



1071

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Prequel to Snakes & Wolves Triloggy



Chapter 11

Falaise, Normandy 1071

The leather of Annette's slippers tapped quietly with her steps on the blue marble she crossed. With each stride, she felt the beautiful gray linen of her tunic gliding across her skin. The full skirt brushed the polished floor beneath the blue bbliaut with the sleeves that flared from her elbows to her wrists.

As many people did, she did not experience a spike of nerves each time she was called to her uncle's side. But she did not see the man as they did. She did not understand the image of a cruel ruler when he had been so kind to her. Her uncle William provided for her since she was five, after the death of both her parents. She wanted for nothing, needed nothing that wasn't already provided. She grew up in a palace, never knowing hunger or poverty's effects on the splendor that was her wardrobe. All this she had, thanks to the generosity of her uncle William, Duke of Normandy and now King of England.

By the time they reached the door to William's throne room, the face of her maid, Dory, had grown ashen with a bit of a green hue as she trailed Annette. Her maid did not like joining Annette in her uncle's presence. Dory told her once some of the things her uncle was accused of. She defended William and told Dory that every man yearned to be her uncle and have his power and so was willing to lie to throw a paler upon his rise from duke to king. He was simply a man of war and a great one at that. His abilities kept her here, ensconced in the wealth left by her father. Here she was safe. Without William as her uncle, it would not be so.

As the door swept open, she entered the large chamber. Those courtesans, peasants, and guards gathered fell silent as Annette moved forward. She did not doubt she radiated an elegant beauty at the age of thirteen that far outshone any here. She felt Dory's hesitancy behind her. The girl, close to her age, did not like to be looked upon by Annette's admirers. She always cast her eyes down and plodded nervously behind Annette.

Annette offered her uncle an elegant curtsy, ensuring her head only bowed slightly, and her posture remained straight. She fluffed the linen skirt. The sapphires at her neck and ears tinkled with the action.

"My beautiful niece," William declared. He was taking on a paunch since becoming king, but it was something Annette rarely noticed anymore.

"I have found a husband for you at last."

Annette felt her heart race. She and her uncle had discussed at length her prospects as a wife. He had arranged marriages for her older sisters, Ember and



Liana. Though her sisters seemed happy, Annette had shared her reluctance to marry men such as William arranged for them. They were poor, with only a couple of properties to their names. Their husbands could not provide the level of elevated lifestyle she required. She had told her uncle that suitable matches for them would be misery for her.

“Well done, uncle,” she declared. She was ready to move from child to woman. She would be head of a large household with full coffers equal if not greater than William’s. Annette had told William her husband needed not only to be wealthy but handsome. She did not want some smelly, unattractive man tied to her. Nor did she want an old man whose skin was sagging and wrinkling.

“He is Maxwell of the Elliot Clan.”

Annette’s smile remained as she tried to locate a place called Elliot Clan in her mind. She did not know of such a place in Normandy or even France. It was bound to be a far more exotic place. Perhaps she would become a princess, if not a queen. But her smile began to fade when she heard a titter behind her. No one ever tittered at her. They looked up to her, were envious of her, and wanted to be her, but they never tittered. William’s words ran through her mind again. It was not Maxwell of Elliot Clan but Maxwell of the Elliot Clan. What did that mean? Who was Maxwell without a title tacked to his name?

“You will prepare to leave in a fortnight. It is with sorrow I see you go but joy at your great fortune.”

Annette felt dismissed, and she began to speak up and ask her questions, but she would ask later when there were not so many faces watching her. Perhaps for the first time, it made her uncomfortable as she was plagued with the question of what they had to laugh about. But later, when she asked to see her uncle, he was gone from the castle. It was unlike her uncle not to bid her farewell. He always told her he had to see her before leaving because he would see nothing more beautiful while away. But he had not come.



The rhythmic brush strokes down Annette’s long hair made her eyes grow heavy. She wanted to snatch the brush from her maid’s hand and fling it across the room. She did not want to attend the evening meal Dory had prepared her for.

“What do you think it means?” Annette asked her cousin, Poppy, lounging on the edge of the bed. Poppy was a cousin from Italy, from her mother’s side. When Poppy’s parents passed away with no surviving relatives, she came to Falaise as a companion for Annette. Older than Annette, she was now ripe for the taking, almost too ripe for marriage at sixteen. But William would not concern himself with a match for Poppy. He would likely be against any marriage for Poppy because it would take Annette’s companion away. It was a situation Poppy was more than happy with. As the most beautiful human Annette ever laid eyes on, her cousin basked in the attention of men. She seemed to grow more gorgeous by the day, and every man would halt to get a

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glimpse of her. Poppy's maturity and seductiveness made Annette think she might have already been with a man. But Annette had thus far been unable to ask, though Poppy was her dearest, and truthfully, only friend.

"I think William wouldn't have snuck away if he thought you would be happy with the arrangement."

Annette turned her head quickly toward Poppy on the bed. The action yanked the hair from Dory's hand and pulled a couple of strands from her scalp.

"Ouch," she complained. Then to Poppy, "Uncle would not make such an arrangement if it did not make me happy."

Poppy made a scoffing sound as Annette turned straight again. Annette whipped back toward her. Dory sighed.

When Poppy finally spoke, she did so in a bored voice. "Wace told me all the king's potential matches have begged off because you are too outspoken and spoiled."

"Who is Wace?" Annette snapped at her.

Poppy rolled her dark, enchanting eyes. "William's guard."

"William's guard?" Annette asked as if she was indignant at the very notion. "How is it that you came to speak to uncle's guard?"

Poppy shrugged as if it was of no consequence. "He often stands at the king's shoulder, so has been privy to some of the meetings with these matches William has attempted to make."

Annette felt as if she had been stabbed in the heart. Annette was beautiful and wealthy. It should not be difficult at all to find her a husband. Most men only cared about one or the other. To be able to have a wife with both should be a gift to any man. Her uncle had told her she would be a special gift he would give to his most powerful, wealthy, and handsome ally.

"How could anyone turn down my wealth?" Annette asked.

Annette watched Poppy's eyes shoot to Dory behind her. Annette grabbed her hair in her hand and swiped it from Dory's grip as she turned her attention to the servant. "What?" she demanded.

She heard Poppy rise from the bed behind her, but Annette remained focused on Dory.

"Well, speak," Annette commanded the servant.

Still, the girl hesitated, and Annette could see the worrisome frown on her peach lips and the way her eyes kept darting away.

"Well?" Annette asked imperialistically. Annette turned around in her chair and dropped her hands dramatically into her lap to emphasize her sigh of frustration.

"I am sure you do not wish to know," Dory said with confidence that did not reach her eyes.

"What do you know?" Annette asked cautiously.

"That's just it," Dory's words came in a rush, her eyes locked with Annette's before dropping. "I do not know any of it. What I know is inconsequential now that you are betrothed."

"I promise I will have you whipped if you do not tell me."

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A genuine sound of frustration escaped Annette when she saw one of Dory's eyebrows arch, as if to say she knew she was not in danger of being whipped. Annette could have it ordered, and she would not be disobeyed. Still, she could not see why any creature should be beaten, especially a human, even if they were servants.

"I will starve you then."

A quiet bark of laughter passed Poppy's lips.

"I will at least make you miss the day's last meal. You will be hungry by the time you break your fast on the morrow." Annette heard how weak that punishment would be.

Dory was always grateful and loyal to Annette for the position she served. She had been at Annette's side nearly as long as Poppy, which meant she was not usually this shy about sharing her thoughts. It made Annette nervous. Too many things had happened that were making her begin to worry. Not only did someone laugh when her engagement was announced, but her uncle disappeared, and Dory was tight-lipped for once.

"Please." Annette was close to tears. She was sure not knowing was far more frightening than knowing.

Poppy scoffed at her. When she looked at Poppy, Annette began to think she would rather remain ignorant. She opened her mouth to stop Poppy before she spoke. Instinctively, she realized knowing was going to be far worse.

"Wace said the king embellished some of your expectations for your future. He said no man would want to marry you the way the king portrayed you."

"Why would he do that?" Annette asked in a small voice. She felt foolish that everyone seemed to be aware of this situation, even Dory, when Annette knew nothing.

"He thinks William needs an excuse."

"Whatever for?" Annette asked. She still sat with her hair held in her hands, oblivious now.

"So, he could send you away and take your family's wealth."

Annette scoffed now. "You don't know what you're talking about. Uncle would never do that. He knows he can have all he wants."

"Annette," Dory said gently. "He doesn't want just some of it. He wants it all."

Annette nearly scoffed again but found her breath painfully caught in her chest. "Why?"

"For his armies or nobles, it does not matter. War is not cheap." Annette had never thought of it. The men in the armies had to be compensated, supplies provided, and then mobilized.

"It most certainly does matter," Annette replied indignantly. But it did not because her betrothal was already arranged. She should count her blessings. Her uncle arranged a place to go instead of turning her out penniless onto the streets. The thought was terrifying. Annette sobered. "Do you know where I will go?"

"Northern England," Dory said, casting her eyes down again.

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“Wace said the king does not have the same hold in the north as he does in the rest of the country. He has given you to one of the clan leaders, hoping it will help deter the rebels.”

“A clan leader?” Annette asked in a voice that sounded crushed. “Are they still barbarians there?”

“I doubt that,” Dory offered.

“Wace said William required a keep be built before he would grant the union,” Poppy said as if it would make all the difference in the world.

Annette burst into inconsolable tears. There wasn’t even a castle but a keep made of sticks and brush.

