

The sea was blood-red beneath the rays from the setting sun that peeked from under a line of dark clouds just above the horizon.

"Isn't it wondrous?" asked a hushed voice. "I have never seen anything so beautiful."

"You certainly do not believe that, Vala." Tarran ap Llyr looked past the trees surrounding them to gaze out at the sea. He hated the color red. Once he had paid no more mind to it than any other shade. That had been before he saw how it spread across the floor of his home.

Pulling his eyes from the crimson sea, he heard a chirp from the peregrine riding on his left hand. He had raised Heliwr almost from the egg, and the bird seemed attuned to his strongest, darkest emotions. Maybe it was because the hawk thought of the hunt and prey, too.

Tarran slowed his horse to match the pace of the old woman's. Her brows were nearly as white as her hair, and her moon-shaped face was lined with years of living upon the shores of the western sea. Although the afternoon was warm, she wore a voluminous cloak of black wool.

Vala laughed. "But I do believe it. I have heard so much of *Cymru's* beauty from those who have traveled before us. I want to savor every image of it, so I might enjoy the memories over and over."

His friend, Seith ap Mil, drew his horse up to ride beside them. Tarran nodded to Seith, who looked as garish as the flowers in the field with his bright red tunic and

deep blue cloak. Even his stockings, which were as dusty as Tarran's from their days of riding, were still a grotesque green and looked like bulbs on his round legs.

"Do you think we can beg shelter from the lord in the castle that is supposed to be just past these trees?"

Seith rubbed his hand on his generous expanse of stomach.

"I would enjoy a meal not of my own cooking."

"I have not seen you turning up your nose at anything we have snared so far."

"Hare makes a tasty meal. Thanks to Heliwr, we have enjoyed the occasional grouse, but a man wishes for something more civilized than fish he catches himself from a muddy stream."

Vala laughed. "It would seem, Tarran, you are the only one among us who prefers the rough life."

Shaking his head, Tarran gave his horse a command at the same time he tightened his hold on the hawk's jesses. His steed leaped to a trot.

Behind him, he heard Seith ask, "What did I say wrong now?"

Tarran owed his friend an apology. Later he would see Seith received it. Seith had been loyal even when Tarran had been unworthy of a friend. Yet, Seith did not understand why Tarran preferred the quiet of his own company and a few friends to a large household where someone was certain to say something that brought forth the

memories he was trying to submerge where they never could be retrieved. So far, he had been unsuccessful, for the red of the setting sun had sent pain through him, a pain as strong as if *he* had been the one stabbed.

Shadows beneath the trees held the dampness of the past winter. His hand went to the knife he carried in his belt. He fingered the dragon and leeks carved into the haft, ready to draw it. Such shadows welcomed thieves. Behind him, the men and Vala grew silent as they rode through the wood and crossed a wide, fast-flowing stream. In the west of *Cymru*, the laws of England were obeyed only by those who believed they could gain from abiding by the king's authority.

Tarran released the breath he had been holding when, minutes later, they emerged into the sunshine. Attack now could not come without warning, and he doubted anyone would be bold enough to ambush them within view of the castle. Robbers would fear retaliation from within the walls surrounding the foursquare tower that rose like a stone challenge. The lord who held the castle would be a fool to attack travelers within his fief's boundaries, for that could focus the king's displeasure on him.

The castle on the hill looked puny compared to the vast mountains rising above its parapets. A darker gray than the raw stone overlooking it, Castell Glyn Niwl sat in an area cleared of trees. The walls were edged with sharp

rocks. No greenery softened at the bases, because those could be easily set ablaze or conceal invaders.

And a woman hung out of an arrow slit.

Tarran did not want to believe his eyes. It could not be – It was! A woman hung from the narrow opening. Her slender legs dangled against the wall, kicking wildly as she tried to find a toehold on the wall. Beneath her on serrated rocks, one long wooden pole lay across a pair the same length.

He exhorted his horse to a run up the hill at the same time he tightened his grip on the jesses holding the hawk on his left hand. Heliwr chirped, preparing for the moment Tarran would send him aloft. He did not release the bird as he stopped next to the poles. What were they? No time to check. The woman might fall at any moment.

He stretched up his right hand. Her feet were beyond his fingers. Standing in the stirrups, he clamped his legs against the horse's sides. The horse shifted, and he growled a warning for it to stand still. Hoofbeats and raised voices came from behind him, but he did not glance back. He looked up at the woman.

"Let go!" he shouted.

She looked down at him and frowned. She shook her head, sending her russet hair swirling around her, and tried to dig her toes into a crevice between the stones.

Did she not understand Welsh? Maybe she was of a

Marcher household.

"Let go!" he called in the Anglo-Norman language of the English lands east of Offa's Dyke. He had learned it as a child at the same time he had Welsh. "I will catch you!"

"Go away!" she ordered. "I have no need of your help, so leave now!"

"Is she mad?" Seith grasped the reins of Tarran's horse to keep it from moving. He took the hawk, balancing the bird on his left arm which was as fleshy as his thick legs.

"Probably, but even a madwoman does not deserve to fall to her death." Tarran clenched his teeth. By St. David, he never wanted to see another woman broken and bloody and dead. The sight of Addfwyn, lying in her own blood, lines of pain dug into her face, leaped out of his memories. He wrestled it away. There was no time to think of his plans for vengeance now.

He pulled his broadsword. Stretching up, he tapped the woman on the buttocks with the flat side. "Let go!"

Instead of obeying, she kicked at him and clung like a burr to the arrow slit. "Will you go away? I don't need your help. I don't want your help. I want you to go away. Will you go now?"

She must be mad!

Maybe he should just leave her to her stew in the

juices of her insanity. No, he could not do that. More memories of death raced through his mind. Open eyes that no longer could look into his with yearning, blood pooled beneath a body he once had held against his, an impotent rage that had no focus, the acidic taste of the craving for vengeance.

He raised the sword again. This time, he struck her sharply on the right elbow.

She screamed as the fingers on her right hand lost their hold. For a second, she hung by her left hand as she grappled to get another hold with her right. Her fingers slipped, and she groaned. Then she was falling. He reached up, catching her before she could strike the rocks. Her legs hit his chest, and his breath exploded out in a gasp. He gathered her flailing limbs to him. Her hand smacked his chin. Pulling her tightly to him, he dropped back into the saddle. Pain raced along his thighs as they absorbed the force of her fall. The horse whinnied in fear. He murmured to it, but looked down at the woman in his arms.

Red hair framed her face and curled around the shoulders of the slate-gray gown she wore over a light blue undertunic. It was a simple gown without much embroidery, but the fabric was finer than anything a peasant could possess. Her body, pressing against him, was curvaceous, but as firm and trim as a well-trained warrior's. Her

delicate face urged a man to look at it and then want to look again and again. Her lips, parted as she panted with her exertions, were soft and lush. No sign of madness dimmed her dazzling, green eyes. She closed them, and her body strained against his as she struggled to breathe.

"How does she fare?" asked Vala, dismay heightening the old woman's voice.

"She lives." Tarran took a deep breath and released it slowly.