

*Lindsay Townsend*

*A KNIGHT'S ENCHANTMENT – excerpt*

*April 1210, England.*

“You come now,” said the steward Richard Parvus, his blue-robed bulk filling the doorway.

Joanna tried to reason with him. “Sir, this distillation is almost complete and I should not leave it. I will come soon.”

“Come now,” the steward repeated, staring at a point in the windowless chamber somewhere above her head and refusing to look at her or the room-full of stills, glass and earthenware vessels, star-charts and burning candles. He could not stop breathing, however, and his wide nose wrinkled in distaste at the heady scent of rose petals.

“My lord loves rose water,” Joanna reminded him, but Parvus merely snapped his fingers at her as if she was a hunting dog.

“Now, girl! Leave this - *wreck* and make haste! Our lord would have you as a scribe in his audience chamber now and none of your puffer's nonsense will delay him!”

“I am no -” Joanna stopped, refusing to dignify the insult of “puffer” -meaning a fake alchemist - with a reply. As for the rest, she could leave it. The fire and candle light were safe now. It was a small risk and making rose-water was scarcely part of the great work of alchemy, but she disliked obeying the steward, who was forever trying to peer up her skirts and bullied everyone in this grand, unhappy household, even its priests.

And where was her lord's regular scribe?

She slipped round him, closing the door after her and ran down the spiral

staircase. Reaching the landing of the first floor of the tower, she stopped, listening for the slightest sound in the room beyond that strong oak door. To her dread, she could hear nothing.

“Boo!” said Parvus behind her, laughing as she flicked up her skirts and sped on, rushing down the second spiral flight of the great stone *donjon*. She did not stop to remonstrate with the steward. Knowing always what was at stake she was suddenly desperate for fresh air and natural light, for the freedom to leave her work bench and walk with her father by the river and in the city.

*Oh, my father! Will I ever see you delivered from these terrible men?*

She ran down the rest of the stairs, deliberately not looking at the weighted trap-door set in the flags of the ground floor. She ran straight past a guard and out into the yard, into a day of misty sun and drizzling rain.

Shouts and catcalls at once assailed her as the rowdy prisoners in the three wooden cages in the center of the yard roared out what they wanted to do to her. After two days of this, their lewd persistence wearied her and their imprisonment was another dread. What if her lord decided to place her father in with these rough rogues? How long would he survive in their company, in cages open to the rain and cold? And what of her lord's other 'special' prisoners, held captive with her father in the stone tower of the *donjon*? If they were moved to these outdoor cages, how would they fare?

“Good nature, protect them,” Joanna chanted breathlessly, taking the outdoor wooden steps to the great hall two at a time. Inside again, she mounted another stairway leading to the private audience chamber on the second floor and prepared to run again, then stopped.

Ahead of her were five guards surrounding a stranger who topped them all by half a head. Even as they marched away the stranger glanced back, gave her a curt nod and addressed the captain leading him.

“Your men will be returned once I leave through the main gate.”

“As agreed,” the captain replied, “though our lord will not be pleased by your plucking them off the streets of West Sarum like so many fallen apples.”

“That is no grief to me,” said the stranger. “How much further?”

He was a rude fellow, Joanna decided, coming up behind the troop. Trying to slip by again, as she had with the steward, she saw him closer and liked him less.

He looked a thing of fire to her. Dressed in a long red tunic, he was as high-colored and as lean as a single flame, moving with the swift agility of a salamander. His hewn features were as sharp as freshly-forged metal, his charcoal-black hair was ruthlessly hacked short and, even at this early hour of terce, his jaw prickled with fresh black stubble.

He was hot and dangerous, Joanna decided, wishing to be past him. If he had snatched hostages from her lord's entourage before this meeting, that did not bode well. Now she was about to be admitted into her master's presence, she had hoped to plead with him, to ask for more than a month to complete her sublimations. True alchemy was the secret work of years, not days. But her lord was impatient and, thanks to this bad-mannered, fiery stranger, he would be in an ill temper.

Gliding by the first guard, she was making progress overtaking the troop when the door at the top of the staircase crashed open and two of her lord's unruly hunting dogs bounded toward them, tails up and teeth bared.

*Not again!* Joanna reached into the purse belted to her waist and plucked out a handful of her hand-made sweets, which the hounds, though bred to attack the boar and stag, adored. About to cast them to the noisy beasts, she heard the stranger shout “No!” and then whistle: three loud, sharp blasts. At once the great white alaunts became almost comically docile, lowering their heads and whining softly, their claws scratching softly against the floorboards as they milled close to the nervous, stiffened guards and the striding stranger.

Without breaking step he bent, scratched both their ears and throats, and scolded her, “Sweets spoil them, girl, do you not know that yet?”

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