“I will not,” Annette insisted. “I will not marry someone who is not even titled.” She shook her head wildly, but a part of her knew she had no choice. Perhaps if she could ply her tears on her uncle, he would fold. Maybe he knew this too, which was why he wasn’t there.

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Chapter 2

Wace Bruneau stuffed his woolen socks into the leather bag lying on the bed. That accomplished, he tied it and looked around the room. It was a cramped space for the three beds placed there. A small rectangle was the only space the three men had between the three beds pressed into the walls. Despite the tiny room, Wace did not want to leave it. It wasn't the men he was reluctant to leave, though he had grown close to them in the last two years since being a guard for William. It was the fact he was William's guard, a prestigious position. He had been a soldier when they landed in England and took it in the name of William. He had fought long and hard, even destroying the north for him, forcing people to his rule. William took notice and Wace became one of the three men always at the King's shoulder. It was a place of honor that garnered great respect. Now he was nothing more than an escort for a troublesome young woman.

Wace knew little of Annette other than she had once been a favorite niece of William's until he fell into desperate straits with his continued propensity for war. Now he coveted her family's wealth more than the girl. Wace did not like the means by which William used to get his hands on it. It would have been much easier just to take it and damn the consequences. But part of William still adored his niece, and he did not want to be hated by the naïve girl who still saw her uncle in a bright light of kindness. She would lose that naivety if she knew of the things her uncle was capable of. For Wace, it seemed as if the king was sacrificing her now in addition to robbing her.

Perhaps the biggest reason he dragged his feet as he left the room was Poppy. She would travel with them, and Wace did not want to be trapped with the woman for the entire journey. Between Annette's expectations of a particular lifestyle and Poppy being Poppy, he did not want to make this journey. But that heaviness was only heavier when he thought of Poppy being escorted by someone else, and he would never see her again. Wace knew he would be stepping into dangerous territory, being French on English soil and close to Poppy and her wiles. He was only a man, and she was Poppy. With the simpering seductive looks, mingled with eyes that could suddenly turn to innocence or worship him as if he were her hero, the trip could be pure torture.

He knew Poppy was aware of her power over men. For the last two years, he had been watching her, in the hall, in the castle, on the grounds, next to Annette, who often found herself at her uncle's side when he was at Falaise. He knew instantly when her eyes landed on a man she was attracted to. They would travel him slowly before turning feline with the narrowing of her dark brown eyes. Confident that she

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could wrap him in her web. It was a web as extraordinary as her beauty, which was the crux of the matter. So, he would hurry Annette to her husband in the village of Kielder in the north of England, and he would flee back to France. He drew in a breath before stepping through the door and into the courtyard, prepared to get the contingent he was commander of moving and moving quickly. It would be a challenging and rigorous journey at the pace he intended to set.

Wace was unprepared for the large quantity of things Annette was taking, and the numerous wagons needed to haul them. He assumed one trunk for the women and one for he and his men would be enough baggage. But what he saw was the guards' trunk beneath another. The cart behind it held two of the same size trunks and two smaller crates. The next wagon had crates, and the fourth and fifth were laden with trunks. Not only did he have numerous vehicles that could now break on the journey. But the women, including the servant girl, were mounted on beasts that made the mouth water and the soul want to fly. Wace knew horses well, and the three he saw waiting for him would be targets for every man who also knew horses. The animals were almost as tall as Wace's giant and thick-chested stallion. But these horses were creatures meant to fly over the ground. Their long legs were leanly muscled, their chests long and narrow like their hindquarters.

The horse, the servant girl, rode was a chestnut with white socks and a long white blaze running down the center of its face to encompass the nose. The mare seemed to be the most patient and docile of all. The two stallions the other two rode were entirely inappropriate for the girls. But he had to admit they controlled the animals with expertise. Annette worked her horse forward and back. His urge to move was almost too much for the bit to hold. She spent enough time on the animal to know this was what was needed to keep his mind occupied. The dark bay animal appeared black at first, with a brown coat so dark it faded almost imperceptibly into the black tips of the animal.

He did not know if it was the black horse, the way it was decorated or if it was Poppy herself, but he could not pull his eyes away when they landed on her. A white caparison draped over the horse's neck, the saddle, and over the horse's rump. A white cap rested on the animal's head, ears poking through with fringes hanging over his eyes. Wace would not guess Poppy to be so attentive to her dark animal to protect it from the sun's rays and flies. But the effect was regal in its attempt to be practical. But this was because Poppy sat on the horse like a royal queen.

The horses would create a target, but the fortune in the treasures they carried would make their party irresistible. Wace stood on the steps, looking at the mess he was about to step into, but resigned himself. It was not his place to tell Annette what she could and could not take with her. His job was to protect it. If he had known the size of the group and what they carried, he would have prepared more men. That was his own short-sightedness. He assumed he knew what the women would be taking. He should have asked, but he had never commanded anything before. His role in the last two years had been one of silence and doing exactly as he was told. He realized his first mistake in leadership, never assume, always know.

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Wace thought of the extravagant cost of passage for all the luggage and animals. The wagons and the horses pulling them would not make the entire journey. Once they arrived in England, they would replace those horses and wagons. Wace had plans to take his horse and those of his three men, but a lady's palfrey could be purchased upon arrival. It was apparent Annette had no plans to leave her three horses behind. But it should not matter to him. It was the king's money, not his.

His eyes trailed across the other two girls again, refusing to see Poppy next to them. Annette looked in disarray. He had never seen the girl in such a state. Her hair was not perfectly arranged but had loose strands of dark hair, making her look wild compared to her usual style. But the servant told the story of what occurred without speaking a word. The girl had an eye that was quickly bruising and a nose that still trickled blood. Despite himself, his eyes slipped to Poppy, but there was no sign she had been touched. He knew the other girls had fought their fates, and Wace was angry that the men had handled them so roughly to get them here. What this purported made his frustration level rise. Annette had fought before leaving on the journey, and Wace wondered just what kind of hell the king heaped upon him.

He descended the steps, focusing on each footfall, his mind on the stirrup as he put his foot in it. His eyes trained themselves on his saddle as his hand gripped it. His trepidation, he pushed away, his mind on his legs and arms as he pulled himself onto the back of Brutus. His fingers took the reins, feeling the soothing leather slip easily between his fingers. He raised his head as the white animal shifted beneath him. One step at a time was how he would complete this journey. One step at a time.



Wace tried to ignore the young woman with her head bent over the rail, gagging. Poppy looked terrible. The trip across the Channel had been quite unkind to her. While the other women were unaffected by the rise and fall of the ship, Poppy suffered immensely. She was pale, her eyes sunken, and they had been at sea so long he thought she might have lost weight. The trip that was supposed to be quick across the water stretched into more than two weeks as the storms kept pushing the boat back to France. It was torture for the woman, and Wace felt sorry for her. But the servant girl and Annette cared for her as best they could, trying to ease her suffering. All Wace offered her was a gentle pat on the back as she spewed her guts over the side of the ship. That had been days ago. The ship fought its way back after being cast off course in a storm. The horses secured in the hold grew wild with impatience, and the crew feared they would tear their way through the hull if they did not reach dry land soon.

Finally, the ship arrived, and the other women pulled Poppy off the rail and helped her shaky legs walk across the ship's deck for the last time.

Wace bid the women to take Poppy to the water's edge so the strong breeze could help clear her head. As Poppy's feet hit the surf, her legs crumbled, and she began to pitch forward. She was taller than the other two, a little heavier, and her weight was too much for them. Wace grabbed for Poppy, snatching her quickly before she was

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submerged in the water. He pulled her up into his arms, and for a moment, he had the urge to drop her back into the water and rinse her off. She reeked. But he had to assume his smell was no better.

Wace hefted her, and he bristled when her head tilted, resting against his chest. He felt her sigh and her body relaxed in his arms. He hurried his steps, and despite her being the opposite of a burden in his arms, he could not get her out of them fast enough. He sat her on her feet with a jolt. But held to her until the other women reached her side. He quickly excused himself and went to oversee the unloading of their supplies.

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Chapter 3

Annette rubbed her arm gently. One of the men had grabbed her there, just above the elbow, and left fingerprints on her skin that turned into bruises. She had banged her shin and peeled a nail back when she fought against the grown men. But the worst of it was Dory's bloody nose and black eye. It was all Annette's fault. She knew the fallacy of her plan in refusing to go. Even when her uncle's men broke down her door, she fought against being dragged from her room. Dory was just an innocent bystander. One that did not unbarricade the door for them when they came banging, but that was the extent of her guilt. Annette felt confident she dealt a good bruise or two and drew blood with her nails down one of the men's faces. Ultimately, it was pointless, just as she knew it would be. Poppy had not been in the chamber with Annette and Dory to talk Annette down. The younger girl was furious, knowing that with her uncle not present to see her off, what she had been told was true. The king was robbing her.

The last vision many of the household and visitors had of Annette of Le Mans was her kicking and screaming, fighting all the way to the outer bailey. She was almost tied to the wagon, but as she breathed heavily and looked around, she saw what a spectacle she was making. Some of those people had satisfied smiles on their faces that froze her. But the blood pouring from Dory's nose and her swelling eye drained the fight from Annette.

One aspect of the journey Annette had mastered was the acquisition of their horses. She always loved to ride. But she was only on a fast horse once because the groom put her on the wrong animal. As a result, she only got to experience the fire that resided in a horse's breast for a moment. Then she was ordered onto her palfrey, one of the slowest horses in the entirety of France, she was sure. Undoubtedly, her uncle and his stewards were making plans to spend her money, and not much heed was given to her in the final hours of her residence. She not only purchased one fleet animal for herself but one for Poppy and even Dory. She feared the animals would be the last thing she could ever buy.

