a lot more of the world than he had. To my surprise, I found that Victor's wife had died while I was on Crusade." Christian was quiet then, trying to find the right words. "The day I returned was to be my wedding day. We waited several hours." His voice became bitter so that it wouldn't break during his retelling.

"As the sun set, a messenger entered the church and told us the Lady Felice would not be arriving, as she had wed with Victor earlier that morn." Christian was silent for a long while, staring at the crackling fire before continuing.

"I traveled for a year, a wayward, landless mercenary. Earl Garrick watched me spar one day in Warrington, and asked me to join up with him. The following year, a few of the men and I went on Prince Edward's Crusade. I returned to St. Mark's two years later. All I knew was killing and betrayal. Malcolm had joked that I should live in the village of Blackwater, I was always gloomy. And because of Lady Felice, I had vowed never to love anyone again."

Sean turned around to face Christian. She touched his lips with hers gently. Hearing the story from him was much more moving than when Una told her a few months back. But he was honest with her, as she'd been with him.

"And now?" Sean asked, kissing him again.

"I know not what I feel," he said. "'Tis very confusing," he admitted. "I do not like not knowing."

"I understand. I know what I feel, and it's something I know I never felt before." Finally admitting it to herself, she said aloud, "I love you."

Christian was silent, unable to bring himself to say those very same words to her. God knew he wanted to tell her, and promise her the world. But he couldn't.

“Do not, Sean. I have nothing. I am a landless knight. I cannot promise ye anything,” he said sadly.

“I don’t understand,” she frowned.

“Another time, m’lady. The hour is well into Christmas morn, and we should sleep,” he suggested, yawning to prove his point.

“I agree,” she said, and snuggled into his chest.

Sixteen

Christmas Day was the first white Christmas Sean could remember. The Great Hall was drafty, but her room was cozy and warm, and the best Christmas present she could ever ask for was waking up in Christian's arms. Sometime during the night, he had moved them both to the bed, and she stretched out, like a cat waking up from a long nap.

Christian had returned to the barracks sometime after their talk in front of the fire to put on a different tunic, and then returned to Sean's comfortable bed, which was better than any pallet he could have asked for. Sean noticed the light grey tunic Christian now wore, and realized she still had on his dark tunic - which she saw in the light was green - from the night before.

"Good morn," Christian said. He was sitting up, his back against the small headboard. Sean smiled. *How long had he been watching her?* she wondered.

"Morning," she said. "I'm starved. It breakfast ready?"

"Ye've missed the morning meal. 'Tis almost time for the midday meal," he smiled at her. Sean liked his smile. She was glad he smiled. She sat up.

"Una?"

"She has not been here this morn. I believe she saw us leave together last eve."

Sean fell back on the pillows.

"Asta," she groaned.

"And Malcolm," Christian added. Damn it, he was smiling again, she saw. It was a playful, boyish smile, and she loved to see it on his handsome face. And last night, by destroying that picture, she would never again compare Christian to anyone she may have known before. That was her old life, a thing of the past.

She sat up again, and swung her bare legs over the side of the bed. Leaning over Christian, she opened the trunk, took out her leggings, and pulled them on. She found a pair of socks she'd washed the previous week, and stuffed her feet into the stiff pair that she would have preferred warm and fluffy from the dryer. She picked up the dagger that she'd always carried hidden in the top of her boot, but put it back in the trunk. It was, after all, Christmas. Lastly, she pulled on her boots, and was ready to enter the Great Hall and face Malcolm and Asta.

For that pleasure, however, she had to wait until the evening meal. By the time Christian and Sean reached the Hall, only Kyra and Sir Robert remained at the High Table.

"Good afternoon to you, Sir Christian and Lady Sean," Sir Robert greeted them. Two of the servers had seen them enter, and by the time they reached their seats, their lunch was waiting for them.

Christian smiled back at his friend. "How good it is ye are able to join us this festive noon," he said.

"You are looking well, friend," Robert said once they sat down.

"As are ye. St. Mark's favors ye," Christian said, and started eating his meal heartily. He noticed Sean had her own trencher, which was usually the case during holidays; extra dishes were prepared, but not everyone supped at every meal.

"Kyra has told me the Earl has granted you permission to court the Lady Sean," Robert

said to Christian, even though Sean sat between the two friends.

Christian nodded, and then took a large drink of ale to wash down the food. He was ravenous, which had everything to do with how he'd spent the previous night. Sean too, ate her lunch quickly, but not with as much gusto as Christian had.

"I have news to share with you, friend," Robert said again. Christian looked up. It had been a while since Robert had sounded happy. Most of the time, Robert just took things as they came, accepting his lot.

"The Earl has allowed me to court Mistress Kyra. I spoke with him just this past hour," Robert said.

Christian swallowed the last bit of ale. "'Tis wonderful, Robert," he said, smiling.

Sean leaned back and touched Kyra's arm; Kyra leaned back in response.

"Kyra, that's great! I'm happy for you. Robert is a great guy, I'm sure." Kyra's ear-to-ear grin told Sean all she needed to know. It was bound to happen, Sean realized. Robert had been spending more time at St. Mark's, and accompanied her and Christian - with Kyra "chaperoning them" - on their outings. Recently, it had become like double-dating, Sean thought, and now she knew why.

The evening meal was just after the sun had set, and the two couples were still in the Great Hall. They had moved their seats so the women were now next to each other, with Sean next to Sir Robert. Christian and Robert were boasting about their conquests, on and off the battlefield. Kyra and Sean were discussing riding, the birds, how Kyra should wear her hair, and why Sean's hair was two-toned, which Kyra found both intriguing and amusing.

Sir Malcolm was the first one to enter the Great Hall as the sun was setting. The Earl and Countess followed, with some of the knights, and then Lady Asta.

Immediately, Sean noticed Asta was wearing a deep blue kirtle, instead of her traditional white. Despite the animosity that Asta displayed towards Sean, Sean thought Asta was beautiful with the dark blue against her light blue eyes and blonde hair. It was much better than her usual stark white.

However, if looks could kill, Malcolm would have struck down both Sean and Christian. Remembering all that had transpired between Lady Seana, Sir Christian, Uncle Garrick, and the responses Malcolm had received from his uncle, even a simpleton could realize what had transpired. Malcolm was furious for not seeing it sooner. Sir Christian had asked Earl Garrick permission to court Lady Seana! And the Earl had granted it!

This would certainly add a kink in his grand scheme, but he'd find a way to make good on his promise. Settling himself in his seat next to his uncle, Malcolm smiled at the way the Duke had laughingly told Malcolm to "get him" this intriguing Lady Seana. It would be a challenge, thought Malcolm, especially since she had considerable fighting skills. It would have to be carried out in such a way that Lady Seana would not know what was to happen until it was too late.

Surprisingly, the meal was uneventful. As it was Christmas night, and height of the Yuletide season, there were to be many more calm peaceful evenings at the Castle of St. Mark's. And as a Yuletide gift, Lady Marta had granted the room Sean was staying in to be her

own quarters, if she so wished. The next week passed in a blur of feasting and Yuletide merriment. It all went too quick for Sean.

At the noon feast on New Year's Eve, Sir Christian - against his better judgment - gave the Earl leave to make a special announcement. He rose, and tapped his goblet with his eating knife. When all was silent, and those assembled watching him, the Earl cleared his throat and spoke in a clear voice so all could hear.

“’Tis my pleasure to announce, with the permission of Sir Christian, that he and Lady Seana have been formally betrothed! Here’s to Sir Christian and Lady Sean!” There were cries of “Hear! Hear!” throughout the Great Hall, and glasses raised to them. For his part, even though he had allowed the Earl to make the happy announcement, Christian still wanted to hide under the table.

He and Sean had talked endlessly about Christian not having anywhere to live once they were wed, and that he didn’t have any property or assets of his own. Sean assured him everything would work out in the end. Christian doubted her words. There was one remote possibility that could net Christian some monetary assets, and that was if the Earl acted upon Malcolm’s thievery, and confronted the Captain of the Guard with his falsified numbers, against the tallies in Alfred’s ledger. *If*, Christian thought, actually resentful. *When would that be?*

In the end, however, Christian and Sean allowed the Earl to announce their betrothal, and set the wedding for that autumn, 1276. Sir Robert hardily thumped Christian’s shoulders, and Kyra and Sean squealed with delight.

After the meal, Sean and Kyra chattered endlessly, as they walked together through the snow, which had originally fallen on Christmas Eve, and every few days replenished itself with several inches of fat white flakes. Sean and Kyra wore heavy cloaks Lady Marta had given them over the Yuletide week, and Kyra had a pair of fuzzy mittens. Sean, who had not been prepared for the winter, used her gauntlets as gloves.

Now, at a stop in the conversation and stroll, she scooped up some snow in her palm and smoothed it out. She looked at Kyra, and smiled a little bit, but then another idea struck her - and she let her snowball fly and it lightly struck Christian in his side.

Christian and Robert were wearing heavier tunics than they normally wore, and each had a lighter tunic underneath. They had been walking behind the women, watching how they interacted with each other. Christian had not told his friend about Sean’s intriguing origins; that was not for him to tell. When the ladies had stopped walking, Kyra stood and looked about, drawing in a deep cleansing breath of cold winter air.

But Christian had noticed Sean as she bent down to scoop up the snow. He watched her, but did not let her see him observing her. In fact, when he saw her look up at Kyra, but then turn away, he suspected he knew what was to happen.

The snowball hit his outer tunic, and a heartbeat later, another snowball struck Sean’s cloak on her side. She smiled at Christian, and tossed another his way. He tried to catch it, but it was too fast, and stopped against his shoulder. He smiled at her, and lobbed another. She ducked, and it landed on the ground this time. She tossed another one, this time at Kyra.

The younger woman squealed, looked over at Sean, and Kyra scooped up her own snow. She looked at Sean again, and then tossed her snowball at Sir Robert.

It was a few hours later when the four returned to the Great Hall, wet, covered in snow, and laughing heartily. There were several men seated at one of the lower trestle tables, deep in discussion when the two couples came in. Some of the men looked up at the clamor they made as they shook off their snow-covered tunics and boots.

