

NOBLE HEART

By Karina Kantas

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"My Lord, over here," Disa called to his master.

Lord Lucus enjoyed his midnight rides through his land, which stretched for miles of lush green fields and forest. The chill of the night air refreshed him and gave him the sense of normality. Although a nobleman, and master of his land, Lucus took pleasure in mixing with the locals, preferring to spend time outside of his castle.

His land bordered his neighbour, Baron Bylack, who when first introduced, gave Lucus the opinion he was a fierce and dominant man. However, he quickly became a good ally, proving that Bylack was a loyal and good friend to have.

Lucus rode to where Disa had called.

Disa had served Lord Lucus ever since he could remember. Coming to the castle as a child, he had been taken in by the former Lord of Gastei, who treated him with kindness.

Lucus and Disa become close friends and had practically grown up together, although Disa never forgot his place. He could however, get away with doing or saying things for which others would have been punished. Disa was loyal to Lucus and would give his life for him if need be.

Lucus's late father had governed the land well and was loved by all his kinsmen. Unfortunately, he lost his wife early in life. Nevertheless, he managed to raise Lucus, and his other younger son Eric, alone, teaching Lucus, his heir, to be kind and considerate, yet also to be firm and strong when needed.

Below Lucas's horse lay a girl clothed in rags.

"Has she life?" Lucas called.

Disa crouched down beside the girl and felt for a pulse.

"She is alive, Master."

Lucas dismounted and walked over to where she lay.

After being viciously pushed from the speeding carriage and left for dead, Jasmin walked and crawled as far as her strength would allow. Draping her cloak over her head to shelter her from the rain, she traveled far and for what seemed like hours. Her body bruised and battered, her limbs numb from the cold, she finally collapsed with exhaustion, not caring if she lived or died.

Lucas bent over to study the girl more closely. Her clothes were in tatters like any other runaway, he mused. Her feet were bare and bleeding from the sharp stones and thorns that had embedded into them. Turning her over, he removed the hood, which shrouded her face and was startled by what he saw; for there at his feet lay a beautiful, young girl. Her brown hair, silky and long, her lips crimson red and her skin young looking, yet pale, holding weariness about it, he thought.

Noticing a locket that she wore around her neck, he opened it, and a picture of an elegant lady stared back at him.

Could this be her ward or had she stolen it from her employer? He pondered. Eager with the challenge of finding out who the mysterious maiden was, and from whence she came, he ordered Disa to bring her to the castle.

Jasmin woke a day later to find herself in what looked to her like a

Queen's bedroom chamber. Gazing around the room, she admired the tapestries and rich décor. She was lying in the biggest dark oak bed she had ever seen.

Four posters held up a sheer net curtain. A fine embroidered, hand-sewn coverlet had been laid over her.

Where was she? She did not recollect the room. It was not the place where she had been living, which had been a place of torment and evil. She snuggled under the sheets and shivered as she recalled the life that she had hoped to escaped from. Suddenly the door opened, awakening her from the painful memories.

A small, plump old woman entered the room. She wore a long, plain, black dress with a white apron and matching frilled cap. Jasmin recalled the outfit as a servant's dress.

"Good morning, Miss, you must hurry and dress. The Lord is waiting to converse with you in the main hall."

Jasmin had never been addressed in such a manner and it puzzled her.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"Why, my Lord and Master's castle of course."

A castle? How did she get here, she wondered.

"And who is your Lord and Master?" Jasmin inquired.

"My Master is the great Earl and Lord of Gastei," she answered proudly.

"Now hurry up child. What is your name?" the servant asked, as she helped Jasmin dress.

"Jasmin, mam," she answered with a curtsy.

"Do not address me as such," the servant scolded. "You may call me Grace." She stared at Jasmin intensively. "Do you not know your station

mistress?"

"Yes mam, I know my station and it is below yourself."

"Is that so?"

Grace was puzzled. The girl had the manners and teachings of a lady and yet she admitted to being lower class.