Only four men journeyed with them across the Channel. She feared they would not be sufficient to see to their safety. She hated her uncle for all of this and this Maxwell of the Elliot Clan. She wondered what would happen if he didn't want her. She thought that highly unlikely. Even without her wealth, she was too beautiful to be cast away. But a more significant part of her wished that he would refuse her. She could find a better husband, she did not doubt. After all, she was not that spoiled and could not help her beauty.



When she arrived in Brighton, she discovered the only money sent was what her uncle's steward gave her before departure. She assumed her guards had the bulk of it, or it was in the extra trunk that was brought.

"What do you mean that the trunk is yours?" Annette asked Wace. He was a tall man, broad on his shoulders and strong in the back. She saw him often in the palace, most often shadowing her uncle.

"I mean, my lady," Wace said with the voice he adopted shortly after beginning their journey. It told her that his patience was held on by the tiniest threads. "That trunk is the only possession the four of us had room to bring. There was a reason there was a limit to what could be brought."

Of course, there was a limit to what could be brought. Poppy told her they would have only one wagon to carry their things. When she took this to the steward to demand a second, he quickly folded, granting her as many as she needed. Clearly another tactic to get her away as soon as possible.

"We can get horses and a wagon here," Tumas said, stepping up behind Annette. She felt sandwiched between the two men, as if two mountains had closed in on her, sucking up the air around her and filling her space.

Wace held his hand out, and she knew he wanted the pouch that held all the money she assumed was left of her family's fortune. She hesitated a moment too long. Wace cleared his throat and began to say something. Annette quickly dropped the purse into his hand. She did not care to hear what he had to say about the situation. She was doing all she could, not to burst into tears, but she could feel them collecting. Wace dismissed her, falling in step with Tumas as they started for the livery. Incensed, her eyes followed them before darting to Edward and Cyrille, who remained nearby.

The shortage of funds was nothing Annette had ever experienced before. The situation was brought home to her when Wace and Tumas reappeared with a wagon that looked newer and sturdier built than the one they traveled Normandy in. But the horses were ghastly. They appeared to have been neglected for a good amount of time. Their ribs showed through their patchy coats. One had raw skin where a saddle had rubbed relentlessly, while the other sported vicious scars across his haunches and back. These horses screamed she did not own them but were either rented, as the horses must have been before Wace purchased them, or that she allowed her household such cruelty.

"What is this?" Annette asked.

"It was what we could afford while still feeding ourselves until we reach your husband."

Annette heard the accusation in his voice, his bitterness for being sent with her. She could not wait until he and his men returned to Falaise. They did not treat her as they did under her uncle's watch. They made it clear they did not appreciate having to uproot their lives to deliver her to her husband.

Wace moved to his horse and raised his foot to place it in the stirrup. "Why did you buy these poor creatures?"

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Wace dropped his foot and slowly turned to her. He smiled at her as if she were a child or an imbecile. "You could only afford this. There was not enough to give us fine horses too."

"But these horses don't look like they can pull the trunks." She noted the way he stressed "you" in his address.

Wace arched an eyebrow, his face twisting in that nasty way that made her aware of his dislike for her. She had never experienced the visual evidence of such displeasure. Everyone was careful to at least pretend to like her because of her connection to a king. She knew some of it was false, a great deal in retrospect, but she liked that better than this open display of hostility.

"But there is only one wagon."

"We can sell your animals and buy more horses and wagons. You can try to hook those racers to a wagon and hope they do not run its wheels off. We can forgo food on the journey north. Or you can rid yourself of enough items so these horses can make the journey."

In the end, trunks stood in a stack upon the dock. A large amount compared to the size of the wagon. Annette wanted to cry anew because these were more things she had to leave behind. She worried she would have no clothes on her back when she reached the Elliot Clan.

"What you do not wish to take with us, I can sell for you," Wace said. His voice was gentle as if he had read her frightening thoughts. At least then, she might have a coin to her name. Wouldn't that be better than the dresses she may never wear or the linens she may not need?

"All right," she said with a level of bitterness.

The weeding out was difficult for all the girls. Annette loved the delicate fabrics and extravagant gowns, Poppy had a propensity for scarfs, hats, and jewels, and Dory loved the fragrant soaps and creams. All of it they left behind except for the most basic of items and the most durable clothing. While they sorted, all but Tumas went with Wace to find buyers for their excessive baggage. He loaded the trunks as they were emptied and refilled until only four trunks filled the wagon.

"What is this?" Wace asked upon his return as he approached the wagon.

Annette began to speak but did not know how to respond.

"Do you think these horses will grow stronger pulling this load? Why does this wagon not hold our trunk?"

Annette was embarrassed, forgetting to save room for the men's trunk.

Wace reached into the wagon and pulled two of the trunks out. Letting them drop with a heavy thunk onto the ground. "You have ten minutes to get your items into one trunk, or we leave it all behind."

Annette stared at his retreating back. Would anything about this situation not make her want to cry?



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Annette pulled her skirts out of her way as she sank to the ground, exhausted. The small brook was a slight reprieve from the day's heat and the wagon's dust. Wace would not allow them to stop, no matter how rigorously she demanded. She could feel the grime covering her. The heavy rain, two days before, had not helped. Wace did not stop them from traveling through the downpour. It felt like the mud created was now embedded deep in her pours. She did not know if she would ever feel clean again. She pulled her skirts higher and gingerly pulled her boots off her feet. She had been traveling through this God-forsaken country for days, and her feet had not fared well in the shoes she did not dry at the beginning of the journey. Slowly she submerged them in the cool water. It bit at the open sores, but it soothed simultaneously. She leaned back on her hands and closed her eyes.

She thought of praying again, but her last prayer remained unanswered since the journey was yet to end, and no horses appeared to replace the slow, plodding ones. The animals slowed them with their tired pace, which was the root of Wace not wishing to stop. She could not say anything she saw of this land delighted her. The weather moved from rainy to hot and humid to dry and dusty roads.

For the last two days, there was little more than a path to follow. Obviously, carved by the wild game of the forests, it told Annette how remote of a place she was bound for. The journey slowed considerably when the wagon had to be carefully guided and sometimes hefted by the four large men to get it out of a hole or back onto the narrow path. She was learning that was just the way of this nightmare land she would call home. She wondered what the chances were that she could return to Falaise after the wedding. Some might consider her too young to consummate a marriage. But she had little hope a man who lived in such a wild land would have any moral compass. Perhaps she could offer him a life of ease in France compared to the drudgery that was likely his. But she could not guarantee that. A life of struggle could be her own fate. The tears began again. She had shed so many she thought none were left.

She heard the heavy steps of a man behind her. She sat up, flicking her skirts down off her thighs. She felt the hem sink into the water, and annoyance at whoever came upon her permeated.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Wace crouch beside her. "We will arrive in a few hours."

"Arrive where?" Annette snapped at him.

Annoyance built when she watched the corner of his mouth rise in a smile or smirk she could not tell. "To your husband."

"Very well," she said, pulling her feet from the water.

"As I have told you, your feet might fare better if you were to go without those boots. All they are doing is rubbing your feet raw." Wace picked one up and folded it in half. "There is not enough leather to protect the soles of your feet."

Annette snatched the shoe from his hand. "I cannot possibly be seen without footwear. That is the way of peasants."

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Wace smirked as he rose and left her, barking at everyone to start moving again. She could not wait to be rid of him and all his orders.

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Chapter 4

Wace lifted Annette from the saddle, surprised at how light she was. With his hands wrapped around her thin waist, he realized she was a child. It was easy to forget with her big attitude and spoiled ways. He gently sat her on her feet and took a position behind her.

The girl was visibly rattled when the villagers began speaking. Annette knew English, but she did not know the dialect of the language so far north. He saw a couple of tears fall down her cheeks. He spoke to the villagers in their own tongue, surprising everyone except Tumas. They had both learned the language here not so long ago. Wace flinched at the memory.

“I am Maxwell Elliot,” a man said, stepping through the people who stood expectantly.

As soon as Annette saw the man, she backed up into Wace. Wace placed a hand on her back between her shoulder blades and pushed her forward again. Then he spoke to Maxwell, introducing him to his new bride.

He saw a flicker of unease in the man’s eyes. “How old is she?”

Wace never considered what he would do if the man refused to take Annette as a child bride. They did not have the funds to return to southern England or make it across the Channel to France.

“She is thirteen,” Wace supplied

“She does not speak our language?”

“She did not know she would be coming here.”

“How is it that you know our language? It is different this far north.”

“I have been here,” Wace told him, and that was all he said. Left hanging in the air was that he had been here when the country was taken by the duke. He was here when the king brought his wrath down upon the north.

“What are you two saying?” Annette’s voice was strong and overwrought with confidence.

Wace could not help but smirk at the girl, then told Maxwell, “She is irked that she does not know what we are saying.”

Maxwell laughed, and Wace chuckled with him. Of course, there was some level of guilt for him taking such joy from the aggravation of one child. Still, Annette’s fury was humorous and entertaining. She was like a tiny dog that thought it was bigger and more powerful than all the other dogs.

Annette turned to Wace. “I cannot stay here.” Her voice was so frightened Wace wanted to sympathize, but that was not his place.

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“You must,” was all Wace said. This got him a scowl, her dark eyes traveling over him. She had a way about her that made him feel small when she chose to look at him in such a manner.