Malcolm was among them, and Sean would not easily forget the look of contempt he shot her direction, and then glanced over at Christian with an almost disapproving look. As if guided by Malcolm's air of derision, the four hastily warmed up by the small fire that was still burning, and hurried from the Great Room.

They sought refuge in Sean's quarters, as it was the nearest to the Great Hall.

"If I may ask, what was Sir Malcolm about?" Robert asked when the outer tunics, cloaks, and mittens were drying by Sean's fire.

"I know not," Sean said, "but it may have to do with Christian and me, and the announcement of the Earl earlier this day. There has to be something about it he does not like."

She looked at Christian while she spoke, and he nodded in agreement.

Kyra was warming her hands at the fire, and seemed to be speaking to herself. "Cousin Malcolm has not been himself these last few months..."

Robert went over to her side. "Why do you speak thus?" She looked away from the fire and into Robert's face.

"It as if he has something he his distracted with," Kyra again spoke absently. "I have seen many of the knights and ladies when their mind is set on something special, and I see that look on Cousin Malcolm's face now."

Robert looked away from Kyra over to Christian and Sean.

"Think you she speaks the truth?" he asked.

Sean and Christian looked at each other. "I do," Sean ventured to say. "There are times when he is most confusing. One moment, he seems to tolerate my being here at St. Mark's, and the next he is spiteful and rude, with no reasoning. I cannot explain it better than that."

"Although he is my Captain, and cousin to my liege-lord, I have no other explanation myself. I do believe Sean and Mistress Kyra have the right of it this time," Christian said after a moment.

"If that is the truth, how do we find out what it is that occupies Sir Malcolm?" Sean asked them.

"Let us think on it." Robert suggested, looking at Kyra as he spoke.

"My thought in this matter," Christian added, "would to be not to allow Malcolm to be suspicious of our inquiries. I fear the consequences if he learn of this."

"Then we are all agreed on that matter," Robert spoke for all of them, as they lapsed into a silence while drying off from the chill that more than the snow had left them with.

Seventeen

One cold morning near the end of January, as the morning meal drew to an end, Christian told Sean he'd have to be leaving for a few days to collect the winter's taxes. Christian had explained to Sean the Earl's taxes were collected once during each of the seasons, and only quite recently did he gather the courage to tell her of Malcolm's unauthorized trips and suspicious absences.

"I shall be gone for only three days, Sean," he said softly, noting the look in her eyes he could only interpret as a longing look, telling him she'd miss him.

"I shall miss you too, m'lady," he smiled at her. She smiled back, recognizing the humor in his words. Over the past few weeks, being called "m'lady" or "Lady Sean" had started to grow on her.

"If you wish it, I've heard it said the Mistress Kyra would like to repay you for your friendship by working with you on your riding." He held up a gloved hand before she could object. "I am aware you do not enjoy this, but have started to learn. Mistress Kyra has a small pony you could borrow at first, as a way to become used to the horses. If you realize you still do not like it, I will not bother you on this matter any further."

Sean looked into his face. She realized there were laugh lines around his eyes, and despite the hard veneer, his face was soft, and as much as she wanted to reach out and touch his soft face, she knew this was inappropriate behavior for a lady at the High Table.

"As you wish, I shall try," she replied softly.

When Malcolm stood up from his place at the High Table, Christian stood also. A half dozen other knights who were sitting at the trestle tables stood as well. Sean recognized Owen, Gilmore and Devlin, and the dark-haired knight that reminded her of Christian's brother. There were two others that Sean only knew from seeing them at the meals. The Company assembled, saluted the Earl, and left the Great Hall.

True to his word, Christian was away for only three days. But for Sean it seemed like three weeks. Just six months ago, she was a slave to her computer calendar, relying on its scheduling features to tell her where to be when. But here, it was as if time ceased to be of the utmost importance. You didn't have meetings to attend, emails to send, pressing documents that needed your immediate attention, worrying about what time your flight was or when the car would pick you up, a nagging mother wondering why you haven't called -

That brought Sean up short, out of her revelry. Her mother. Her parents. What was happening to them in her time? She'd read stories of time travel where, even though the traveler spent months or years in the past, it was as if no time passed in the traveler's own time. Was this what was happening? Not that it mattered. She was here, where she felt like she truly belonged. And besides, she thought to herself with a wry smile, there was no way for her to return anyway.

Left for three days with her thoughts, and having her mind wander to places further than she'd liked, Sean looked out at the practice field in the early morning of the third day. While there was still snow in some parts of the field that were hidden in the shade, the hard frozen

ground peered through in many places.

Having just woken from the sunbeam that shone in her chamber right on her pillow, she scrambled out of bed and dressed in her leggings, the green tunic Christian had allowed her to keep, and her well-worn boots. She put on her heavy cloak, grabbed her staff from the corner of the room where it had long stood, and headed out for a date with a straw dummy.

On her way out, she passed Kyra's rooms, and peered in through the doorway. The young Lady of the Castle was still asleep, burrowed under the many covers on her bed. Sean chose not to wake her. Outside, the cold air was crisp, and it almost hurt to breathe. She could see her breath like puffs of smoke in the morning air. Opening her cloak, nearly flinging the sides over her shoulder, she held her staff at the ready, and then moved towards the dummy.

She was stiff moving at first, as the last time she'd really worked out had been the day of her bout with Sir Malcolm. Gradually, as she struck and kicked and whirled - and finally removed her cloak - she began to loosen up her muscles, and moved more agilely than when she first came outside. She'd tossed aside the cloak not only because was it getting in the way, it was quite warm. No, she amended her thought, it was that she was working up a sweat so the cloak seemed overly warm to her.

While she sparred, she thought of all she'd learned in her few months of medieval times in the real Middle Ages. In the 21st century, basically anyone with good credit and enough money could own property. Here, you had to be born into the family. But even that wasn't enough. She'd learned the Earl had done many favors and paid higher taxes to the kings to own three land holdings. Earl Garrick was wealthy and well-connected, and so was able to provide for his sons, and even a nephew. A nephew that was unworthy, Sean suspected, remembering Christian telling her about the tax collecting. Christian had ridden out with Malcolm three days ago, so Sean knew they would return when they said. Three days for the towns of Warrington, Blackwater, and finally St. Mark's.

The other factor in determining land ownership was your birth order. Sure, Sean had know that many "second sons" joined the clergy from her studies, but the thought of a fourth son - as Christian was - had never occurred to her. She'd told him it would all be okay. But now that Sean was better able to understand the practical workings of the Middle Ages, would it really be all right? Would the Earl believe his nephew was stealing from him? And, as Sean's nosy mind asked, why is he even doing this? What sort of personal gain is it for?

Lost in all her thoughts, Sean did not know how much time had passed and how long she'd been outside. Only that when she was sufficiently exhausted, and felt most of her frustrations gone, did she lean the staff against the dummy, pick up her cloak from the ground, and retrieve the staff again.

Blocking her way off the field was a knight, clad in armor and wearing his helm. He stood relaxed, but as a knight, he was always on alert. Sean walked right into the man in chainmail without even noticing he was there. The man wore no surcoat, no colors to identify who he was, other than a faded tassel of ribbon on the top of the helm that hid all his features, except his eyes.

Sean stepped to her right. The knight blocked her. She moved back to the left, and the

knight mirrored her move.

“If you please, Sir Knight,” Sean said, remembering she was always told she could catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. Her parents loved clichés, she realized some time ago. It got to be really old really quickly. “I would like to return to the castle, and ‘twould appear the way is blocked.”

The knight stood still and did not move.

“May I pass?” she tried again, wondering who the knight was, why he didn’t move, and why he didn’t speak. Maybe he didn’t know who she was. Or maybe he did. She studied the only part of him she *could* see, his eyes through the slits of the helm.

Thinking she recognized something, she looked at the tassel on the helm again for some sort of confirmation. Some of the tassels were dirty grey, and others were - yeah, that could have been green at one time, she realized. Suspecting very strongly she knew who it was, she held up her staff and spoke again,

“Move it, buster.” The eyes hiding in the helm changed, and Sean knew the knight smiled. And to her surprise, the knight stood aside. Then it was Sean’s turn to smile. She walked past the knight, then turned back to him.

“I thought you wouldn’t be back until the evening meal,” she said casually.

The knight was still a moment, and then put his head down, pulled off the helm, and took off the chain mail hood. He shook out his blonde hair, and then looked up and smiled at Sean.

“When did ye know ‘twas me?” he asked.

“When your eyes smiled.”

Still unaccustomed to the gesture, Christian reached out and beckoned Sean to him, and he hugged her. Not a lover’s embrace, this was a genuine hug.

“I’ve missed ye,” he said into her hair.

“And I you,” she told his surcoat. When she looked up at him was when he kissed her.

By the time Alfred had completed the tally, and while it was a standard accounting for January, it was less than the income collected in September. But it was luxurious compared to Malcolm’s paltry bringings from his most recent unauthorized visit.

Now, Alfred, Lord Garrick, and Christian gathered in Alfred’s study, a room in a cool part of the castle, away from prying eyes. However, it was near enough the Great Hall, which was the central location of St. Mark’s, and oddly made it accessible to anyone. If you knew which corridors to follow, that was.

The Earl seated himself in the chair at Alfred’s desk, and looked at the ledger parchments spread out on the smooth top. Christian remained standing near the door. Alfred stood at the side of the desk on the Earl’s right. Alfred steadied his mind, as he was about to make a serious accusation when the Earl was finished looking at the numbers and sums and notations.

Finally, after agonizing moments, the Earl looked up, first at Christian guarding the door, and then at Alfred.

“You may speak. I know there is something on your mind.”

“Frankly, my Lord?”

“Aye,” answered the Earl.

Alfred drew a deep breath. “After comparing the income and goods taken in during the year of 1275, my thoughts are that something has changed in the last six months. There have been more outings, but overall less has come in. Taxes were collected four times in a year - once per season - and these show the usual annual increase.

“‘Tis these smaller side trips of which I speak, where Sir Malcolm and only two men ride out. These men are always Sir Morgan and Sir Gilmore. These are not authorized trips, my Lord, and they have only started in the last seven...” Alfred paused to look at the parchment on his desktop. “...eight months, since the springtime, in early June, which was the first trip. At that time, I had no reason to question the trip, as the authorized collection for the spring was early, at the end of March.” Here Alfred stopped for a moment, collecting his thoughts.