"You are a guest here, Mistress, and the Lord has ordered that you be treated as such, so I shall call you Mistress Jasmin and you will call me Grace. Is that understood?"

Jasmin nodded.

"Now hurry yourself for my Lord does not like to be kept waiting."

After Grace finished, Jasmin gazed at herself in a full-length mirror. She looked beautiful. She had never worn a dress of such richness. Green velvet with silver lace trimming clung to her body as though it were part of her skin.

Grace brushed Jasmin's hair, leaving it down the length falling just below her breast.

She certainly looked like a lady, Jasmin thought, not believing the situation she was in. It truly amazed her. Feeling comfortable and safe in her surroundings, she knew she should not offend the lord in anyway. Why did he bring her to his castle? Who was Lord Lucus? What did he want? What was expected from her?

When Grace was satisfied that Jasmin was ready, she brought her down to the hall.

"Now, watch your manners," Grace warned. "You are a gentle, for the moment," she added, with a smile.

Grace entered the grand hall without knocking.

"My Lord, Mistress Jasmin."

Jasmin walked slowly towards the two men that stood up to greet her. She stopped two meters away from them; then curtsied, not allowing her eyes to leave the floor.

"You are welcome, Jasmin. I hope we see you well recovered."

Rising from the floor, she looked to where the question came from. The sight astonished her and she gasped.

Before her stood a man at least twice her age, well built, with dark wispy hair. Wearing a silvery blue embroidered tunic and blue trousers, he stood proudly, nobly. He was definitely handsome, she thought, yet his face was full of scorn.

"Well, answer me girl, are you still ill?"

He was angry with her. She realized she had been staring rudely at him.

"I'm sorry, my Lord. No, I am in good health. I thank you for your enquiry."

"Then why do you stare at me so?" he asked.

"I..." Only, she could not tell him that she found him mesmerizing and mysterious. Lost for words, she looked down to the floor, embarrassed.

"Very well," he sounded weary, "you should stay in your room and rest until you are completely recovered and ready for company. We shall speak again tomorrow."

"Yes, my Lord." She turned to leave.

"One moment," he said.

Jasmin turned and faced him.

"Where did you get this?"

He was holding her locket. She grabbed for her neck, thinking she had it on. She never took it off.

"It is mine, my Lord," she answered quickly.

"Is it? Or did you steal it from your employer?" he questioned.

"No! My Lord," she cried, "It was my mother's. It was given to me."

Tears threatened to fall. He held the only thing she treasured, and how could he think her to be a thief? He had opened his house to her, yet he did not trust her.

"Very well, you are still ill, you may go, and we will discuss this tomorrow."

He waved her to leave; only she stood staring at the locket, unable to move.

"What is it girl? Did you not hear me?" His anger rose.

"Yes, my Lord I was just hoping that I could have my locket back."

Her eyes pleaded with him. His face was stern.

"No, you may not; I will keep it, for a time. I am curious about you. This locket means nothing to me; you will get it back by and by."

Still, she stood her ground, staring.

"Do you think I would keep it? What do you take me for?"

"I am sorry, my Lord. I did not mean to accuse you."

"Did you not?" he asked curiously.

She knew she had angered him, though not deliberately. However, she had embarrassed him in public, and insulted his station; she would have been whipped for that back home.

"May I be excused, my Lord?" she asked.

He did not look at her, but just dismissed her with a stroke of his hand.

She turned to leave.

"May I escort Mistress Jasmin?"

The other man rose from his seat. Jasmin had not looked at him once.

Tall, with blonde hair, he was younger than Lucas, handsome with a pleasing smile. However, his eyes did not contain the fire and passion just like Lucas's contained.

Walking towards her, he bent down onto one knee, took her hand, and gently kissed it.

Jasmin blushed.

"Permit me to introduce myself, for my brother has not. My name is Eric, and I am the youngest. It would be an honour if you allowed me to escort you to your chamber."

Jasmin was taken aback by the flattery. "It is an honor to meet you, Sir Eric." She curtsied. "I would be happy for your company."