“I am Wace, and this is Tumas, Edward, and Cyrille. Tumas also understands your language,” he said.

It was then Maxwell’s eyes narrowed slightly after reading between the lines. He seemed to falter for a moment before he bid the group to join him for a meal in the hall before the wedding.

Wace was unaware the wedding would be so soon. But a part of him was relieved he accepted Annette, and Wace could quickly return home. The other part wanted to grab Annette and pull her away from a man like Maxwell, who would rush a child to the altar. Once Maxwell gave Wace a tour of the nearly completed construction of the keep being called Ravenshill, Wace had no choice but to give the man his bride. The nuptials were exchanged, and a feast was arranged in celebration.



During the meal, Annette was positioned on the other side of Maxwell, effectively cutting her off from the rest of the group. Poppy sat to Wace’s left, and he could not avoid conversation with her since she did not speak the woman's language sitting on her other side. Her chatter showed her nervousness, as did her dark eyes darting back and forth, gauging the people she would be living with from this day on.

Watching Poppy and her trepidation, his eyes moved to Dory sitting at the next table with Cyrille, Edward, and Tumas. She, too, was only a child, probably somewhere between Poppy’s age and Annette’s. He had brought children here to leave them. He did not know what kind of people these were. He suspected he knew the type of man Maxwell was, and he wanted to grab the girls and run back to France with them.

Maxwell spoke little to Wace. Now that he was aware Wace had come to the north to fight when their king came to conquer and kill, his dislike was evident. Wace did not care. He would soon be gone from this place, far removed from civilization. Then Poppy moved closer to him to accommodate someone else on the bench. Her leg brushed the length of his, and then her hip nudged him as she shifted her weight. She seemed oblivious she had come in contact with him, and he found he was not in such a hurry to leave.

With many things distracting him and making him feel ill, he ate little of the food. He was not sure how Poppy could put away her entire trencher, but she managed in a surprisingly short amount of time. She sat a few moments, twitching, looking about herself, and then her eyes landed on Wace’s food. It had been moved about, smashed, and mutilated. He looked at it, feeling like a child who only pretended to eat.

Then Poppy leaned forward. Her leg pressed firmly into his, and her rib cage ran across his left arm as his hand rested in his lap. She leaned across him and toward his trencher, reaching for a soft carrot on the opposite side. She popped it into her



mouth and turned her head to stare at Wace. She held a mischievous smile that made Wace want to smile back. Moisture from the carrot remained on her lips, and he had the urge to lick it off.

She turned her head again and stuffed more food into her mouth. He did not know what she ate and did not care. He could smell she was freshly washed. He spent many nights and mornings watching her brush the tangles from the long black tresses. Each time her hands smoothed over her silken hair, he wanted those fingers to be his. He had grown hard each time as he was now. He reached out and pushed the trencher in front of her, relieved and cursing himself when she moved away. She cast him a look of confusion and hurt. Had it been a game? Was she flirting with him again? She had once, and it had not ended well for Wace.

After a few more minutes of stuffing herself, Poppy shifted again on the bench and stood. Wace looked from her toward Annette, hidden behind Maxwell's giant body. He needed to stay with Maxwell because he decided he would threaten him if he dared consummate the wedding before Annette was more of a woman. But he could not leave Poppy to walk alone. The men with Dory were ensconced in their conversation and would not give Poppy the protection he could.

Wace stood and fell into step at Poppy's shoulder. She looked up at him once, and he read relief and wondered why she had not asked him to accompany her.

"I am going to the privy," she said, shedding light as if she read his thoughts. "But I thank you for escorting me. This place scares me," she admitted. Her voice was small, not like the cocky and, he had to admit, conceited Poppy he knew.

He did not know how to respond. He could see easily why Poppy would find fear here. He suspected that in their situation, they would discover fear anywhere, any new place, where they would be left and forgotten. Wace waited for her to finish her business before she rejoined him. He wanted to offer to take her away, but she was indentured to Annette. She could go nowhere if Annette did not.

They walked back to the hall, and neither seemed in a hurry to get there.

"I am sure you will do well here," he finally said, finding his tongue.

"I have no doubt. But who is here for me?"

Wace's steps faltered. "Any man who lays eyes upon you will worship and cherish you, Poppy," he said. He did not take his eyes from the dim trail ahead, but he found it hard to swallow while he wished he had not said such a thing.

"That's just it," she began. "Did you see the men? There are not many, and all of them are old or pimply-faced boys. I would rather not catch their eye." Then she turned quickly to him. "How can I make myself ugly?"

Wace could not help the guffaw that escaped. "That is impossible," he supplied.

"You have always been my biggest admirer," she said with the self-assuredness one would expect from a woman like her.

Wace did not know how that comment affected him. He did not have time to analyze it before they stepped through the door into the hall again. Maxwell and Annette were gone. His steps slowed, and then Poppy's eyes followed Wace's.

"Oh my," Poppy said.

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Wace almost knocked Poppy down as he charged toward Tumas and the other two men. He slammed his palm down on the table. "Where is she?" Wace demanded.

All eyes stared at him in surprise because Wace was not one to lose his temper.

"Maxwell took her for the night," Tumas said as if it was of no consequence.

"To bed?" Wace said with irritation knowing of no other reason to retire so soon unless he was eager to stake his claim.

Wace straightened. His chest constricted tightly. Why had he left Annette? She was the one in the most danger. Then he looked down at Poppy, who came to stand next to him. Who could say? He was a gentleman, so he did not snatch Poppy away to ravish her. Other men would not be so chivalrous.

"Why didn't you keep an eye on her?"

When it appeared that no one else at the table would speak up, Edward asked, "What did you expect us to do? He is her husband."

Wace could picture Maxwell on top of Annette, pressing her tiny body down, crushing her. He could imagine her struggles would be smaller than the big man's strength. He did not think Annette would lie down obediently, even if she were scared. She was good at hiding that side of herself. That child side and not the spoiled bitch side. No one deserved rape, especially a child. His fury grew into a giant boulder within his chest that would not let him draw breath.

Then he registered Poppy's hand splayed across his chest. The other hand rubbed his back in a small circular manner. "It's okay, Wace," Poppy said. How could her voice sound even more seductive? He felt desire charge in on him. "It must be done sometime, and we cannot all be so lucky to give it willingly."

Wace nodded his head. He knew many women had to do their duty to their husbands and family. It did not make it right when she was unwilling, and she had to lie with her husband regardless of her wishes. Many women experienced sex for the first time when it was callously taken from them. Wace hoped he was wrong, and Maxwell was not such a man. He took Poppy by her arms and slid them off him.

"You are right," Wace said. He nodded, looked at Poppy, and left the hall.

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Chapter 5

The exhaustion claimed her entirely the previous night. Annette slowly became aware of the buzz of activity outside. The morning light filled the room and the man in the bed next to her. She lay still, assessing herself, trying to remember how she even got in the bed. She felt him stir, and she remained still, feigning sleep.

She dozed until his rising from the bed woke her again. She had rolled over in her sleep, so she faced him, but she kept her eyes closed, breathing in the steady rhythm of sleep. She heard him move about the small hut. She felt movement on the bed, but he did not get back in it. Eventually, she heard him dress and leave her alone in silence.

She threw the cover off herself. She had not realized she was still clothed in everything except her shoes. She remembered Maxwell bringing her here and her terror that the wedding would be consummated. But as soon as they stepped into his room in the back of the hall, he had smiled gently at her. It threw her off guard because the gesture made her realize how young he still was. Then he motioned her to sit. He removed her boots for her and rubbed salve on her sore feet. He then picked her up, carried her to the bed, and lay her gently upon it.

He had stared down at her a moment, and she gasped when he drew his dagger from his belt. He drug the blade across his palm. She remembered staring at him as if he was crazed. He said something to her in a gentle voice, but she only stared. He pulled the blankets back and smeared his blood in the middle of the sheets. He gave her a satisfied nod, went to the other side of the bed, and lay down, fully clothed, down to his boots, giving her his back. And just like that, as far as all would know, their marriage was valid under the king and God.

She went to the trunk that had been placed in the room and pulled out a tunic not so rumpled from sleeping in it. She donned it and nervously exited. She was surprised Cyrille waited outside and fell into step with her.

“Did Wace send you to check the sheets?” Annette asked him, a lilted piqued by his proximity.

“No. I have been here waiting to see if you scream. Before me, Wace had Edward listen.”

That brought Annette up short. “And if I had?”

Cyrille slowly shook his head, his eyes traveling the length of her. He had a hint of sadness in his eyes as he assessed her. “You didn’t,” he said.

Poppy’s voice made Annette’s feet move in a different direction. By the time she reached Poppy, Cyrille was gone.



“Are you well?” Poppy asked. Concern was evident in her voice and radiated on her face as she looked at her little cousin.

“I am,” Annette said. She didn’t know the answer to the question. She was fine, but Poppy could not know it was not consummated. She trusted Poppy with everything, but she thought perhaps this could be a secret she kept from her.

“Was it too terrible? Was he cruel to you?” Poppy stepped closer and placed a gentle hand on her arm.

“He wasn’t cruel,” she said to defend Maxwell.

On Poppy’s face, she saw she would never believe Maxwell wasn’t cruel because he had taken her virginity while she was still a child.

“I wish your first could have been like mine.”

Annette’s feet stopped as she turned to Poppy. “You mean you are not a maiden?”

Poppy laughed lightly at the hesitant and delicate way Annette said it. “I am not. But my first time was with a kind and gentle man of my choosing.”

