

Sounds filtered into the white haze of peace surrounding her.

Utensils scaping metal. The muffled clearing of a throat. A masculine throat, for the sound was mellow and low.

The wind outside the side of the house, whistling past a window.

She awoke and felt instant warmth.

Fur cradled her body, surrounding her underneath with luxurious softness. It felt good against her bare flesh.

Bare flesh.

Her senses kicked in. She felt the brush of softness against the peaks of her breasts, the enveloping warmth over the tops of her thighs.

She lay quietly, unable or unwilling as yet to open her eyes.

A scrape of a chair on wood floors. The step of a masculine boot crossing the area outside whatever enclosure which housed her.

The hiss of a fire being stoked, the heat of the hearth which filtered into the place she was.

The room was warm, but she knew, outside the wind was fierce and cold.

She felt safe and secure and protected.

She could smell a vague hint of cologne. Very masculine and pleasant. She liked it.

And food...

Her stomach reacted to the delicious odor. It smelled wondrous. She was famished.

She slowly opened her eyes, her curiosity outweighing the need to remain quiet and unobtrusive.

Wooden beams braced a ceiling of white-washed clay or gypsum. Heavy drapes lined the outside of the small alcove in which she lay.

She felt a bed of feathers beneath her. A luxury indeed. But this seemed a modest enough home with its rustic features.

She did not know this place. There was nothing familiar about it at all.

The room was lit with oil lamps. And the dancing shadows of a recently tended fire.

She turned her head and instantly gasped, for a streak of excruciating pain filtered out all else. A brilliant white light flashed before her eyes.

She fought against being pulled into the silent depths.

“Lie still. You have a head injury.” The voice was deep, commanding and definitely male.

With a strong tinge of foreign accent, one she could not place at present in her incapacitated state.

She obeyed instinctively, easing her hand’s pressure on either side of her head. If she lay very still, the pain receded tremendously.

She felt a raised bump on the right side of her temple. It was terribly sore to the touch.

“You must drink water.”

She chanced to open her eyes once again. A large man was shadowed against the light of the hearth. She could not make out his face clearly and he simply stood, looking down at her.

He took his leave without a word, coming back shortly. A warm palm cupped the back of her neck, easing her enough to place a pewter cup to her lips.

She drank greedily, holding the strong wrist with her fingers that the glorious treat not be taken from her.

Gray eyes watched her face studiously. Beautiful gray eyes. A strong, virile face with dark stubble about the full mouth. A straight nose. An aristocratic face. A scar over his right temple.

She stared at the man, and he stared back.

His build was stocky and he was tall. His clothes seemed of simple cut but well made. He wore a white cotton shirt, a dark vest and tan breeches.

He raised, setting the pewter aside. His hands went to his pockets, and he continued to stare at her.

“My head hurts.” Was that her voice? It sounded so...strained and odd even to her own ears.

“I imagine it does, yah.”

“You have an accent.”

“No.” he drawled the reply. “You...have an accent.”

“...Where are you from?” she tried again.

“From where do you originate?” he lifted a rather condescending brow to her way of thinking.

Was he having sport with her and if so...why did the fact make her wish to weep. She pushed such a ridiculous notion aside, clearing her throat gently. “I am from...”

Her mind was blank. She waited, for the answer to come. No answer came.

“Yah?” he seemed to be waiting, that analytical look on his face.

A cold, alien feeling swept through her mind and body.

“I...I cannot...” panic came and was allowed for her mind was a clean slate with nothing inside its hollowed cavity but anxiety and a growing fear. “I...

He read the emotions flitting across the pretty enough face. “Calm down.” His tone was censored and brusque. “You have hit your head. This is very likely all temporary.” He had seen it enough in the war.

She seized upon the statement, laying back, calming her nerves. She took in deep, cleansing breaths, forcing the fear aside. “Of...course. You are right. It is only...”

Nothing came to mind, so she stopped speaking.