With that, they left arm in arm.

Lucas watched the interaction closely, a stream of jealousy flowed through him. What was Eric up to, he wondered.

The sight of her as she stood there with those beautiful, haunting, green eyes woke a passion and desire. It felt like a burst dam, a feeling he had not experienced for some time. It had been too long since someone had aroused him that way, woken the need. He wanted her, and he would have her. He smiled smugly.

Outside the hall, Eric's politeness vanished. Grabbing Jasmin's arm, he swung her around so that she was squashed between the staircase and his body.

"Sir, please do not," she begged.

He slapped her hard around her face. Covering her face with her hand, she stared back at him in shock.

"How dare you speak to the Lord in that manner?" Eric spat. "I will not play this game with you. I know your station; you are nothing, save a slut. And you shall be treated like one."

He dragged her up the stairway, his intention showing in his eyes.

Jasmin was petrified. "Sir, I beg of you, please let me go. I know my station and I am no whore," she pleaded with him as she tried to break free from his grasp.

"We shall see," he said, and smiled cruelly.

When she had first entered the hall he wanted her. He knew what she was the moment he saw her. She was a whore. It did not matter what she looked like in fine silks. It was all a charade and she would get what she deserved.

They reached the landing. Luckily for Jasmin, Grace was just leaving the chamber and saw them both.

"Good afternoon, Sir," Grace said and curtsied.

Eric quickly released his grip of Jasmin's arm.

"Thank you for the pleasure of your company," he spoke kindly. "I am certain we will meet again soon, Mistress." He smiled, turned, and started chatting away to Grace lightheartedly.

Jasmin ran to the shelter of her room, closed the door, bolstering it with a chair from the dresser, then ran to the bed, sobbing. She had left one hell and entered another. Was there nowhere she would be safe? Why did people think they could treat her that way? She secretly wished she had died that night in the

forest, rather than face the agony of more abuse. Crying tears, she finally exhausted herself and fell asleep.

Lucus sat in the chair, looking at the locket in his hand. If this was her mother -- of course, he never suspected otherwise, so why was he so unkind to her-- he must have scared the poor girl to death. She looked frightened enough without him adding more anguish. Nevertheless, he knew why he was harsh. Her beauty was frightening. Her eyes were mesmerizing. She had wakened the man inside him. That was why he dismissed her so quickly; he could not handle the emotions he felt when he looked at her, he mused.

He stared at the picture inside the locket. The woman was young and had an air of nobility about her. She was a lady, there was no doubt in his mind about that, and if this were her mother, then Jasmin would be of noble birth.

Jasmin's days were filled with boredom, shut in a room with nothing save books to occupy her time, and thoughts about her future if she stayed at the castle, and what she would do, if she did not. Her nights were restless, overflowing with horrid memories of her past.

She wanted the lord to like her, and not to send her away because of her manners, and then, maybe his brother would change his opinion of her. She was determined to undo the mess she felt she had caused.

Two days passed before Lucus called for Jasmin.

Choosing a scarlet, velvet gown, which matched the colour of Jasmin's lips, Grace dressed her as though on a mission, patting down the material, pulling here, tucking there, paying special attention to her hair as the master requested that Jasmin wear it up.

Grace waited until Jasmin was dressed, before presenting her with a pair of Jade earrings, a welcoming gift from Lord Lucus. They were the most beautiful things Jasmin had ever seen, and she put them on eagerly. She never owned any riches before and it made her wonder why the lord would present her with something of such value. What did he want in return, she worried.

Taking a step back, Grace was even happier with her work this time round. She admired how noble the girl looked, and was somewhat envious of Jasmin's splendor. It did not surprise her that Lucus was so attentive to the girl.

Jasmin left Grace tidying the chamber, and made her way down the twisting staircase. Feeling elated about seeing Lucus again, she could have easily skipped down the steps, yet managed to keep her dignity. Jasmin hoped she would leave a better impression and make amends for the awful introduction they had. Unfortunately, her happiness soon dissolved the moment she saw Eric walking up the staircase towards her.