“When?” Annette asked, still trying to move past the shock.

“Last year, I think.”

“Why did you not marry?”

“Unlike you, I have no reason to. I am your servant for all intents and purposes.”

“Who was it?” Annette asked. She expected it to be some high lord, someone who was worthy of a woman such as Poppy.

“Wace.”

Annette’s mouth fell open. “You were with Wace?”

“Mm-hmm,” Poppy said as if it was of no consequence.

“Why?”

Poppy chuckled. “Because he is Wace.” Then Poppy shrugged. “It just happened, and afterward, I told him it couldn’t happen again because it had been reckless behavior. He agreed, but we have had encounters since.”

“Encounters?” Annette questioned. “How many?”

“Five, I think.”

“Has he not asked you to marry him?”

Again, Poppy chuckled. “Why would I marry him? He has not asked, and that is fine by me.”

Annette returned to walking, silently wondering what Poppy could see in Wace. She had assumed the man was married. He was old enough to be, but so was Poppy.

Most of the people were gone when they made it to the hall. “Did he hurt you?” Poppy asked again of her wedding night after they had eaten most of the food placed before them.

“No,” Annette said, unaware that that was unlikely.

“That is good. Wace hurt me at first until he realized he was the first.” Poppy nodded and smiled, “He was different then, gentler.”

Then the man who was the subject of the conversation appeared. “See how he moves through here like a prowling cat?” Poppy asked, her voice telling Annette she appreciated it if her cousin did not. “I didn’t think a man of his size and with a face as intense as his could be so fun in bed.”

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Annette watched the approaching man, and for the first time, she saw it when his eyes landed on Poppy. Wace was in love with her. He obviously did not think anyone would notice, and she hadn't until Annette knew there was something to take note of. The way his eyes landed on Poppy, lingering for a moment before his eyes crinkled the slightest and the corner of his lip curled ever so slightly.

It made Annette want to laugh at the side of Wace she would never have known if Poppy hadn't told her what she had. Annette did not wonder why Wace hadn't married Poppy. She was from royal bloodlines. Though she and her children would never have a chance at the throne, dozens lay between her and the crown, farther away than Annette, but royal, nonetheless. As for Wace, Annette knew nothing of him except that side she had grown to know on the journey here. It contradicted Poppy's story of his gentleness. But he was concerned for her enough to make his men stand outside Maxwell's door if she was manhandled.

"He nearly beat a man to death last night for showing an interest in me." Annette saw the coy smile on Poppy's face and felt the urge to roll her eyes. Poppy liked flirting with men, but until moments ago, she imagined it had only been flirting.

"Annette!" Wace's voice barked her name at her.

She was immediately frightened. Wace always called her Lady Annette, always. That he didn't now, was worrisome.

"Did that man touch you?"

Annette stared at him as those around her did the same. "He is my husband," she said hesitantly.

"And you are only a child. I will kill the man."

Wace stepped away to do just that. Annette jumped to her feet and hurried to plant herself between Wace and the door. "Do not," Annette ordered him.

Neither her small frame nor her order slowed him. She finally braced a small palm against his enormous chest. When she touched him, his feet stopped, and he stared down at her. She could not imagine this man being gentle with Poppy. He appeared to be anything but that. His face was a mask of fury, his nostrils flared like some wild beast, and his chest rose and fell beneath her hand. She quickly withdrew that hand.

"It is all right."

"It is not all right. You are nothing but a defenseless child."

Annette felt angered and yet grateful that he was concerned for her.

She took him by the arm and led him outside. That he allowed it surprised her. Once outside and they stood out of earshot of the others, she said, "He did not touch me," she whispered. "Not the way you mean. I think he is a considerate man, mayhap even kind. At least last night he was."

He stared down at her for a moment, his massive jaw working. His eyes pierced her. The rage visibly drained from him as she watched him. He gave a short nod, and that was the end of it.

The news Wace brought to them later made Annette's heart sink. Because the man had cared for her despite his surliness.

"I want to let you ladies know, my men and me will leave in the morning."

"What?" Annette asked in surprise. "Why so soon?"

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“Why not?” Wace countered.

“Wace,” Poppy said. Her voice held no level of sadness or loss that this man she had slept with once and dallied with several times after was leaving her life, likely forever.

Wace turned to her, his face intent. If Annette had her guess, his departure was not a decision he made without great deliberation.

“We would like to go riding today. We do not know if we will feel safe doing so after you leave.”

Wace’s head slowly turned to Poppy. “Why don’t you ask the man from last night?”

Annette knew he spoke of the man he beat away from Poppy the evening before. He was Maxwell’s uncle and had gotten too far into his cups and tried to seduce Poppy into his bed. She had played the flattered damsel, but Wace had finally ended it.

“Roy?” she asked with a great deal of humor. “He was only entertaining last night. He is a moron.”

Annette saw Wace smirk. “Will the servant girl be joining you?”

“No,” was Poppy’s response.

“I will have your horses prepared,” Wace said, turning and walking away.

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Chapter 6

Why had he not insisted that Annette's husband escort the women for their ride? All day he was tasked with chasing after the women. His and his men's horses were fast, but Annette's horses were lightning streaking over the ground. Both women were quite accomplished riders. But it was Poppy he could not pry his eyes from. He remembered her, feeling her, wanting her even when he was inside her. He craved more of Poppy. Not sex, though it was fabulous. He wanted more. He wanted her to be with him. When he left, he wanted her to wait for his return. When he climbed into bed at night, he wanted Poppy's lithe and full body pressed against him. But what he had was this day, and he watched her fly as he gave chase.

The men were upon them before Wace realized. They had come to a stop to give their horse's a breather. A shout from Tumas brought Wace's mind back to the present and away from one of the nights he spent with Poppy. Wace knew they were outnumbered by the ten riders bearing down on them. "Ride for Ravenshill," Wace said, pulling the sword that was always at his side and laying it across his lap. "They'll never catch you two."

There was no indication the men were a threat as there was no indication they were not. Unfortunately, it would be too late before they knew one way or the other.

"But..." Poppy began to protest, her eyes glued to Wace. At that moment, he saw she had some feelings for him because he saw concern.

"Go, now. I will come," Wace assured her in a voice that was kind. A voice he softened just for her.

She gave a short nod, and then the two women were off.

"If they wish to fight," Wace said as his men tightened their ranks. "We only fight long enough to let the women get away."

"Wace," Tumas said, interrupting him. To Wace's horror, the ten riders were giving chase to the two women.

The four men rode hard after them. Fortunately, their pursuers did not overtake the women before they reached the outskirts of Kielder. Wace knew one thing when his eyes fell on Poppy standing next to her lathered horse. The men were after her. He could feel it in his gut. He had not gotten a look at any of them, but he would bet Poppy's moron from last night was one of them.

Wace slipped from his horse and approached Annette. "Are you two hurt?" Wace asked, but his eyes kept trailing to Poppy, who looked as terrified as Annette.

"We are unscathed," Annette said, then her husband was at her side, drawing her attention away. After a moment, he guided her from Wace.

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“Wace.” Poppy said his name. It was a small shaky voice. He was beside her when she turned and walked toward the small hut she and Dory shared. He watched how Poppy moved and how she flowed over the ground. She remained silent all the way to the door. She slipped inside, and Wace hesitated. He knew he should not cross the threshold with Poppy. He knew he should not, yet he did.

She stood in the center of the room. She had begun to shake to the point her teeth were clacking together. She was going into shock. Wace grabbed a blanket and draped it about her shoulders. He brought it together in front of her, then placed his hands over her arms and rubbed them vigorously.

“Oh, Wace,” Poppy said. Her voice sounded so frightened and small. Then the tears pooled in her dark eyes.

Poppy was not the type of woman to use tears to get her way. She had no need for such tactics. She was also not the type of woman to cry, as far as Wace knew. But her tears and fear affected him. He felt his heart shatter for her as he reached out a hand to wipe the tear from her face.

She stilled as soon as his finger came into contact with her cheek. She looked up at him, and his finger stroked across her tears before his hand involuntarily slipped into her hair. He paused. At least he would convince himself he had, giving her a chance to protest. She did not.

He stepped against her. He felt the heat of her warmth along the length of his body. One hand splayed across the small of her back while the other held her head as he kissed her. It began as a gentle coaxing, a request to let him soothe her fears. Even if it was just for this moment. But Poppy wanted more. She needed more, and she needed it from him.

Wace could not stop the passion that raged now that he held Poppy in his arms again. It exploded when her hands came up to lock behind his head, forcing his lips tighter against hers. Her tongue flicked against his lips in demand that he yields to her. He watched Poppy, whose eyes were closed, lost in her desire. He thought perhaps the gentlemanly thing to do was excuse himself from her embrace. But he was only a man who would do whatever Poppy asked of him as long as she did not stop touching him.

Her hands trailed down Wace’s chest, around his waist. She pulled him more firmly against herself and ground herself into him in a most provocative manner. He tried to grab her then. His passion could not be denied. But her hands gripped his tunic over his chest, and she began pushing him backward. When he came up against the bed, he fell with the force of her shove, and she followed him.

She was astride him, and he was in her before he could even say how such a thing happened. Throughout the day, he had watched her hips undulate with her animal and the rise and fall of her body with the steps of her horse, but it was nothing to how she rode him. He kept reaching for her to slow her. She was driving him into a frenzy he would soon have to release, but he didn’t want it to end so quickly. But Poppy kept forcing his hands away from her hips, driving him mad, as was her way.