“I believe Sir Malcolm is pursuing - or being pursued by - another Lord in this realm for his own personal gain. I realize this is very honest on my part, my Lord, and that he is your own nephew. I understand the penalty is grave if my accusations prove to be wrong.”

Earl Garrick was silent as he sat, thinking on Alfred’s words. This was a serious accusation, it was true. But there had been something different in Malcolm, the Earl realized, since the summertime. His first thought was to attribute these changes to the odd young woman he’d allowed Sir Christian to court, and to wed later this year. But he realized she made her appearance at St. Mark’s at the Michaelmas Fair, which was at the end of September. So, if not the influence of Lady Sean, what had changed in Malcolm? Was Alfred right? That Malcolm planned all this? If his nephew was stealing from St. Mark’s, where was it going? In to Malcolm’s personal coffers, or was it as Alfred suggested?

The Earl shifted in the seat several times, looking at the parchments, and Christian, and Alfred, as he thought. Finally, he realized he had to say something, as both men standing seemed to shift as often as the Earl did.

“I believe,” the Earl started to say, looking at Alfred, who started to cower and shrink back from the anger he imagined in the Earl, having said such damning words, “that you have the right of it, Alfred. You have been faithful to me and the Estate of St. Mark’s these long years. I know you do not make this accusation lightly, and I do believe there can be no other explanation.”

Alfred was stunned at the Earl’s agreement with him, but a glance at Christian told the old steward that Christian seemed to have expected the Earl to agree with Alfred’s assessment.

The Earl spoke to both men. “How should we find out where these goods and monies are going? Have either of you heard of nearby towns or duchies who suddenly have new-found wealth?”

Again, Alfred seemed speechless, and this time, Christian appeared not to know either. Their Earl had surprised them by asking the opinions of an elderly steward and a simple knight. But it was clear he was asking for their thoughts on this matter.

Remembering the conversation Christian had had with Sir Robert, Lady Sean and Mistress Kyra, he offered parts of their discussion to the Earl.

“‘Tis true, Sir Malcolm has been acting differently since the Summer, and my own initial thought would be because of Lady Sean’s arrival -” At this, the Earl raised his eyebrows at Christian’s implied suggestion, “- however, I have concluded this cannot be the reason, as

Lady Sean arrived the day of the Michaelmas Faire. Since the Lady Sean and I are betrothed, we have had a great many conversations, sometimes even on this very matter.” At this, both the Earl and Alfred looked at him in surprise.

Christian shifted uncomfortably from where he was standing, but continued.

“’Twas only recent I trusted myself to tell her of this. I know not how long this has been occurring, but at the time of the fall collection, Alfred bade me keep Sir Malcolm’s tally when he rode without me. Since that time, I have noted two such collections, once at the time of Hallowe’en, the second one was just before Yuletide.” Christian paused, remembering something.

“I rode with Malcolm just after the Michaelmas Faire, a month before Malcolm’s first observed unauthorized trip. Then Malcolm left again, just before Yuletide...a month before the winter collection,” Christian said, mulling over these new thoughts.

The Earl and Alfred reached for the parchments on the desk. Alfred looked at his numbers, and showed them to the Earl.

“There was a March collection for the spring of 1275, but then there was a smaller collection in June,” Alfred reported to Christian. “The fall collection was September, which was when I realized there were the extra collections, and apprised Christian of my suspicions.”

The Earl had been deep in thought, still sitting at Alfred’s desk, while he sifted through the accounting parchments and the steward’s notes. He took a deep breath before continuing.

“The spring collection for the year of 1276 will be in May. If these notes are accurate, my nephew will ride out without my knowledge sometime in April, possibly after the Easter celebrations. We should watch Malcolm - but so that he does not know it - and when it appears he, Morgan and Gilmore are preparing to leave, Christian and I will follow after Malcolm. Again, so that he does not know we are there.”

“You, my Lord?” Alfred asked.

“Aye, Alfred. I am not the old man I appear to be some of the time.” The Earl smiled at the two men in the small office. “Christian, quietly alert the others in my guard to this matter, and that they are to report to you if Malcolm appears to be readying himself for one of these ‘collections.’ Also, select two men you trust to be ready to ride with me the day Malcolm rides out. We shall wait an hour before following his trail.”

“Aye, my Lord,” Christian replied, thinking of who other than Sir Robert he would ask to aid him in this task. Although Sir Robert was not one of the Earl’s men, he was Christian’s best friend. And although Robert had returned to Lincoln in the middle of January, he was expected to visit St. Mark’s again at the time of the spring equinox.

As he returned to the barracks, Christian had another thought. Would it be more advantageous for Robert to track Malcolm, or was there a way for Robert to accompany Malcolm on a collection no one was even supposed to know about?

Eighteen

“*I swear,*” Sean muttered to herself, *this pony hates me.* She tried again - not for remotely the first time - to put her left foot in the stirrup and swing her right foot over the pony. Again, the pony nonchalantly took two steps forward - not for the first time either - and Sean landed on the ground. Again.

The weather was warming up that March, and the first day of Spring was not far behind. Sir Robert had returned a day ago to celebrate the equinox in a few days’ time with his friends. Sean was glad Sir Robert was back at St. Mark’s, because Kyra was positively bubbling with excitement. Although it would mean leaving her home behind, the young mistress was excited to be engaged to Robert and moving with him to Lincoln. But she assured Lady Sean that she and Robert would visit St. Mark’s frequently once they were married.

Now, however, Sean picked herself up, dusted the back of her leggings and tunic, and tried, one more time. And fell, one more time. She looked up at the pony. If she didn’t know any better, she would have insisted the little horse was laughing at her. Kyra rode her own horse over to Sean, dismounted, and helped Sean stand again.

“I shall assist you, my lady,” Kyra said softly, so the men on the field would not laugh at her. *The men had all probably learned to ride right after they learned to walk,* Sean thought wryly. She thought back to the one time she had ridden a horse, the lead horse in one of the Guild processions at a Faire. Although it was many years ago, Sean remembered it clearer than she would have liked.

The horse’s name was Magnificent, and it was aptly named. The horse was 14½ hands high, almost as tall as her, and she could ride him with ease. The procession circled the Fairegrounds, and they had returned to the jousting arena where they’d started, when something startled Magnificent.

Sean never found out what it was, but one moment, she was tugging the reins for him to stop, and the next moment, she was sitting dazed on the ground, while one of the men chased after the horse to settle him down. She was lucky that physically she was not hurt. But that day her pride took a bit of a thumping.

It wasn’t that she couldn’t ride after that day, it was just that she really didn’t want to ride. Ever again.

Sean sighed at Kyra, and allowed the young woman to hold the pony, while Sean was finally able to seat herself in the saddle. She shifted uncomfortably in the seat, as it had been many years since she’d been there. But it was, as her parents would have said, just like riding a bike.

After a few uncomfortable trots in the small area of the field, Sean led the pony back to Kyra. Sean was riding a Highland Pony, who was as tall as Magnificent was, and she was not the “cute little horse” most people thought of when they heard the word “pony.”

Kyra held the pony's reins as Sean dismounted. Sean smiled at the younger woman, and when she was back on her favored terra firma, she said softly,

"Thanks for the help."

"You ride as if you have ridden before, Lady Sean," Kyra noted.

"Aye, I have," Sean admitted.

Kyra had a puzzled expression on her face, trying to reconcile Sean's words with her recent actions. Sean noticed the look on her young friend's face.

"I have never said I did not know how to ride," Sean said softly. "I had a ... bad situation with a horse some time ago, 'tis all."

"I understand, Lady Sean. Your secret is safe with me." Kyra leaned in towards the older woman and spoke softly. "Tomorrow, if 'tis all right with you, we shall learn to ride sidesaddle."

Sean groaned aloud. When she'd first learned to ride, she'd always ridden astride, never thinking once she would ever need to ride sidesaddle. That was for stuffy, formal ladies of the Victorian era. However, the few times Sean had seen Lady Marta and some of her ladies ride, it was sidesaddle.

"I do apologize if the sidesaddle pains you, Lady Sean. 'Tis the way I and the other ladies ride," Kyra explained.

"'Tis okay, Kyra. As I promised Christian, I shall try."

And true to that promise, Sean did try, and she did learn to ride better than before. The morning after Kyra had learned that Sean was able to ride, the two women had breakfast long before Robert and Christian. Sean did *not* want Christian watching her learn to ride sidesaddle, as she only promised to *learn* it, not ride that way. Although she was sore that morning from her first foray into riding in years, she climbed back up onto the pony to sit in the odd-looking saddle. And this time when she tried to mount the horse, the pony allowed her. Kyra was sidesaddle on her own horse, and Sean imitated the position of the right leg.

"Oh, this is so uncomfortable," Sean muttered, slipping into her 21st century speech without even thinking. Holding a riding crop in her right hand, Sean managed to nudge the pony forward. Although the horse cantered evenly, Sean felt bumped and jostled around. Finally, after going only a few yards, Sean halted the pony, and slid off to stand unsteadily on the ground.

"I can not do this, Kyra." She rubbed her right leg, which had cramped up, and then fallen asleep. As Sean rubbed, the feeling of thousands of pins stabbed her leg muscles.

Kyra rode over, and dismounted, so she was now next to Sean.

"Is all aright, Lady Sean? Are you hurt?" The younger woman was concerned for her friend.

Sean looked up as she rubbed her leg. "I'm fine now, Kyra." She stood up. "My thanks again." She clicked her tongue, and the pony turned her head towards the sound. Sean held out a cloth sack, into which the pony put her snout, and munched on the hay she found in there.

"She likes you, Lady Sean," Kyra observed as the pony nestled into the sack, looking for more.

"Aye, 'twould seem so," Sean agreed.

Kyra was looking past Sean towards the castle. "Here come Sir Robert and Sir Christian

now.”

Sean giggled, glad that Christian hadn't seen her awful attempt at riding sidesaddle. Wanting to show him she was trying, Sean gently took the sack away from the pony and handed the bag to Kyra, and smiled at her. Holding the reins in her hands, Sean put her left foot into the stirrup, and slowly lifted her right leg over the back of the horse, and sat in the saddle. Clicking her tongue quietly, the pony started to slowly walk in the direction Sean guided her, towards Christian.