"My, we do appear as a lady today," he snarled, and blocked her path so she could not descend any further.

"Please, I beg you, Sir, let me pass."

"I am sure you will be begging when I get through with you."

Grabbing her, he pushed her to the banister, then planted a hard kiss on her lips.

"I shall have you soon," he warned.

Jasmin pushed him away forcefully, and then ran down the rest of the stairs, leaving the laughter of Eric behind her.

Stopping outside the door of the hall, she composed herself. It was not a good start to the day. Jasmin knew she needed to make a good impression, now,

she felt her life depended on it.

Lucus stood up from his seat as she entered the hall, and then walked to meet her.

"Are you well rested, Jasmin?"

"Yes, my Lord, I am quite well, thank you," she curtsied.

"Come." He ushered her to a chair and motioned for her to sit.

"My Lord, I wish to apologize for my rude behavior when we first met. If I made you angry, I apologize, it was not intended. You have shown me nothing save kindness, during my stay here and I never meant to displease you."

He smiled. "It is I who should be apologizing, Jasmin. I am not always a rogue. I can be somewhat charming."

She let out a strained giggle.

"Are you still unwell?" Lucus looked at her, concerned.

"No, my Lord, I am quite recovered."

"Do not try to deceive me; you are as pallid as a ghost. What ails you?"

He left his chair and knelt down beside her.

"I had a restless night. However, I am in good health. I thank you for your concern, my Lord."

He stood up quickly.

Had she angered him again? She hoped not.

"Tell me about yourself, Jasmin."

Standing with his hands clasped behind his back, he walked around her chair and stood beside the fireplace, staring into the dying flames. He turned his head and was caught again by her splendor.

Jasmin was silent for a moment, while she contemplated whether or not

to tell him everything. Gazing into his face, she saw compassion and concern and so she unburdened her soul of the sorrowful story.

“My mother died in childbirth. Forgotten and unwanted by my father, I was sent into the care of the convent. The sisters looked after and they were kind and patient. Unfortunately, I did not get a calling as the sisters wished. On my sixteenth birthday, I was given into the care of the Countess and Earl of Lasmay. The Countess treated me with love and kindness and I felt very fortunate to have such a home. Sadly, the Countess died from consumption. Life in the residence became grim. I was the Countess’s confidant, so I was not familiar with the Earl. However, I soon discovered what kind of man he was.” Tears welled in her eyes as she told Lucus of the torture she went through and of her awful life there.

Lucus felt empathy towards her. He wanted to hold her in his arms and tell her he would protect her for the rest of her life. Did she not know what she was doing to him? She was beautiful, as a ripe women should be, yet so innocent, like a child.

"You are safe here, Jasmin. No one will hurt you again, not while you remain in this castle, under my protection."

He squeezed her hand, hoping to receive a smile, yet nothing.

Jasmin wondered whether to tell Lucus about the advances Eric had made toward her, only she could not discredit his own brother. Would Lucus believe her if she did? It was her word against that of his noble brother. The thought that she could be thrown from the castle made her shiver.

"Are you cold, Jasmin?"

"A little," she lied.

He stoked up the fire. "I believe you to be of noble birth, I plan to speak

to the sisters presently. I shall inform you about what I discover. Are you pleased?" He turned to her for an answer.

"What pleases my Lord, pleases me," she replied.

"Oh, and do you know how to please me, Jasmin?" He needed to know her desires.

Silently, he watched her. "Do you not know what you are doing to me, Jasmin? Your eyes hypnotize me."

Taking her hand, he pulled her up from the chair.

"My Lord, I do not understand."

"Do you not?" He sniggered. "I want you. I could take you by force of course, however, I would rather you come to me by your own free will." He held her at arm's length looking at her "I will be honest with you, Jasmin. I want a companion, and I need an heir."