When he exploded, he heard her cry out her own release before she collapsed onto his chest. He brought his arms around her, holding her gently as they floated back

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down. That's where she fell asleep, lying across him, with him still embedded in her. He remained that way for an interminable amount of time until he felt he might grow hard again. Then, rolling her onto the bed beside him, wrapping his arms around her, and securing her in his embrace, they slept.

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Chapter 7

It had been three months since the men had chased Annette and Poppy. Wace and his men did not leave as Wace said they would. Annette was grateful for the extra men because members of Roy Kirkham's clan had been seen frequently on Elliot land since then. Maxwell had learned it was his uncle, who was now actively hunting for Poppy. He banned him from Kielder, but Roy still lurked, lying in wait.

The women filled their days in the village, but it began to feel like a prison for Annette. There was always someone at her side. Maxwell had taken on that role frequently, and Annette minded him the least. He was a kind man who cared greatly for his people and her. He spoke gently to her, trying to teach her their language. But, despite now being able to recognize some of the words the others said, it was still stifling trapped among them.

Few came and went from the village, and always it was in larger groups now. The raiding of the Kirkhams against the Elliots had increased tenfold. Maxwell tried to reassure his people that the Kirkhams were only after Poppy, not Kielder or their women.

It was not only Annette and Poppy who felt stifled, but most of the villagers. Those who listened to Maxwell began to turn against Poppy because she started it by flirting with Roy at the feast. If Annette was unsure of Wace's interest in Poppy, it became apparent when people turned against her. His anger was written clearly on him. It was enough to stop any talk of tossing her from the village.

To distract from the turmoil, the women decided a feast would be in order, to celebrate the bountiful harvest. It was a joyous event, and one Annette and Poppy would have loved to help prepare for, but no one asked, and when Annette asked if anyone would need help, they refused. Maxwell tried to reassure her it would pass, but it seemed to drag on and on.

The day of the celebration arrived, beginning before dawn.

"Do they need your help?" Maxwell asked beside her in the bed.

She could not decipher every word in the question, but she had learned enough to catch the jest. Annette shook her head, and silence fell between them. There was often silence. Annette saw Maxwell's frustration that he could not communicate effectively in private with his wife. It was frustrating for Annette because she wanted to reassure him that they would get there. She also looked forward to conversations where the words did not have to pass through another's mouth before reaching his ears.

Among the festival activities were numerous competitions, including wrestling, where the men competed to dance with the lady of his choice. The married men did not compete, but the single men and boys old enough to care were lined up according to their preferences. Some women only had one or two competitors but Poppy, despite

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the people possibly ready to turn against her, had the longest line. It was not lost on Annette as she watched the spectacle unfold that Wace stood in Poppy's line. Looking over the men he stood amongst, she did not think they stood a chance.

It was not lost on Annette either that Edward, Tumas, and Cyrille were among Dory's line. She, too, had several admirers. She had played an integral role in the day's preparations. Dory just had that way about her that she was loved. Annette found it interesting that the three Frenchmen would compete against one another for the dancing honor. It would prove entertaining.

The first competitors were those with fewer admirers. The best competition would come when the winner of one round still had to win against the others until there was only one.

Surprisingly, all three of the Frenchmen lost to a giant of a man that seemed to swallow Dory as they danced. Not surprisingly, Wace won the honor of dancing with Poppy. Annette feared what would happen to the man if he defeated Wace.

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Chapter 8

Tumas's raised voice jolted Wace awake. It was a sound he had come familiar with, the nightmares that haunted Tumas. Since Wace invaded England with William five years ago, Tumas had been at his side. The man Wace met on the ship that brought them was not the man who woke nightly to screams of the horrors inside his head. Wace had difficulty coping with the atrocities they had to mete out. But Wace had, while Tumas never figured out how.

Wace did not think he could get worse, but he was. It had to be the idleness of the place. Wace and Tumas spent most of their days hunting, staying on the move, and running from the past. Cyrille and Edward had not been a part of the takeover and slept each night soundly.

Wace rolled from his pallet and crouched next to Tumas's. "Tumas," Wace said, quietly shaking him. In the moonlight coming through the shuttered windows, Wace saw that many of the men were awake, wishing Tumas had not woken them every night since he arrived.

Tumas drew in a sharp breath as if he had been holding it. Then he bolted upright and sat staring at Wace for a moment. "Oh," he said. "Sorry." With that, he lay back down. Wace returned to his place and lay awake, staring upward into the overhead beams shrouded in deep shadows. Tumas lay awake too. They had been together a long time and Wace knew how the man sounded when he slept. Through cold nights and blistering summer heat, they lay down next to each other, whether it was a hard ground with empty bellies or a place with cots and plenty. So, Wace knew Tumas remained awake. He could easily imagine what Tumas was reliving in the idleness before dawn. He tried not to let these thoughts invade his mind. It was a constant battle, but he felt he was holding his own. He did not wake up screaming as Tumas did when the past invaded his sleep. He could be a part of people who did not understand what he had been through and why he had to do the things he did. But Tumas was losing his battle. He avoided people, telling Wace once he felt as if they judged him and hated him. He masterminded the hate inside his own head to the point he did not feel safe among the people he did not know. He feared a knife would be driven into his back or he would be poisoned, among a plethora of other things that could lead to his demise.

Wace slept again, and dawn was just breaking when he woke to find Tumas was no longer there. He rose and finished his morning ritual before seeking his wayward man. He found him saddling his horse.

"Good morning," Wace said to him. Wace saw Tumas pause before returning to the strap. "Going hunting?"



Wace heard Tumas expel a sound of annoyance before he turned to Wace. “Why have we not left yet?”

Wace shook his head. He could not say for sure. With Wace’s prolonged silence, Tumas turned away, visibly annoyed.

“I will hunt with you,” Wace said.

Tumas turned back to him. “I would rather go alone.”

“Nonsense,” Wace said. “I will saddle and join you.” Wace walked quickly away before Tumas could protest.

It made Wace nervous when Tumas went out on his own. He could not say why he feared for Tumas when he disappeared. It was just a feeling of darkness that weighed heavy on him when Tumas was not safely in sight.

They rode from Ravenshill side by side. The two had not ridden far before Tumas drew up, raised his bow with mind-blowing speed, and let the arrow fly. It hit its target, but the stag was not ready to go down. It turned and ran. Wace spurred his horse and gave chase. The animal had fled far, finally succumbing to its wounds. Relieved, Wace drew his horse up when he saw his prey stumble and fall, not to move again. He turned to congratulate Tumas, but the man was not with him.

Wace began to dismount to dress the deer, but something stopped him. It was a foreboding feeling. He looked above to see if the clouds had darkened, but they remained white and gently floated with the currents. Wace turned and sped back in the direction he had come.

The cry that escaped him could not be stopped when he returned to where he had left Tumas. He was on the ground, moving to his friend before he realized he left his saddle. “Oh, Tumas,” Wace said sadly.

Tumas leaned heavily onto the blade of his sword. Wedged between rocks, the pommel had been unyielding when Tumas threw himself upon the blade he had meticulously sharpened. A blade that had shed the blood of many. His eyes stared vacantly toward the ground where his head hung.

Wace sat on the ground to look up into Tumas’s face. Looking at him, Wace felt some level of peace for Tumas. His face was no longer lined with that poised expression, which showed the man was never at rest, even if his body was. His look was relaxed now, his mind quiet. Wace did not need to ask why. He did not need to pray. Despite what the doctrine said, there was no way Tumas could go to Hell for killing himself. How could one be sent to Hell when they had resided there for years? Suffering in it, to the point that it drove him to this end.

Wace sighed, thinking Tumas’s soul could be free now. It had to be lighter, happy even to shed the darkness of this world for the light of another. Wace stared up at Tumas, his slack face, the eyes that no longer saw his own turmoil. Could it be that simple, Wace wondered. Just one fall, would that send the nightmares fleeing, the horrors of the earth to fall away?

Wace finally stood and pulled his friend from his sword. He buried him where he had fallen. It seemed appropriate that way. As Wace stared down at Tumas, the moonlight washed his body as it lay in the grave. Wace held Tumas’s sword, knowing it was appropriate to bury the sword with the man. But he had used it to free himself

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from its destruction. It did not feel right to leave it with him for eternity. Wace covered his brother, condemning his body to the dark earth but knowing he was far away now, in a better place.

Wace gathered Tumas's horse. He retrieved the deer in the darkness, and when he rode by the river, he paused and tossed Tumas's sword far out into the current. Only floods would wash it from the bottom. Until then, it would remain.

Dawn was not far away when Wace returned to Kielder. They seemed to notice the solemnness of the man as they looked at him in the torchlight and let him go on his way. He did not know who came to take the horses and Tumas's last kill. By now, he had grown numb, his feet heavy as he trudged past the hall. His mind did not know where his feet took him until he stood outside the hut. He waited, staring at the door, wondering why he was outside the place Poppy shared with Dory. He began to move away, but his legs would not allow him to. Instead, his hand pushed the door open.

"Poppy," his voice was quiet, and he wondered if it was even enough to wake her. Would he wake Dory? He started when Poppy appeared in front of him. He felt her hand land on his chest as she pushed him from the room.

Wace stood on the stoop, Poppy standing close. "What is wrong?" she asked.

"Tumas is dead."

Her arms were instantly around him, and he clung to her.

"What happened?" Poppy asked him.

He had not thought about what he would tell her. He should not tell her the truth, but it spilled out anyway. "He killed himself."