Christian noted the look of pleasure and satisfaction of a job well done on Sean's face. But he could not tell her this, as she would never believe him. As he watched her, he realized she appeared quite comfortable astride the horse - no, it *was* a pony, even though it was only two or three hands shorter than a horse.

When the pony stopped beside Christian, he helped Sean down, unable to hide his proud expression.

“’Tis good to see you smiling, Sir Christian,” Sean said softly, as he helped her down from the pony, sliding her along his body. When their eyes were level, he kissed her then. She stifled a squeak of surprise, as he was usually reserved about kissing her in public.

“I am pleased that Sir Robert had told me ye were riding this morn. I am glad ye seem to be enjoying the pony.”

She frowned slightly at his words, and Christian realized he should not have said she appeared happy. He didn't want her to stop riding just because he said something. He changed the subject slightly.

“Animals seem to like you,” he observed, remembering the way Snowy had come to her that day many months ago. Sean, too, remembered the way the falcon had landed gently on her bare arm instead of going to Christian. She made sure she visited the mews everyday, and fed and spoke to the bird.

“Aye, they do,” Sean laughed lightly as the pony nuzzled her neck, looking for more treats. Kyra, leading her horse behind her, brought the cloth sack over to Sean. The pony found it before Sean could offer it, and Sean, Kyra, Christian and Robert laughed heartily.

Still laughing, the two women led the horses to the stables while the two knights followed them.

“The Earl has spoken to me about Sir Malcolm's mysterious errands,” Christian began. “I wish to speak more with ye and Lady Sean on this matter. I wish to know what ye would do.”

Robert was silent a moment, realizing Christian wanted to ask a woman her opinion on matters best kept to the Earl and his steward.

“’Tis not like you, Christian. Lady Sean has changed you, and I *do* like it,” Robert smiled at his friend.

“Mayhap ‘tis not Lady Sean who has changed me, Robert. Mayhap ‘tis me,” Christian replied after a few moments of silence.

Robert was silent as they followed the ladies to the stables, thinking over what his friend had said. Certainly, this was not the same brooding man who had not spoken to any maidens since coming to St. Mark's. No, this was the Christian that Robert knew in Cornwall, the Christian who loved life, and loved that others loved life. If Robert had any doubts about Lady Sean when the Earl first announced her betrothal to Christian, he didn't have those

doubts now.

Love was certainly kind to his friend. As it was kind to him. Robert smiled remembering the way Kyra greeted him when he'd returned that morning. But there was something special that Christian had with Sean that Robert hadn't seen with anyone else, he reflected as they arrived at the stables, and Robert helped Kyra brush and feed her horse.

While Sean was grooming the pony, Christian came over to her. The words he spoke stunned her.

"I would ask ye for yer council, my lady," he said softly.

Sean looked up from her brushing, pausing in mid-stroke. This was not something to be asked of lightly, and she knew whatever the matter was, it must be very important. It wasn't every day in the Middle Ages a man asked for a woman's advice.

She finished the brushstroke, put the brush down on the small stool in the corner of the pony's stall, and followed Christian out of the stall.

"What is it?" she asked, concerned. She saw Sir Robert now outside the stables as well.

"Okay, who died?" she quipped, which caused Sir Robert and Christian to exchange looks with each other.

"No one, Lady Sean," Sir Robert said, not catching the humor in Sean's voice. But Christian did.

"She jests, Sir Robert," Christian told his friend.

"'Tis not a very nice jest," Robert said.

"My apologies," Sean interjected. "You were both so serious," she said, by way of explaining her witty question.

"'Tis a matter of import we wish to discuss with ye," Christian told her. "We have spoke on it before, but now it is of a somewhat more urgent matter."

Sean suspected she knew what Christian and Robert wanted to talk to her about, but -

"What of Kyra?" she asked, indicating the young mistress who was now finishing up brushing her horse in the stall, and humming a catchy tune.

Christian and Robert again looked at each other, and Robert nodded. He broke away from the two of them, and headed back into the horse's stall.

After a brief moment, Robert returned with Kyra, who looked just as concerned as Sean did when she first saw Robert and Christian together only a few minutes before.

"Let us adjourn to the quarters I have been calling mine own for quite some time now," Robert said. "It has quite a bit more privacy for what we have to discuss."

The quarters where Sir Robert spent his time at St. Marks were very similar to the room that Sean now called her own. Kyra sat on the edge of the bed, and Sean found a seat on the trunk at the foot of the bed. Robert poked at the still-lit embers in the the fireplace to take the chill off the room and then remained standing near the hearth; and Christian stood near Sean. He was almost touching her, and she didn't mind.

Christian spoke up after a few moments, his words directed at Sean.

"Dost ye remember some months ago, when I spoke of collecting taxes, and Sir Malcolm, and his suspicious absences?"

“The worst three days of my life,” Sean admitted, “But yes, I do recall those conversations,” she confirmed.

“Lord Garrick has given us allowance to watch Malcolm, and to see if he is preparing for another ‘suspicious absence,’” Christian said, “Lord Garrick, myself, and one other, believe that Sir Malcolm may be collecting taxes for another liege.”

There was mostly silence in the room for a time, with the exception of the crackling embers and Robert poking at them with the fire iron. The four of them realized the seriousness of the Earl’s accusation of Sir Malcolm.

“Could it be thus that is distracting to Cousin Malcolm?” Kyra asked. Even though she spoke softly, it seemed loud in the quiet room.

“It certainly could be a part of it,” Sean suggested. “What would you have us do?” she directed her question at Christian.

“Mayhap one of us could go with Malcolm when we see him riding out?” Kyra suggested.

“Nay.” This reply was from Robert. “It would arouse his suspicions if one of us appeared with him on a trip he thinks will be a secret.”

“We have noticed a pattern,” Christian said, “And ‘tis possible Sir Malcolm could take his leave within the next month’s time.”

“Maybe we could follow in the shadows, tail him so he wouldn’t know he was being followed?” Sean suggested.

“As before, his trip is secret, and only he knows when it will be. We can only surmise ‘twill be soon,” Christian said patiently. “Mayhap if we watch Sir Malcolm, and when he associates with Sir Morgan and Sir Gilmore,” he mused aloud.

“They’re the two knights that go with Malcolm on these secret trips?” Sean asked for clarification, filling out a mental scorecard so she could keep track of who was who in the future. Christian nodded, and Sean noticed how he licked his lips. She wanted to kiss those lips, but with Robert and Kyra in the room, this was not the right time.

The four were silent again, each trying to figure out how they could expose Sir Malcolm and his real reasons for making extra tax collections.

Sean, her gaze now traveling around the room and taking in the furnishings, noticed Robert and Kyra smiling at each other, and Sean turned back to look at Christian. He smiled down at her, knowing she’d also seen the same thing. They started snickering quietly, but soon it turned into loud laughter.

Robert and Kyra looked at them, then back at each other. At that moment, they knew what their friends were laughing about, and joined in with them.

Christian was the first one to stop laughing and catch his breath. The others soon followed, and while the room was quiet again, the seriousness had dissipated.

It was Christian who spoke next. “I did have the thought that should Sir Malcolm offer anyone of us an opportunity to ride with him, ye should do just that. ‘Twould be helpful if one of us could get word of it if possible.”

“‘Tis a splendid suggestion,” Robert agreed with his friend. He glanced out the little window in the stone wall and then turned back into the room. “Howe’er, at this time, mayhap we find ourselves in the Great Hall? I do believe ‘tis time for a meal.”

He offered his arm to Kyra, who accepted it immediately, and they led the way while

Christian and Sean followed them through the winding hallways and down to the evening meal.

Nineteen

The spring equinox wasn't celebrated with all the fanfare that the Guild had given it, Sean noted when the first day of Spring had arrived. Mother Nature didn't really acknowledge it was Spring either, as the ground was still frozen and hard.

However, the castle was all abustle the following weeks, as the Easter feast was almost as big of a deal as Yuletide. The rushes were replaced, and the Great Hall was certainly smelling better. Sean offered to help where she could, and was given the task to spread the new, clean rushes in various places throughout the castle. Many times she was working next to ladies she only knew who they were just from seeing them frequently, and although she wanted to say hi, it still was not a thing that was done.

The Thursday before Easter, Sean found herself working next to Una.

"Lady Sean!" Una had all but shrieked. "Ye look much different in these days," she observed.

Una was not wrong. Sean had been wearing her hair down for the first few months she'd been at St. Marks, allowing for the few times Una had done it for her, in braided rings even. It had also been almost a year since she'd dyed her hair, and it had grown long in the meantime, and while her hair didn't look as awkward as it had at Christmas, it was still two colors. To avoid drawing much attention to the multi-colors, Sean had chanced using her ponytail holder she had retrieved from her rucksack, still at the hidden bottom of the chest in her room. Her hair today was attempted to be pulled in bun, but the thinnish hairband holder wasn't the best at keeping all the locks in place, so she was tucking a few wisps behind her ears from time to time.

Retrieving that ponytail holder had reminded her of some of the other creature comforts she had in there, like the roll of toilet paper she'd all but forgotten about. But her favorites were those two sanitary pads, which were used promptly the next time nature presented its opportunity. If there was anything to miss from her own time, it was that. But one of things the Guild had taught her was to improvise, and do it well. And Sean thought she was improvising well enough.

It had been since the new year that Una had been assigned back to her castle chores. Lady Marta had, essentially, recalled Una from her service to Sean. And while Sean couldn't fault the lady of the castle for wanting her helper back, Sean did miss Una. And while there were times that Sean had preferred to dress herself and fetch things for herself, she did miss having the girl around, even for the company and chatter.

There were times, however, that Sean and Una were able to talk and gossip, and that was most days in the late mornings in Lady Marta's solar. Sean had watched some of the ladies embroidering - some worked on intricate collars that were meant to go on a Sunday dress, others were working on stitching patterns onto curtains or bedspreads. And there were a few of the ladies, including Una, were knitting. One of the things that Sean had seen at many Guild functions were the ladies knitting. Secretly, Sean had wanted to learn, but she was always working with her sword or staff, so she hadn't gotten up the courage to ask anyone.