Looking into his eyes, she saw his desire and want. To see a man's intent frightened her, yet what scared her most was the passion that was growing inside of her. She had never felt an urge, the desire of a man's touch before, and yet she knew what was causing it. Hoping that her own eyes were not giving her away, she quickly looked down to the floor.

"Or are you spoiled goods?" he spat, pushing her away.

Her emotions in turmoil, she could not take anymore.

"How dare you? No man has ever touched me, and no man will until I am ready to give myself, and it would certainly not be to a man like you. I am no whore, and when I marry I shall marry for love, not to be somebody's bed partner." She stopped to catch her breath.

She knew she had gone too far, only he had touched a nerve. Looking to

Lucus, she expected to see a frown; instead, he was smiling.

"Forgive me, Jasmin. I see you are a woman of good virtue. I did not mean to offend you." His anger faded and he stepped towards her. "I would never want to hurt you intentionally."

He needed to hold her, needed to feel if she felt any desire for him. He opened his arms willing her to enter.

Without hesitation, she walked into his embrace. God, how much she wanted to be wrapped up in his arms, safe and warm. She was falling in love with him.

"Consider what I am offering, Jasmin. Imagine the life we could have together."

She looked up at him. "I will consider your proposal. I am so confused. I do not know who I truly am. What if I am not of noble birth? We could never be together."

He held her tighter. "It is going to be all right. Do you trust me, Jasmin?"

"Yes, my Lord," was her meek reply.

Tilting her head with the tips of his fingers he looked down at her face and then leant forward and kissed her lips. How sweet she tasted, how much he wanted her. The kiss grew; the need grew. He wanted to take her there and then and knew from the way Jasmin responded that she felt the same urgent need. It was only time that stopped them being together. He would have to wait and be contented with what he could get.

Jasmin felt weak and thought that if it were not for him holding her in his arms, she would collapse. The more they kissed, the hungrier she became for him. It scared her, the urgency of his mouth. She felt his manhood grow and

press into her skirt. She had never experienced such a feeling. Oh God, what was happening to her? Her first thought was to resist, only she enjoyed the sensations too much. Feeling as though she had no control of her body, she felt almost lifeless. If he made love to her, there would be no resistance.

Their embrace stopped abruptly as the door to the hall opened. Sir Eric walked in.

"Excuse me, my Lord, I did not mean to interrupt."

He stared fiercely at Jasmin. Lucus did not notice.

"What is it Eric?" Lucus asked impatiently.

"The horses are ready, and the men are waiting for your command."

"Very well. I will be there momentarily," he called back.

The door shut and they were left alone.

"I am required to depart, for now. I will be absent for no more than a day, for I refuse to stray longer. We will continue this conversation on my return." He grinned at her languorously. "So I bid you goodnight, my love. You have the run of the castle; enjoy your solitude, Jasmin, for I vow this will be the end of your loneliness."

He kissed her full on the lips. No urgency this time, yet the kiss lingered. Finally he let go, looked at her once more before leaving the room.

Jasmin fell into the chair.

What had just happened? Everything was happening too fast, and yet it felt so right. Lord Lucus had asked her to be his companion, and she had almost accepted. Nevertheless, it all depended on his enquiries.

Jasmin did not remember leaving the hall and returning to her room her mind was somewhere else. Could it be true? Could I really be of noble birth?

She imagined herself in his arms again Lucus, her husband. Was it possible that this man could keep her from her awful past and give her a life she had never dreamed?

Some hours passed before she heard the door to the chamber open.

Eric walked in. Without looking at her, he turned the key and locked the door.

Her apprehension grew.

"What do you want, Eric? If you touch me I will scream."

"Go ahead, scream," he hissed. "I have dismissed all the servants; no one is here to hear you. When Lucus is absent, I am Lord, and all obey my command, including you."

He ran at her, his intentions showing in his eyes. She screamed and attempted to run past him to the door, only he grabbed her arm and threw her to the floor.

"Lady Gastei, ha! Lucus told me of his plans; he will not want anything to do with you when I am finished. When he hears you came to me of your own free will, well I am sure you can work out the rest. You are nothing, save a whore. You have proven this to me. Lucus may not see your charade, however, I do! You open your legs for many men I am sure of this."