Quiet came from Poppy, but her grip tightened. They stood together for a long time before Poppy pulled from him, leaned up, and claimed his lips as hers. She was nectar that carried the darkness away. With her touch, the earth filled again with light, a sun so warm he felt he might burn in its intensity. It made him alive. It made him want to be. It saddened him that Tumas did not have a Poppy to preserve his soul.

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Chapter 9

Annette felt the heavy atmosphere at the morning table. Poppy told her what happened to Tumas before she left her chamber that morning. Annette did not want to dine with all the others in the village. She only wanted to bury her head beneath the covers and ponder what could have been so bad it drove him to do what he did. But better sense took hold, and she realized this was not a good path for her mind to wander.

Annette was the only one from the Normans to join in the meal. She could not say she was surprised, though she felt like a traitor for not being wherever they were. But Maxwell had already been at the table waiting for her. She had grown attached to the man. She did not know about love, but she knew she would miss him now if they parted.

The food seemed unappetizing as it sat before her. She stared at it for a long while, ignoring the rest who dove in. Then Maxwell's hand came out to take hers. She stared at their hands clasped together on the tabletop. That's when the damn burst with Annette's silent tears. If only Tumas had someone like Maxwell. Even if she could not understand most of his words, she knew she did not stand alone. Even if her fellow countrymen returned home, she had Maxwell. He would offer her comfort and protection. He could keep demons from her, and that was all Tumas needed, someone to keep the monsters away, to show him he was not alone.

Maxwell shifted closer to her and placed an arm across her shoulders. He pulled her firmly against his side, tucked her head into his chest, and let her cry silently while those gathered pretended to ignore the grief coming from the head table.

After the meal, Annette patted Maxwell on the shoulder as she stood. To show her gratitude, she leaned down and kissed him on his cheek before she left to find her people. She found everyone but Wace in the stable. "Where is Wace?" Annette asked.

Dory was a shambles. Her face held the signs of heavy grief. She had been a constant at the men's sides since they arrived at Ravenshill. She had wondered if there were any romantic relations within the group, but she never asked.

"He said he was going to the river," Cyrille said quietly. The somberness of the room made the whispering sound as if it boomed.

Annette nodded her head and turned from them. She had comforted Poppy this morning, but she did not know how to comfort the men standing before her and the grieving woman who had the support of the two men. Annette turned and moved toward the river.

He was easy to find. A few benches lined the river, placed there for many purposes. He sat on one, staring over the water. Then, when he heard Annette's steps,

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he turned slightly. His eyes traveled her for a minute before turning back to the river. He bent forward, elbows on his knees, his palms rubbed together, again and again, interrupted only by the clenching of his fists.

Annette did not know what to say to the man. She had never seen Wace show emotion except for annoyance and the softness he reserved for Poppy. She sat down next to Wace and watched the flowing river with him.

“Is Maxwell touching you?” Wace asked. She was surprised his first words were concern for her.

“No. He said he will not until I am ready.”

Wace only nodded, his hands still working.

“Can I tell you something?” Wace asked after long moments. “Without it being told to Poppy?”

“Yes,” Annette replied softly.

“Tumas was a broken man. Sometimes I feel like I am too.”

Annette wanted to reassure him he was not, but she did not know Wace enough to declare such a thing.

“He followed me. He did the things I told him to, the same things I did. He should have blamed me and not himself.” He fell silent again, and Annette was determined to remain quiet and give him a chance to speak what he felt he needed to.

“I know the language here because I came north to kill these people for William. We destroyed villages, we murdered, and I let my men rape. I could never do such a thing, and for a while, Tumas could not either. But I changed him. I made him evil in his own mind and in his actions. For a while, I think he went mad. He murdered with violence that sickened me. I admit I was afraid of him then, but he was my strongest fighter and my friend.”

Annette heard Wace swallow. She refused to look in his direction, keeping her eyes on the water before them. “Finally, we could go home. But it is hard to go from fighting, from murder and hate to peace and quiet. Neither of us could deal with the idleness. So we decided to return to William’s army, regardless of where it might go or what battle we would be heading into. He said once that idleness allowed the demons to catch up. I agreed. Keeping him here allowed them to catch up and rip him apart.”

When his voice cracked, Annette had a strong urge to comfort him, but she knew it would make a man like Wace run. “I thought of following him. As I watched him hanging on his sword, I saw how peaceful he was. I blame myself for allowing the demons to get to him in the first place. I did not deserve his loyalty.”

Wace straightened then, an indication he was done with his revelations. Annette still allowed the silence to spread before she finally spoke. “Why didn’t you?”

Wace looked at her questioningly.

“Why didn’t you kill yourself?”

She met his eyes, and they searched hers. He had revealed so much to her, yet she saw his uncertainty. “It’s Poppy, isn’t it?” Annette finally asked.

Wace bent forward again, his hands working. “You know?”

“Yes. She has told me of your intimacy.”

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Wace flinched on the bench beside her. "I forced her," he quickly said. But his quick response, not taking a second to think of his answer, made it evident it was an answer he had created long ago. Moreover, it was an answer that would protect Poppy from that reputation.

"You didn't," Annette corrected him.

Wace looked at her for another moment before returning to his forward position. "I love her," he said simply.

"I know," Annette said. "The thought of her saves you."

Wace nodded as he dropped his head to watch his hands work. "We are no longer in France," Annette said. "Here, it seems you are the best prospect for a good marriage for Poppy. The king is done with her, with you and me. He would not have sent you with us if he was not."

"I know. I knew when he first ordered me to bring you. I think I pushed him toward war too often, even for him."

"But here, right now, there is no war. There is only Poppy."

"Do you think she would marry me?"

Annette laughed lightly. "Knowing Poppy, you might have to beg, but she will."

The conversation was interrupted by the approach of others. In unison, Wace and Annette turned to see the rest of their group nearing. "Where's Poppy?" Wace asked before they reached them, and Annette realized Poppy wasn't with them.

"She's coming. She had to go back because she forgot something," Cyrille said.

Wace jumped to his feet. "She cannot walk outside the gates alone."

He turned and ran back toward the keep, with the rest following. Annette stepped onto the road in time to see Wace charge forward. Four men stood on the path. One held Poppy in his grip, a hand clamped over her mouth. A primal roar of rage exploded from Wace the moment before he tackled Poppy and the man to the ground. Cyrille and Edward quickly joined in the attack, defending Wace's back from the other men.

When her eyes traveled back to Wace, he was on the man, and Poppy was rolling away from them. Annette could not tell at a distance, but she was pretty sure Poppy's attacker was already dead as Wace slammed his fist repeatedly into the man. The other three attackers were down within moments, but Wace still beat at the man who tried to steal Poppy from him. Blood flew from the man's face as his body lay limp beneath Wace. Annette recognized the fury was not only on Poppy's behalf, though he held a significant amount for that act. A part of it came from his grief, from the anger that Tumas had left him.

Then Poppy stepped toward him, touched his shoulder, and Wace stopped. As quickly as he attacked, he sat back on his heels. His eyes stared at the man he had just killed, then he tried to wipe his hands down the front of his tunic, but it was already bloodied. Finally, he stood, and his eyes looked at Poppy warily until she slipped into his arms. She was not concerned with the blood coating him as he wrapped her up and tucked her head into his chest. At that moment, Annette knew Poppy loved Wace.

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Chapter 10

The man Wace killed was Daigon Kirkham, Roy's brother. He sent more men to raid, steal, harass and destroy. All village hands helped complete the wooden wall surrounding the tower. Two days after Wace killed Daigon, the family settled into the tower as light snow began to fall. Darkness was taking hold when the attack came.

The gates that secured the bailey and tower began to close for the first time. But the men of the Kirkham village had already gathered in the darkness. Wace did not know how long they lurked outside the walls. When the gates began to swing closed for the night, the men flew through like a horde of bees. Battles were not waged in the dark. There was too much chance the lighting would make the friendly look like the enemy. But the Kirkham clan was here, charging across the bailey and into the tower. The handful of men inside the keep was unprepared for the onslaught.

Those prepared fought, and those that were not fell. Wace was ready, he rushed toward the gates, intent on getting them closed, but there were already too many inside. He turned his feet instead and ran toward the tower where the women had gone. He only made it halfway across the bailey when a shout from the wall halted everyone.

Roy Kirkham stood with Annette in his grip. She appeared addled, and Wace swallowed his trepidation.

"Maxwell!" the man called down.

Maxwell materialized at Wace's shoulder.

"Remove your men, or I will kill your wife."

"Don't do it," Wace advised Maxwell, who had also been fighting toward the tower.

Maxwell turned to him. "Ravenshill, I built for her," he said, nodding at Annette. "It is not worth her life."

"Do you truly think he will allow us to leave?" Wace turned and looked at the carnage. The bailey floor was reddened by the blood of the men defending Ravenshill.

"I think that is our best option. We have already lost too many."

"What will it be?" Roy demanded. He leaned Annette over the parapets. Her feet were barely on the walkway, only kept on the wall by the mercy of Roy's arm.

"You will give her to me unharmed?" Maxwell asked.

"All the women," Wace demanded.

"Very well," came the reply.

"We leave," Maxwell said, with no additional thought.

Wace could not keep the growl of frustration in. He had helped build the defenses. Once they got out, they would not be able to get back in.

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But Maxwell's men would not fight without Maxwell. Wace flitted over the knowledge that Edward and Cyrille had fallen, trying to get the gates closed against the horde. He could not regain Ravenshill alone. So, he, with the rest of the men, retreated from Ravenshill. As the defeated men crossed beneath the portcullis, the gate closed with a thud behind them.