One cold day in February, when the snow blanketed everything outside, most of the knights remained in their barracks. Even Christian had sent word to Sean that he would not be

venturing to the castle that day. Robert and Kyra were in Robert's hometown of Lincoln, so they were absent from the castle for most of that week.

It was on that day when Sean found herself in the solar, asking Una if the girl might teach Sean to knit.

"Ye mean ye don't know how t'knit?" Una gasped, but she was smiling. Sean recognized Una's actions and words, and knew she was being sarcastic. Sean smiled, remembering all the times she would be sarcastic and no one would 'get it,' or ask her if she were being serious. Sean didn't quite know when sarcasm started "becoming a thing," but it wasn't too soon for people to learn, was it?

"Oddly enough," Sean replied sweetly, "I was too busy playing with swords."

Now it was Una's turn to laugh, but she rose from her seat and went over to a trunk on the wall and the opposite end of the room. She lifted the wooden lid and moved some things around inside the box. When she closed the lid and turned back to Sean, Una had two knitting needles and a ball of off-white yarn in her hands.

She returned to her seat next to Sean, and handed Sean one of the knitting needles and put the ball of yarn on her lap. Una took the other needle in her left hand and the yarn in her right.

"This is called the 'cast-on'," Una said, and finagled (that was the best word Sean could think of to describe what Una did) the yarn onto the needle in such a way that it created connected loops. Sean counted each time Una made another loop, and stopped at 20.

Una held the looped needle in her left hand, and took the second needle in her right hand. Using the tip, she put it through the first loop on the first needle. With the loose yarn, she wrapped it over the second needle, and then maneuvered the second needle so it seemed to go through the loop wrapped around the first and slid the newly-created loop onto the second needle.

Sean watched Una make a few more knit stitches, watched how the loops interconnected and transferred over to the second needle to create a row. After watching a second row, Sean asked if she might try it.

Una passed the needles to Sean, and placed them in her hands in the manner of how she held them. After getting used to how they felt in her hands, Sean attempted a stitch. And dropped it. She fiddled with the needles, got the loop back to where it belonged, and tried again. She tried only two more times before she succeeded in making her first knit stitch. And she did the next one, inserting the needle into the loop, carefully wrapping the yarn around the needle, and pulling it back though with just the right about of tension and speed, and at the correct angle so that it made a stitch instead of dropping it.

One at a time, she slowly worked each stitch until all the loops were now on the needle she held in her right hand. She counted the loops, and when she reached twenty, she squealed that she didn't lose any stitches. Upon making a loud happy squeak, she instinctively looked up to see if anyone had heard her and was now looking at her, judging her. That was one of the reasons she preferred the sword play. The men were never as judging as the women, who could be petty creatures at times. She supposed she could be just as petty, but it wasn't one of the traits she was proud of.

"'Tis wonderful, m'lady!" Una said. "Ye shall have a scarf about your neck by Yuletide of

this year!”

“Are you saying it’s going to take me until Christmas to make a scarf?” Sean instinctively retorted, but then looked at the Una’s face to see her huge smile. “You jest?” Sean asked, but then looked at the yarn and needles in her hands. The needles were about the size of a ballpoint pen, something she hadn’t had in her hands for a long time now. The yarn - wool, she figured, based on its texture - wasn’t all that thick, and the two rows that had been knitted weren’t all that long either.

“You know what? You’re probably right after all,” Sean conceded.

“Woulds’t ye explain?” Una asked, confused at Sean’s admission.

“Well, the needles aren’t all that big and the yarn isn’t all that thick, and I’m not all that fast at knitting since I’ve just learned today. I’ve no doubt it will take me some time to learn, and I’m sure someday, I will knit a scarf.”

Sean was able to get a few more rows knit that afternoon, and even though some stitches were loose and some were tight, it was a good first foray into knitting.

Now, as it was Easter in only three days, Sean was glad to talk with Una again, of only briefly.

“How has your knitting progressed, Lady Sean?” Una asked as they were cleaning the rushes and draperies in one of the rooms where a guest would spend the coming week.

“Quite well, actually,” Sean revealed. “I can start to put it about my neck as if it were a full scarf,” she said.

“‘Tis pleasing news,” Una smiled, as she opened the drapes to the bright sunshine outside. Sean never got tired of seeing the bright green grass and the clear skies. There were some things she was not looking forward to, like the hot summer days with no air conditioning. But, as sure as the sun would rise on green grass on the morrow, she had no regrets with coming to terms of having to remain in the Middle Ages.

The last meal of the Easter festivities was a full week after Easter Sunday, and now it was the noon meal those seven days later. The Great Hall was filled with visitors from all over the area, and there was much loud talking and carousing, as there had been all week. But there was also something special in the air, that gave it a charged sense of great energy.

Sean was able to observe everyone as she sat at her place at the High Table between Christian on her right and Kyra on her left. Next to Christian was Devlin, who was at the end of their end of the table.

There was entertainment in the center of the room, including pantomimes (although Sean was aware that wasn’t a word yet) and jugglers; actors and singers.

Christian poured some wine into her goblet, and then leaned in and whispered, “Shall we drink to us?”

His voice sent a shiver down her back and gave her the ‘good kind’ of goosebumps. They’d only spent that one time on Christmas Eve together like that, but every little whisper, kiss, even glance, set her on fire. But she knew here, in Christian’s world, that was not the way. Maybe, however, once they were married, he wouldn’t be so proper around her.

“Yes,” she whispered back, and turned towards him, and he kissed her gently on her lips.

She wished she could wrap her arms around him and return his kiss with all the passion she felt, but that was not appropriate behavior for a lady at the High Table.

After the all-too-brief kiss, he brought two wine goblets up between them, and they each took a sip. Sean watched him as he drank, the way his eyes looked down into the goblet, his long, light colored lashes seeming to cover the tops of his cheeks. He looked back up at her, and she looked down into her wine, feeling her cheeks turn warm. He leaned in, and kissed her closed eyelid. It was the weirdest feeling, and for a brief moment she felt like Louisa from a musical called *The Fantasticks*. The character's only wish was to be "kissed upon the eyes," and Sean couldn't quite figure out why. And now that Christian had done just that, she still couldn't figure out why.

They were brought back to reality by Sir Robert clearing his throat loudly in their direction.

"My apologies, m'lord," Sean said around Kyra. Christian cleared his own throat just a little bit louder, which drew a stern look from Robert as he glared at his friend as he leaned over both Kyra and Sean.

"Children..." Sean cautioned, and Christian and Robert just glared at her.

"What? You're both acting like overgrown children. It's nice to see some things are still the same. Boys will be boys," she said, looking at each of them in turn.

Christian just raised his eyebrows at her. Since he's known this woman, his world has completely changed. He was more relaxed, less suspicious, and an all-around nicer person, and he had Sean to thank for it.

He wasn't sure when it happened, but he'd come to realize that he really did love her. He would do anything for her, and he'd also come to realise that he did believe her whenever she said things would work out in the end.

Since their conversation that day in March, he'd been watching Sir Malcolm, as well as Sir Morgan and Sir Gilmore, for any sign they were preparing to ride out for their unauthorized tax collection. But so far, there had been none; everything was as it had been since the beginning of the year. But Christian suspected they would make their move soon. At least, he hoped it was soon. He was getting restless waiting, and he hated waiting. He wondered what Sir Robert and Lady Sean made of the waiting.

For his part, Sir Robert hadn't thought much on Sir Malcolm and his possible secret liege. Sir Robert would be soon married to the Mistress Kyra, and he was looking forward to the day when he would start his new life with her. Of course, they would visit the Earl, his Countess, and their family here at St. Mark's. It had been on his mind for some time now to invite Christian and Sean to stay with him and Kyra at his home in Lincoln, should things not "work out," as Sean was always telling Christian. Robert was happy for his friend for finding someone like Sean to believe in him and finally draw him out of the shell he'd been living in. Christian had confided in Robert that he'd shared with Sean the story of the Lady Felice, and that Sean had shared her own story with him. At that, Robert was glad they'd both been fortunate to find each other.

A few people away from Sean, sat Sir Malcolm. His place at the High Table was between Sir Robert and the Earl, but he put on airs as if he were the lord of this castle. Thankfully, Lord Garrick chose to ignore this behavior from his nephew. But Malcolm knew there would

be a day when he would be the lord of his own homestead, and thanks to the Duke, that day might come quite soon. Malcolm chanced a glance at Lady Seana, and knew his plan would work out just as he hoped.

At the opposite end of the High Table, sat the Lady Asta. She was seated between the Earl's heir, Dalton, and one of the knights, Gllmore. She looked as if she were flirting with both men, but Dalton seemed to be ignoring her as his father was ignoring their Captain of the Guard. Lady Asta had taken a liking to Sir Malcolm a few months ago during Yuletide, but that seemed to have diminished in recent weeks, since it became warm again, and the knights were out on the fields practicing again.

But now, at this final meal of Easter, Lady Asta was enjoying batting her eyes at Sir Gllmore, since she'd realised that her young Lord Dalton was paying her no heed. Gllmore seemed to enjoy the attention he was getting.

Back at her end of the High Table, Sean heard Robert mention something about his journeys between Lincoln and St. Marks, and the interesting places he'd visited along the way.

"And what of you, Lady Sean?" Sir Robert asked. "There must be many new places you have seen in your travels."

If you only knew, Sean thought. But instead, she said, "There have been a few," she said, choosing her words carefully. "My encounters along the way here were quite a few," she added.

"Where did you travel from?" Robert asked, between bites of meat that was very soft and tender. *That was a new way to ask*, Sean thought, but by this time she'd had more than enough time to finally create a cover story that didn't sound so lame.

"A little town about a half a day's ride north of London," she said.

"'Tis the first time ye have said from where you hail," Christian said softly in her ear, teasing her again with his voice. He seemed to know how she reacted when he did that. He knew how he would react if she were to speak into his ear that low and close to him. Maybe he could ask her if they had a chance to be alone again in her room.

Sir Malcolm, who seemed to pride himself on knowing everything that happened at St. Marks, which was befitting the Captain of the Guard, interjected himself into the conversation to his right.

"Sir Robert, have you been to Grenville lately? I've been there recently, and it's become a really nice little town, with a newly completed cathedral."

"I have not, good sir," said Robert, and then added, "but now that you say such thing, I believe I shall make a visit there this coming season."