She lifted hopeful eyes. “But, you know me, yes? I m-mean.” She flushed, motioning to her state of being. “We are acquainted, surely for you...removed my clothing.” She felt the reality acutely now, her flush deepening.

“Your garments were soaked.”

“Of course.” She nodded minutely, not understanding any of what was being said. “But it was proper you do so. There are no improprieties here, correct?”

Another type of fear surfaced. She was in a strange room with a strange man who she did not know and she was...

The man seemed to consider all said then a dark scowl laced his features. “Are you telling me you do not know who you are?”

“I...I thought that had been established, Sir.” That particular fear grew by leaps and bounds for she realized, he had not answered her questions.

She was unable to read the carefully composed features.

The man stared at her for an inordinate amount of time.

“...I am your husband, of course.” He stated quietly. “Who else has the right to remove your clothing.”

She...closed her eyes, relief flooding her entire system. “Well, you might have said as much from the beginning!” she breathed out a shaky breath, her hand coming gracefully to her chest bone. “I was thinking dreadful thoughts.”

She gathered her wits, beginning anew. “W-What happened to me? How long have I been...”

“I found you on the beach. I assumed you took a spill. The cliffs are treacherous in spots.”

“Oh dear.” She tried a small laugh which fell flat. “How stupid of me.”

“I thought so.”

She scowled crossly at the man. “A little sympathy would not be unwelcomed.” It was scolded.

His features did not soften one iota.

“...Are you upset with me?” it was her turn to study the man. “You appear so standoffish and distant. Have we...quarreled?”

“We are always quarreling.” It seemed to amuse him.

She thought the statement through. “I see.” What more could be said to that, after all. “We are not happy, I take it. Is the marriage not to your liking, Sir?”

“You ask rather straight-forward questions.” He clearly did not appreciate the fact.

“I am in need of rather straight-forward answers at present.” She reminded the man.

“You should eat.” He turned, going to fetch the food.

She stared after his retreat, her senses reeling.

He returned shortly, bowl and spoon in hand.

She forced herself onto one elbow, ignoring the pain throbbing in her temples. “Thank you.” The soft voice filtered over the man which made his anger deepen.

She held the coverlet to her breast, taking the food, sitting it beside her on the cushy bed.

He watched until she took the first bite then crossed, seating himself at the table in the center of the other room.

The stew was delicious. She ate in silence, searching out her surroundings.

“Where are we? Where is this place?” she tried for amiable.

“Outside Portus, five miles give or take.” He cleaned a weapon with a cloth, she noted.

“I can hear the ocean, correct?”

He said nothing.

“This is your home?”

“One of them.” He shrugged stocky shoulders, carefully disassembling the weapon, placing the parts in an orderly manner on the table before him. “the one in which I feel most comfortable.”

“It is a male’s domicile.” The décor or lack thereof told her that much.

Those gray eyes shifted. “You find fault with it?”

“It is warm and clean.” She disagreed. “It is a fine home.”

He returned to the weapon.

“You will not speak with me?” she tried not to be exasperated with him, but her nerves were such, it was difficult.

“Concerning?” he scowled over at her.

“Everything, man.” She snapped. “Anything! I...I need to know about myself. About my life. How can you not know this?”

“What do you wish to know?” his gaze was a direct one.

“You do not believe I am...” What? What was she. “Do you think I make up this ridiculous farce and if so, why? Do you think I am lying to you? For what reason?”

“You lie continuously about any and all things.” He continued to hold her gaze.

Her spirits sank. “Do I?” her brow furrowed with sadness. “What sort of person am I to do so?”

The room was quiet.

The girl tried to regroup. She only had his word for any of this, after all. There were always two sides to a tale, surely. “May I know your name?”

“My name is Erich.” He sent her a look which said, ‘as well you know’. “Erich Richter.” He looked down the site of the weapon, one thick finger rubbing the long barrel almost lovingly.

“Any you, my lieblich...are Tessa.”

She repeated the name in her head. It brought no recognition.

“I am tired.” She told the truth. “I believe I will sleep now.”