"Roy has already broken his word," Wace spat at Maxwell. But within a few moments, the gate opened, and the women and children left inside began to flow out. Annette and Dory exited behind them, then the gates started to close.

Wace raced forward. His heart caught firmly in his throat. He reached the gate as it slammed in his face. "Poppy!" he screamed, leaning back to look up at the men staring down at him from above.

Enraged, Wace pounded his fists on the wooden gate as if he could bring it down with his bare hands.

"Roy Kirkham!" he screamed the man's name. "Roy, you coward!"

Wace pounded until the pain began to run up his arms "Roy! I will kill you if you hurt her!"

"How do you plan to do that?"

The voice of Roy froze him, and he stepped back to see the man standing above him.

"Do not harm her," Wace demanded.

"I just may beat her face in as you did my brother's."

"Damn you, Roy! Let me have her." He put his entire voice and strength behind the demand.

"No," was the simple reply. "This has been fun. But Poppy waits for me."

Roy turned from the wall and disappeared from sight. Wace stared at the tall wall before stepping forward and pounding on the door again, screaming Roy's name. He brought down dire warnings, curses, and promises of a life of hell if he laid a finger on Poppy. But the gate remained closed.

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The word "Chapter" is written in a decorative, black, serif font. The letter "C" is large and ornate, with a red rose and green leaves extending from its top left. The word "III" is written in a smaller, simpler serif font to the right of "Chapter".

Chapter III

Annette wanted to join Wace in pounding at the gates of Ravenshill. Together they could take it down. At least, that was what her heart told her. But her brain knew otherwise. Poppy was gone unless Roy decided to release her. They couldn't get to her. The only option would be to scale the walls, but that could not be done without a horde of Roy's men killing them before they reached the parapets.

Then Wace turned from the gate and approached them. "We go to the village and plan a way to get Poppy back."

Maxwell shook his head. "We go to the village, but there will be no plans for attack. We will settle our lives there as we did before I built Ravenshill."

"We will not abandon Poppy," Wace insisted. "And I will make them pay for killing my men."

"Do you think it is wise to have the Elliot's retaliate? They wiped out half our men within minutes. The surprise tonight was a disadvantage. Now our numbers are small."

"You are a coward," Wace spat at him. "Surely, if you do not go for Poppy, you will fight for Ravenshill, for your home."

"My home is complete as long as Annette is safe. She will not be if we attack the keep."

"Coward," Wace accused again.

Maxwell calmly shook his head. "The village will be destroyed. I cannot have that."

Wace turned away and returned to the gate, landing two solid blows. Annette went to him and lay a hand on his back as he braced his hands on the heavy wooden gate. "I know, Wace. I love her too, but there is nothing we can do for her tonight. Perhaps dawn will bring us ideas on how to get her back."

Wace's head drooped, and finally, he shoved himself away from the door and followed the others to the village and shelter.

There was something simple about life in the little village. As Annette watched the people the following day, taking care of their tasks and families, she could not help but think they might be better here. Too much rested on a baron's shoulders. She watched Maxwell pacing all night as he began the calamity of second-guessing his decision to abandon Ravenshill. Now that they were safe, all except one of them, he began to think they could have fought and won. Though Annette did not understand all his self-directed harsh words, she knew he was blaming himself now.

"It's not your fault," she kept telling him. Though she knew her words would not make a difference.



Annette found Dory next to the river. She sat tightly balled with her knees drawn to her chest. As Annette sat next to her, she saw Dory's eyes were puffy and bloodshot.

"They're all gone, my lady," Dory said with a voice so forlorn it prompted Annette's tears.

"I did not think Edward and Cyrille would follow Tumas so quickly to the grave," Dory whispered. She dropped her head in her arms for a moment. Then, when she raised it again, she asked, "What will we do about Poppy?"

"Wace will get her back. He won't stop until he does."

"Then Heaven help those who stand between him and his love," Dory declared.

Annette smirked. For the first time, Annette was confident Poppy would be returned to her side.

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Chapter 12

Wace tried for two days to make it inside the walls of Ravenshill. He recruited men, men who hated Roy Kirkham, but even when they marched toward Ravenshill, he knew it was not enough to take it back. Each time he was stopped before he could make it beyond the bailey. On the third day, he was waiting for the gates to open when he tried to slip in. He was spotted immediately but was determined to make it to Poppy this time. He fought with a level of rage he did not have to try to cultivate.

The fight ended when a big man grabbed Wace from behind, wrapping his giant arms around him and forcing him to his knees. The man put his weight on Wace's calves, making him grimace. Roy stepped before him. The arm across Wace's chest remained unyielding.

"I thought you would have relinquished the fight," Roy said.

"I came for my woman." His jaw hurt, his teeth felt loose, and he believed his eye socket had been shattered.

Roy laughed. It was a grating, condescending sound. "Yes, your woman," Roy began. "I find it interesting you do not fight for this place. Do the men who follow you in the attacks against my walls know it is for Poppy you fight and not Ravenshill? Not for the Elliots?"

Roy smirked at him. "I assure you, your woman is quite used now. A soiled dove, though you already know all about the ravishing Poppy," the man said, his voice dripped with condescension. Wace tried to move, but the big man held him easily in his position.

"She is a rare find, now that she knows her place. Something she has not told you yet is that she is pregnant."

Wace felt himself grow cold beneath the big man's body as he stared at Roy. "There is no doubt in our minds who the father is." A thousand drums sounded in Wace's ears, and his pulse fluttered a hesitant rhythm. "But don't worry, only the three of us will ever know. It is my child now."

"Why do you not let her go?" Wace heard himself plead. For a panicked moment, he thought he might be able to barter with him. "You can keep her until you tire of her. You can keep the child. Just let me have Poppy back."

Roy tsked at him. "You will never get Poppy back. She is my wife now. My obedient wife," he laughed. "She fancied you her hero. I've told her you're not much of a hero if you left her to my mercy. I think she is starting to see things my way. She does not hate you, not yet, but I'll get her there, trust me."

"If you will not let me have her, kill me now," Wace said.

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“I am not one to give mercy. I think Poppy can attest to that if I ever allow her the chance. But I will grant you mercy. I will not kill you. You will return outside the gates and remain outside the gates. For every foot you step into my keep, Poppy will receive ten lashes each.”

“I will not leave her,” Wace screamed. He put all his strength into the struggle, but another man joined the first, and a fist knocked his head sideways, and a blow from behind rendered him unconscious. When he came to, he lay outside the gates standing open. He lay a moment, smelling the dirt pressed against his cheek, tasting it, breathing it.

When the pounding subsided to a tolerable level, he climbed to his feet, and approached the gate. He knew he was being foolish, but Roy would learn he could not keep him out. One, two steps inside the walls, and Wace froze. His foot was raised, ready to take the third step, but he sat it back down.

Poppy stood facing him. Her arms wrapped forward around a post as if she were hugging it. Her wrists were tied tightly, keeping her there. Roy stood behind her, a cane in hand. He raised it, and even at the distance where Wace stood, he could hear its whistle before it slapped across the skin of Poppy’s back. Her eyes were on Wace. Tears filled them, tumbling down her cheeks. When the second lash landed, she sobbed loudly.

“I’m leaving,” Wace said quickly, taking a step back. But Kirkham did not hesitate to keep the rapid fall of the beating going. Wace had taken two steps, and true to his word, Poppy received ten lashes for each step he took inside Ravenshill walls. Twenty strikes, hard enough to leave welts, fell on her. The gut-wrenching sobs left Wace standing before the open gates, his eyes flowing tears with Poppy’s.

Kirkham had made the count to fifteen and raised the cane again.

“No!” Wace screamed at him. Poppy’s pain-riddled sobs destroyed Wace. “Don’t do this, Kirkham. I will never step foot inside these walls again. I swear to you.”

“The lesson well learned is the one with the worst consequence. The consequences of your actions were spelled out to you and are not yet complete.” With those words, Kirkham raised the cane and let another blow fall. This one struck harder than those before.

Wace had fallen to his knees by the time the last lash fell on Poppy’s back. She was too weak to scream, her pain too great to do more than just make pitiful mewling sounds. When she was removed from the post, she could barely stand. With the help of a servant woman, she straightened. Just before she turned away, her eyes fell on Wace. It was not a look of hate. It was a look of longing, a soft caress, before she turned away and was swallowed by the walls of Ravenshill.

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Epilogue

Twins were born to Roy Kirkham, the boy and girl christened Harold and Faina Kirkham of Ravenshill. It had been a joyous affair for those inside Ravenshill. The sound of the festivities rang across the valley.

When Poppy was bearing her third child, she suddenly hemorrhaged and died. No matter how Annette and the others tried, Wace could not be consoled. The part of Wace that was human was killed the day Poppy died. There was no end to the number of men Wace raised to attack any Ravenshill man outside the gates.

War raged against Maxwell and the rest of the Elliot clan for Wace's attacks. The murders between the two sides were brutal. The boy Harold was raised with hate for the Elliots that grew each year until Harold stood upon the parapets and watched his men raze the village of Kielder across the river.

The Elliots were pushed off their land but would return again and again to fight back. Thus was the bloody feud between the Kirkhams and the Elliots. It was soon forgotten that the desire for a woman set the blood bath in motion.

Annette pleaded with Wace to present his claim to King William that he was Harold's father and not Roy. At least so Wace could tell his side of the story to his son. But Wace refused, and generations of bloodletting followed. Hate for one another grew deep roots in the soil surrounding Ravenshill.

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