"Very good, Sir," Malcolm said, and raised his wine goblet towards Robert. Robert looked to his right, to Kyra, Sean, and Christian, raised his goblet, and indicated that the others should as well. But it was his eyebrows raised that Sean noted, indicated that Grenville could possibly be the secret liege to whom Malcolm was collecting for.

Kyra, Sean, and Christian joined Robert in the toast, and Sean needed to remember to mention Robert's signal to Christian.

Twenty

“Milady Seana,” Malcolm said, entering the stables where Sean was grooming Meg, her Highland Pony, whom she’d named for her older sister. Sean never liked to ride before, but Christian, with some help from Kyra, had taught her to enjoy it. It had been only seven months since Sean had arrived that day in September, but it seemed more like seven weeks. She was happy here, even Asta had finally started treating her somewhat civilly. It was just after the morning meal on a warm morning near the end of April.

“Yes, Sir Malcolm?” Sean asked, still grooming Meg.

“I would wish it if you would ride with us to fill Uncle’s treasuries,” he asked.

“You mean, ride with you to collect the Earl’s taxes,” Sean clarified, knowing the springtime collection wasn’t to be until mid-May. *This was it*, she thought.

“Aye, milady,” he bowed lightly. “We are ready to ride now, after you gather a few of your things.” Sean thought she saw a hint of a smile. She thought for a moment before answering.

“Certainly, Sir,” she smiled at him. “How long will we be away?”

“’Tis dependant upon what we collect. I will guide you as we go.” He turned to leave. “Oh, do bring with you that green dress. You may want to wear it when we return to St. Mark’s.”

“Sir Malcolm?” Sean called after him, wondering why Malcolm had asked *her*, and at the odd request. He never had asked anything of her before, especially a request to wear a specific dress. She also wondered if Malcolm had any idea what Christian suspected Malcolm of. She had to get word to him. Or Robert; or even Kyra.

“Thanks,” she said when he turned back only because she didn’t really know what to say. He nodded and left the stables with two knights, Gilmore and Morgan. Sean turned back to finish up Meg’s grooming, and thought she’d heard crunching straw on the ground, but didn’t see anything.

She ran back to the castle, and up to her room. Sean had since acquired a saddle bag, which was much better for her than the rucksack, and she now stuffed it with the requested green dress not really knowing why, and her green tunic from Christian in addition to the red one she was wearing. Packing for a trip was much simpler now, no luggage, no “just-in-case” outfits. Life was simpler now.

She set the bag on the bed, buckled her sword at her waist, and took her dagger from her trunk and tucked it into the top of her left boot. She grabbed the bag from the bed and headed back out to the stables. She’d hoped to have found Christian, to tell him where she was going, but he was nowhere to be seen. She’d seen no one on her way from and back to the stables and she found that odd, since most people spent the majority of their daylight hours outside now that it was the height of springtime. Malcolm, the two knights, and two extra horses were back at the stables waiting for her.

She tossed the bag over Meg’s saddle and then she climbed on, and rode over to Malcolm. She was glad she’d come to enjoy riding, as her and Christian had taken many long rides in the past few weeks.

Malcolm formally introduced Morgan and Gilmore to Sean. She nodded towards both,

realizing it was Morgan who looked like Christian's brother, and Gilmore sat at the far end of the head table, who Lady Asta had been flirting with that last day of the Easter feasting.

They rode out, in the direction of the village of St. Mark's, leaving Sir Owen watching them from the back of the stables.

The horses' saddle bags filled up quickly. Some people paid with livestock, some paid with fine fabrics that Sean had never seen before. Some opted to pay with gold coin. They visited the villages of St. Mark's, Warrington, and Blackwater.

In each of the towns, Malcolm would lead the group, and as Sean passed by crowds of people, there were hushed whispers, and Sean wished she could hear what they were saying. Paranoia wasn't something that she easily succumbed to, but she began to have an uneasy feeling about this trip.

As she rode with the men, her thoughts were filled with Christian. She wished she could have at least told him she'd return in a few days, and to be waiting for her. She thought of the times they'd spent together, holding hands, his gentle caressing, those winter nights they'd spent curled up by the fire, and the night she told him she loved him. Christian hadn't said the words to her yet, but she knew he was teased by them.

A sudden jolt brought Sean back to reality. She'd been dozing in her saddle, and now was quite sore. She'd been dreaming about Christian, and although he hadn't said it yet, she knew he loved her.

Opening her eyes, she found they had stopped, and Morgan and Gilmore were setting up camp. The sun was just about touching the western horizon.

"Did you have a pleasant sleep?" Malcolm asked, helping her down from Meg.

"Yes, I did. But I'm a bit sore," she said, rubbing the backs of her legs and her bottom. Mentally tallying where they'd been, she realized she'd slept on the road from Blackwater, back towards St. Mark's.

"Where are we?" she asked, accepting some bread and cheese from Morgan.

"Just north of St. Mark's, milady," Morgan told her.

Malcolm came to stand next to Sean, where she was sitting on the ground in front of the fire that Gilmore was tending.

"In the morning, milady, we will return to St. Mark's. We should be there in time for the noon meal. I would like it if you wore that dress I requested."

Sean swallowed some bread, nodding. "May I ask why?"

Malcolm was silent, wondering what he should tell her. After mulling it over, he finally settled on,

"Sir Christian will be wanting to see you," and he left it at that.

Sean thought that sounded fishy, but who was she to question the Captain of the Guard? And as to the question of who Malcolm was collecting taxes for, since they were headed back to St. Marks in the morning, it was still the Earl. But why the secrecy? Sean seemed to think she was missing something, but had no idea what it could be.

She used her saddle bag as a pillow that night, and slept close to the fire in her clothes. Even though it was April, and the day were becoming warmer, the nights were still somewhat

cool. She fell asleep a short time later, despite her afternoon nap, dreaming of Christian.

The dress in question had enough fabric to allow Sean to ride astride, as opposed to sidesaddle. She'd tried that once, and her legs cramped up, and she couldn't walk for a few days afterwards. She'd changed from her kirtle to the dress behind a tree, constantly peering out from the other side to make certain Malcolm, Morgan, and Gilmore were packing up the camp and not spying on her.

She kept her leggings and boots on, the dagger still safely hidden. Once her dress was smoothed out, she re-buckled her sword about her waist, stuffed the worn, dirty, smelly tunic back in the bag, and headed back for Meg.

They had been riding for several hours before Sean realized something was wrong. She did not know where they were, but she did know this was not the road back to St. Mark's. She was third in the riding order when they rode single file, as they were now. Malcolm, of course, led the way. Behind him was Morgan, and Gilmore was behind Sean. Now, she tried to make her way past Morgan to ride next to Malcolm, to ask where they were going. But every time Sean moved to try to pass Morgan, he moved in front of her.

She tried to fall back, to be able to turn around and head the other direction. After Gilmore forced her to turn Meg back to the line twice, Sean gave up. Where *were* they going? And did anyone from St. Mark's realize she was missing?

Malcolm glanced over his shoulder several times at the column behind him. He was somewhat amused to see Sean trying to come up to the front, presumably to ask why they were not headed towards St. Mark's. He almost laughed aloud when he saw her fall back, not once, but *twice*, to try to get around Gilmore. Both times, Gilmore had taken her horse's reins and brought them up to speed.

Malcolm smiled wickedly. He remembered when he'd asked Uncle Garrick those many months ago about courting the Lady Seana, and when refused, he came up with this plan, approved of by the Duke, and which was about to be put into action. They were on their way to Grenville, with a future Duchess.

Since Malcolm was promised Grenville when the Duke died, if the Duke had a wife, she was promised to Malcolm as well. In fact, the Duke had commanded him to bring him Lady Seana, and he was upholding his part of the bargain.

And now, since the Lady Seana had come willingly thus far, Malcolm allowed himself to think on the second part of his scheme. What if, Malcolm's devious mind thought, the Duke had a bit too much to drink at his wedding, and when he tried to climb the stairs to the bridal chamber, fell down and killed himself? The poor widow would turn to the first person she saw for comfort.

As part of the agreement with the Duke, that "poor widow" would be Lady Seana, and it was up to Malcolm to make certain *he* was the person she would turn to.

Rubbing his hands together, he noted with great anticipation they had reached the outlying huts of the village of Grenville. He chanced another glance over his shoulder. Sean now rode between the two men, her hands hidden behind her back. Malcolm stopped and turned Conqueror around to face them.

“What has happened here?” he demanded.

Gilmore moved Sean so Malcolm could see that her hands had been tied behind her back.

“She didn’t like our company, milord,” Morgan said. “She tried to escape.”

Gilmore chuckled. Malcolm just clicked his tongue, turned Conqueror back around and called over his shoulder,

“Let us go then. The Duke awaits us.”

“Duke?” Sean asked. Her mouth was dry; it was the first time she’d spoken in many hours.

“The Duke of Grenville. A very powerful man,” Morgan supplied. He was not about to tell her what Malcolm had planned. That was Malcolm’s stroke of genius, so Morgan wisely didn’t say anything.

Sean too, was wisely silent. She had no idea what was happening, but she knew well enough to stay quiet. She knew Malcolm was a powerful man; she was an outsider still in his mind, even though everyone else in the castle had accepted her as she accepted them. For all she knew, Malcolm could sell her into slavery, but somehow she doubted this. She just knew something was rotten in the state of Denmark.

She muffled a laugh at the thought of quoting Shakespeare. She would be ever-referring to what she knew from her own time, yet the longingness to return to her own time was no longer there. Now, she only longed to return to Christian. She’d been gone for four days.

At the Duke’s castle, Malcolm and his men were greeted warmly - too warmly, Sean thought. They’d been here before, she realized. Morgan helped Sean down from Meg, and the horses were led to the stables inside the castle walls.

“Will you promise not to strike out if I untie you?” he asked her softly, his face close to hers.

Sean nodded, and Morgan turned her around and undid the binding. She shook her wrists out, and then allowed Morgan and Gilmore to escort her to the Great Hall, where Malcolm was waiting for her.

At the far wall, there sat a great man in a great throne. As Malcolm escorted Sean the length of the hall, Sean began to see just how literal her description was. Usually unbiased in her descriptions - Sean would describe a person by only a few physical traits, ignoring obvious ones: color, size, and the like - she could not help but notice that this man was *fat*, Duke or not. But she held her tongue.

The throne was elevated on a platform with only two steps up. Malcolm stopped, and touched Sean’s arm, as to let her know to stop as well. A few paces behind them, Gilmore and Morgan stopped also.

The Duke held out one of his hands, this one had a huge ring on the middle finger. Malcolm bowed deeply, holding the Duke’s hand, and kissed the ring. Sean had to stop herself from laughing. This reminded her exactly of those really bad mob movies. Thank goodness she’d never have to see another one of *those* again.

“Milord Grenville, I present to you, the Lady Seana Kelly of London,” Malcolm said, indicating Sean. She curtseyed politely. Malcolm turned to Sean.

“Lady Seana, I present to you the Duke of Grenville.” Sean curtsied again. Then Malcolm brought her up on the first step, directly in front of the large man. Malcolm stepped back to the floor.

“Milord, your future bride.”

The Duke nodded and smiled broadly at Malcolm in approval. For a moment, the words did not register with Sean. But it only took that moment before Sean realized what Malcolm had told the Duke, and she whirled on Malcolm, whipping out her sword.

“His what?” she shrieked. Sean moved to strike at Malcolm, but her sword was knocked from her hand by Gilmore, who drew his sword at the same time as Sean. She heard and saw her sword clatter to the floor in the middle of the room. There was no time to retrieve it. Nor did she have the time to reach for her dagger.

She rushed at Malcolm, pounding her fists on his arm and shoulder, and he just turned to face her, taking both her wrists in one hand.

“I do apologize, milord. She shall be seen to her chamber,” Malcolm told the Duke. Then, to Gilmore and Morgan, he said,

“Take her up to the bridal chamber. There is a bolt on the outside of the door. See to its proper use.”

“You can’t do this!” she called back, as she was forced out of the room with Malcolm’s two men. They led her up a stairwell that kept narrowing, until they were at the top of the tower, to a chamber that was well furnished. There were no windows. Gilmore pushed Sean into the room, towards the bed. The door closed behind her, and Sean heard the bolt being dropped into place.

Owen had watched Lady Sean ride away with Malcolm of her own accord. He was very confused why she would be doing that, since it was Sir Christian who was her betrothed, not Sir Malcolm.

He saddled one of the horses he had already groomed, and rode up to the castle, and directly into the great hall. The Earl was at the High Table with a three men Owen had seen around the castle but didn’t know them by name.

“My Lord,” Owen called out. The Earl looked up.

“What is this meaning?” he called out to Owen.

“My deepest apologies for such an intrusion, My Lord, but I did just see the Lady Sean ride away with Sir Malcolm, Sir Morgan, and Sir Gilmore!”

“Many thanks for coming right away with this news, ‘tis of great import,” the Earl said. He turned to the three men with him at the table. “My Lords, I beg thee pardons, this is a most urgent matter to which I must attend personally. I must take my leave, and we shall adjourn until the morrow, if that suits you all?”

The men leaned in close together and exchanged some words with each other.

They stood, and one of the men with a white beard spoke for the three of them. “We shall return then,” he said, and the three left the high table, and disappeared into the interior of the castle.

“Your horse, sir?” the Earl asked Owen. Owen dismounted, and the Earl took his place in

the saddle. He turned and rode out the great hall and down to the knights' barracks. None of the knights were inside, but the Earl wasn't surprised as it was a warm day, and he surmised they were out on the various practice fields.

The first field he went to was a good gallop away from the barracks, but he guessed well. Sir Christian was sparring with a fighting staff with Sir Robert with Kyra looking on. The Earl didn't dismount, but rode right onto the field, taking everyone by surprise, as this was not something the Earl did.

"What has happened, my Lord?" Christian asked.

"It's Malcolm," the Earl said with no pretense. "Lady Sean went with him, but Sir Owen said she was not act forced to go along."

"Why didn't she come find one of us?" Christian asked Robert as they jogged off the field behind the Earl, heading back to the barracks to retrieve their steel swords and cloaks. Since they didn't know where Malcolm was headed, they didn't know how long they'd be away. Even though it was warm during the day, there was quite a chill at night.

It was less than 20 minutes from when Owen first told the Earl about Malcolm leaving with Sean until the Earl, Christian, Robert, Kyra, Owen and two other knights, Sir Roland and Sir William, rode through the gates of St. Mark's to try to retrace Malcolm's path.

Earl Garrick led his party through the villages of St. Mark's, Warrington, and Blackwater, and the shop owners they spoke to did remember Malcolm and the men. Some of them remembered a lady in a red tunic, but most people only remembered the party came through to collect the taxes.

They were leaving Blackwater to head back south towards St. Marks, when suddenly Robert, who had been bringing up the rear, called out to the group.

"Christian! Do you remember Easter?"

"What?" Christian called back, turning his horse around to ride back to his friend. "Of course I do. What of it?"

"At the last feast, when we were sharing about our travels, what was that place Malcolm mentioned that finally completed cathedral? Green Vale? Gren-something?"

"'Twas Grenville," Christian said "Do ye think she mayhap is there?"

"'Tis a good possibility," Robert concurred.

"Let us go then," the Earl said, turning his horse, and the party, to the north.

The streets of Grenville were preparing for festivities when the Earl and his party rode through nearly an hour or so before the the sun would be setting. The seven horses trotted through the town slowly, with their riders wondering what the event was to be.

At the last little shop before the road opened up to reveal a newly-built cathedral on one side, and an old stone castle on the other side, Kyra called out to a lady she saw with some fine fabrics in her arms.

"What is the festivity of this night, my good lady?" Kyra asked.

"'Ave ye not 'eard? The Duke is takin' 'imself a wife. Strange lady, I heard tell though."

“Thank you, kind ma’am,” Kyra called back to her. Straightening up, she rode up to the Earl and Sir Christian.

“The good woman says the Duke is getting married tonight. She says it’s to a strange lady,” Kyra told them. “You don’t think...?” her voice trailed off, thinking the ‘strange lady’ could be Sean. But up until Lady Sean arrived at St. Marks, Kyra could have thought of herself as a strange lady all the same.

“‘Tis possible,” Christian said, “But we must have an open mind about this. It may be some other strange lady.”

Sir Robert had ridden to the front of the group, and now asked Christian, “Dost thou think that is the truth?”

“Nay, I do not.”

“‘Tis nice to see what my taxes have built,” Lord Garrick said, now stopping to look at the newly-completed cathedral. “I should wonder if we can have it moved to St. Mark’s,” he mused aloud.

“‘Tis nice to see you have an air of humor about it,” Christian said.

“My other choice would be to weep over my lost goods and monies. I would much rather prefer the humor,” Lord Garrick replied.

“That is quite wise,” Christian agreed. He looked across the road to the castle. “Shall we just barge in to this Duke’s Great Hall?” Christian asked his liege.

“I do not believe that would be the wisest,” the Earl began, “But I am thinking on a plan of how we may enter the castle without being seen.”

“Shall Sir Robert and I ride round the castle and report back our findings to you?”

“That would be an excellent idea, Sir Christian. Also take Sir Roland and Sir William, but try not to appear as one large party.”

“Quite wise, m’Lord,” Christian said, bowing his head to take his leave from the Earl and ride over to Sir Robert. He also waved over to the other knights.

“Sir Robert, Sir Roland, Sir William: ye are to join with me. Sir Owen, ye are to remain with the Earl and Mistress Kyra. We will not be long in our duties.” Christian explained they were to scout around the castle, him and Sir Robert would go around it in one direction, while Sir Roland and Sir William would circle the castle the opposite direction, looking for secret or possible places for hidden entrances to be accessed. The Earl would make his presence known when the time was right.

All agreed on their tasks, the group split up, Owen remaining and the four others heading towards the castle.

As they scouted the castle walls, Robert asked,

“What nature of agreement do you think Sir Malcolm has with this Duke?”

“‘Tis plain to see what the taxes from the Earl are used for,” Christian started. “But what part of the agreement is Lady Sean?” he asked.

“Of that, I know not,” Robert said after a moment. “The mind of Sir Malcolm it not a place I would wish to be.”

“What if this claim is true, that she is to be the bride of this Duke? I think I shall not be

able to bear it.”

“I do not think it has come to that. And ‘twould not surprise me if she has refused, rather loudly, with quite the spectacle to go with it,” Robert said, with a little laugh.

“I love her, Robert,” Christian blurted out to his friend.

“I know,” Robert replied softly.

Christian looked up to see where they were in their path around the castle. They were at about the halfway point, and could see Sirs Roland and William slowing down to look at the same place along the outer walls they were.

“The trees do not seem quite right to me,” Robert said, making a motion with his hand that seemed to trace the top of the odd tree.

“We concur,” said Sir William as the two groups met and were within speaking distance.

Christian dismounted Magnus, and handed Robert the reins. He approached the slowly tree on foot, walking lightly as not to disturb the grasses on the ground or create heavy footfalls. The branches seemed to create a doorway, but as Christian got closer to the wall, he realised the branches were hiding cuts in the wall that *was* an actual doorway.

He ran back to the others and told them what he’d found. “Sirs,” he said to William and Roland, “Return to our liege, and report to him that Sir Robert and I have found a way in, and we shall go first to clear away any ambushes that may await. He is welcome to follow once he arrives.”

William and Roland nodded their agreements, and clicked at their horses, who turned around to go back along the path they had just trod.

“Will ye join me?” Christian asked, sitting back astride Magnus and turning back to his friend.

“Of course I shall,” Robert said, and turned his horse to follow Christian.

They cleared the branches away to reveal the cuts in the stone, but neither could find an obvious way to open it. Christian dismounted so Magnus could walk behind him. Christian ran his hands along the bottom of the walls and in the nooks and crannies that weren’t seen from further away.

Robert examined the branches that hid the doorway and found some of them seemed connected to the wall itself. He dismounted and upon looking closer, he noticed two of the thinner branches that were intertwined, and on a whim, he untwined them, and heard the distinctive sound of stone moving along stone.

“Christian!” he called out in a loud whisper. Christian turned towards Robert, and led Magus over to the stone now sliding open.

“‘Tis impressive,” Christian said, peering in to see what this hidden gap revealed. It was an entryway that seemed large enough for two horses with riders, so Christian beckoned Robert to follow him in. With their horses following behind, Christian and Robert made their way through dimly lit stone corridors that seemed to take them in circles.

“Now I know how rats feel like in the sewers,” Robert said in a whisper, “but I do seem to be getting used to the darkness,” he added. Christian chuckled.

They came to corner on their left, but there was also the option to continue straight.

“What think ye?” Christian asked, his voice low, but no longer a whisper.

Robert looked at their path if they were to continue on straight, which was still just as

dimly lit. He stepped into the corridor as if they were to turn left, and could see just a little more light up ahead.

“I say we follow the left-way passage, there appears to be more light,” Robert said decisively. Christian also looked down the new passageway.

“I concur,” he said, and they led the horses down this new path. Sir Robert was correct, in there was more light filtering through the dimness in their corridors they now followed. This new hallway was sloped uphill, and had various turns to the right or the left at random intervals, but at every one, they made the choice to keep going towards the lightened end of the hall.

As they drew closer, and seemingly climbed higher, Christian thought he heard yelling and banging down one of the various corridors on their right. At first his thought was to dismiss the yelling, but a few steps later, he turned back, and Robert was no longer behind him. Christian backtracked and found that Robert had headed down a side corridor.

“‘Tis getting louder,” Robert explained, and Christian followed.

The corridor was short, but it ended at a hallway that looked to be one of the main halls on one of the upper levels. The banging and yelling was loud enough now that Christian was able to identify the voice to whom it belonged.

“‘Tis Lady Sean!” Robert realised when Christian looked at him and bade him to follow. The two men led their two horses upwards to the left with a new urgency.

Lord Garrick saw Sir Roland and Sir William returning, and he knew that Sir Robert and Christian had found a way inside.

“My Lord,” Sir Roland said once they were next to him on their horses. “They have found a way in, and Sir Christian request you follow when you are ready. He will keep the door at the ready for you.”

“Twill not be needed,” Lord Garrick told his men. “They are inside, searching for Lady Sean. We shall ride through the front door and announce our presence now,” the Earl commanded. “Roland and William shall ride beside me. Owen, you and Kyra will ride behind.”

The men chorused “aye,” but Kyra simply nodded, wishing she did not have to ride behind other horses. While Kyra enjoyed riding, she did not enjoy following, as the horses did not stop to seek out a garderobe or outhouse, should they have had the need for one.

The five made an impressive array as they approached the main gate of the Duke of Grenville’s castle. There were two guards on either side of the gate, but they made haste to open the doors when the Earl and his party had ridden close enough. The Duke finally had the coinage for new gate doors, they didn’t want to have to give their lives because the new doors had been run through by wild horses.

Without slowing down, the Earl’s group was able to pass through the open doors of the Duke’s castle into the courtyard. There were a few men on horseback waiting for them, one of them was Sir Malcolm, who was almost at the center of the group. The man at the center was a large man wearing a red velvet cloak, who had managed to sit not quite sidesaddle on his horse, but still had command of his small entourage.

The two groups remained, watching each other. The horses nickered and snuffled, but the men remained wary of each other.

After a few moments, Lord Garrick was the first to speak. “The Duke of Grenville, I presume?” he projected his voice towards the large man in the velvet cloak.

The large man nodded, but did not ask who his uninvited visitor was, as if the Duke had been expecting him.

“I should like to know of the arrangement you have with the Captain of my Guard,” Lord Garrick called out to the Duke.

The Duke looked over his shoulder and Malcolm, and then back at the Earl.

“He is steward of my household, and shall remain after I am gone,” the Duke replied smugly.

Lord Garrick directed his next statement at Sir Malcolm.

“You have used my coin and goods and fineries here at Grenville, while you have pledged your fealty to me,” he pointed out. “As well as you are my nephew; the son of my only sister,” the Earl reminded is wayward relation.

Malcolm looked at the Duke, who nodded once at the younger man. Malcolm nudged Conqueror forward, so he was now in front of the Duke and his men.

“The Duke has also made me his direct heir,” Malcolm finally spoke to his uncle.

The Earl reactated as though he’d been struck.

“You are quite the idiot!” Lord Garrick called back. “You know three villages pledge their fealty to me. Warrington, the town that shares my family name, was to be yours! You have betrayed that family, and the lands will go to someone I know will not squander such responsibility, someone who yearns for land to call his own.”

Now it was Malcolm who was shocked, and did not have a reply for his uncle. Lord Garrick turned to the men on each side of him in turn. “Sir Roland, Sir William, please escort nephew Malcolm back to St. Marks where he shall be confined to his rooms to await my judgement in this matter.”

Roland and William closely flanked Malcolm as they rode back to the Earl, Sir Owen and Mistress Kyra. Sir Owen and Mistress Kyra starte riding out of the courtyard, with Roland, William, and Malcolm following.

“Wait!” the Duke called after Malcolm as he was led away, “What about my bride?” he cried.

The Earl fixed the Duke with a hard stare.

“I am quite certain she has already met her betrothed,” the Earl said in a deadly calm voice. “And I am also quite certain ‘tis not you.” The Earl turned and rode after the others, and once they were through the gates, the Earl returned to the head of the column to lead them back to St. Marks.

He did hope that Sir Christian and Lady Sean didn’t tarry too long behind.

They hadn’t gone too far when the uphill hallway started to narrow considerably. The torch sconces on the wall had been closing in for some time, but now Christian wasn’t sure if it was wide enough for the two men and two horses. He turned back to Robert, and handed him

Magnus' reins.

"Hold here until I return," he told his friend, and resumed his way towards the pounding. The yelling had stopped, but Christian was almost to the door that Sean was behind. At some point, there were stairs cut into the stone floor, but Christian was only steps away. He saw the bolt that had been slid into the notch on the outside of the door, and he moved it out of the slot. When the banging stopped for a moment, he pulled the door open, and Sean fell into his arms.

"Oh!" she gasped. "I am *so* glad to see you!" Her words came out in a rush and Christian could barely understand her. "It's Malcolm, he's used the Earl's taxes for this place, and there's something about me marrying some fat guy who's a Duke or something. And Malcolm had Gilmore lock me in here," she took a deep breath. "Wait, what time is it?"

Christian was taken by surprise at her quick change in demeanor that he answered her last question without understanding her entire rant that led up to it.

"'Tis sometime before the evening meal still, I would believe. This tower appears shorter on the outside than it takes to climb up here."

"So I've only been up here for a few hours? It felt like an entire day," she said, and put her head down on Christian's chest. She could hear his slow and steady heartbeat, where hers was beating like a wounded animal. He held her tightly, but only for a moment.

"How did ye know t'would work out in my favor?" he asked her, his lips brushing the top of her head. She lifted her head and looked up at him.

"Ye had said 'twould all work out in the end," he said, "How did ye know?"

"It just always does," she explained.

"I have overheard the Earl speaking to Malcolm earlier. Lord Garrick has changed his mind, and will no longer be giving Warrington to his nephew, but to someone who yearns for land to call his own. Leastwise, I believe 'twere his words."

"And that's you," she said.

"I do believe 'tis me," he said, leaned down to her, and he kissed her lips.

"I love you, my Lady Sean," he told her after the kiss. When she smiled at him, he separated them and took her hand.

"Let us not tarry, Sir Robert and the horses are waiting a bit of the way down the hall, and then we shall get you home to St. Marks." He started to walk down the hall, holding her hand.

"Gladly," she said, following him, knowing she would follow him anywhere.

Epilogue

September 29;
Present Day England

Robert was very confused as he left the first aid tent. He was sparring with Sean with their staffs on the practice field, and she misstepped. He heard her cry of “Time!” a moment too late, and the staff struck her on the right side of her head, and she collapsed to the ground.

He pulled the surcoat he wore over his head so he could fold it up and use it as a pillow under her head while he fetched someone from the first aid tent, but once his surcoat was off, Sean was gone. She’d completely disappeared. Not even that drawstring bag she wore on her back was there. He dropped his surcoat to the ground.

What the hell - he thought to himself, wondering if there wasn’t some kind of recoil, that when he accidentally hit her head, he himself took a blow to his own head. And for accidentally hitting her, he couldn’t stop chastising himself. He mumbled all kinds of apologies to Sean, and called himself all kinds of idiots and fools, and that he really needed to pay attention to what the hell he was doing. Faire-goers looked twice at him as he grumbled his way to the first aid tent to make sure *he* hadn’t been injured, at least physically anyway.

The nurse looked him over, and found no sign of injuries, not even a bruise or scrape. She dismissed him with the warning that talking to himself with his head in the clouds and not watching where he was going might result in a trip and fall. He laughed and said he would watch where he was going.

The tent flap fell closed behind him and he blinked in the bright sunlight.

He headed back to the field where he’d been practicing to call off the demonstration, but by the time he returned, there was no one there milling about anymore. He retrieved his surcoat from the ground where it had fallen, and then his sword and a few other items from the edge of the field.

He wandered back through the Faire grounds, stopping in the stalls to see the wares the crafters were selling. He found a bench to sit on in amidst a small grove of trees near the entryway, where he mulled over the crazy events of the past hour, and wondering where the hell Sean could have gotten herself to. People don’t just disappear. Maybe she was wandering the grounds, not knowing who she was, dazed from her head injury.

Maybe - he caught sight of a statue near the entrance that he didn’t remember being there when he’d arrived that morning. Curious, he picked up his things and went over to look at the bronze statue of two people.

The man was kneeling as if to ask his companion for his hand in marriage, looking adoringly up at the woman, and as Robert followed the man’s gaze, he found himself looking at -

Lady Seana?

He looked down at the base of the statue to see if there was any kind of explanation or inscription about the statue. He found a plaque on the base.

Sir Christian of Cornwall and Lady Seana of London were married in September of 1276 at the Shire of St Marks. They were bequeathed the village of Warrington by Sir Christian's benefactor, Earl Garrick of Warrington, liege of St. Mark's, Warrington, and Blackwater.

Sir Christian and Lady Sean lived in Warrington for the rest of their lives, with their son and two daughters, Sir Robert, Lady Eleanor, and Lady Rona. Sir Christian lived until 1302, Lady Sean lived until 1305.

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