"No, you are wrong," she screamed. "I have been with no man! I am untouched. I swear this to you Eric."

"Lord Eric to you, slut."

She crawled, only he caught her legs and dragged her toward him. Sitting on her chest, he started ripping her bodice till he could see the mounds of flesh he wanted to taste so badly.

Jasmin screamed and slapped him, yet she could not get him off her. The weight of his body on her chest was unbearable and she found it difficult to breathe.

The door opened unexpectedly. Grace walked in. Her hand covered her muffled gasp.

His hand came down hard, across Jasmin's lip. Blood trickled down her chin.

"Are you all right, Mistress?" she asked shakily.

"Get out of here, wench," Eric shouted.

Using Grace as a distraction, Jasmin pushed Eric off her, and ran to the dresser.

"Lord Lucus asked me to look..." Grace began.

"When he is absent, I am Lord. Do you understand? You insolent hag, I shall have you whipped."

"Yes, my Lord," she answered.

Jasmin's eyes beg her to help. Reluctantly, Grace left, knowing she would have to get help, and send word to Lucus. She ran down the winding staircase.

Eric turned back to Jasmin, and his eyes blazed with anger. He came for her again. She screamed and grabbed for things on the dresser hoping to find something to defend herself with. Pressing himself against her, his hand started probing for her purity. She tried to fight him, and screamed when he slapped her and pushed her hard against the mirror. She swallowed the copper tasting blood in her mouth.

Her hand rested on a letter opener and she did not hesitate as she plunged the knife into his arm. He yelled and stepped away. His action gave her enough

time to escape.

Jasmin ran out of the room, down the stairs, not noticing the stares from the servants. She ran out of the main door and continued running, without looking back.

Jasmin was certain she was still on Lucus's land, as the estate ran for miles. Nevertheless, the castle was out of view.

She did not want to consider returning to the castle; only she needed to find help, and did not know where else to turn.

She was walking alongside a hilled brook when her foot slipped, and she lost her balance. She fell, taking the surrounding fence with her. Landing hard on the ground, she felt stunned. A pain shuddered through her body. Sitting up she saw a wooden spike lodged in her right leg. The sight made her feel dizzy and weak, so she lay back down.

Jasmin could not move her limbs; it was as though a blanket of ice was freezing her body. She knew she was losing blood, and as she felt her strength leaving her, her vision blurred. Jasmin knew she was dying as she felt the last of her strength draining away.

The sisters at the convent gave Lucus the information he wanted. Jasmin was of noble birth.

He immediately started back for Gastei, eager to return and tell his love the wonderful news. He did not want to be away from her longer than he had to. He wanted to embrace her, protect her, and make her feel safe. She would be his wife. He could not wait to see her green eyes sparkle with delight.

Any other business could wait. This was far more important. Excited at

the thought of assisting Jasmin to find her ancestral home, he rode hard back to the castle.

Eric was stunned, for a moment. Clutching his bloodied arm, he ran from the chamber. He would find her if it was the last thing he did. She was going to pay with her life, he vowed.

He headed straight for the stable and mounted his horse. The servants attempted to restrain him, to stop him from going after her, only he lashed out with his whip and rode off.

As Lucus was nearing the castle, he sensed that something was very wrong. He rode hastily towards the gates and saw the guards mounted and armed.

"What the blazes is going on?" He demanded.

Disa heard his master's voice. "My Lord, something dreadful has occurred," he cried, clutching a rag to his face.

The blood poured from where Eric had stuck him. Lucus dismounted and went to his servant's aid.

"I tried to stop him, my Lord alas, I failed."

"Who did this? I demand to know," Lucus shouted.

"Your brother, Sir Eric."

Lucus stepped back in shock, and then ran into the castle to search for his brother.

Grace saw Lucus and called to him. "My Lord, oh, thank God you are home! It is awful. The poor child."

Lucus felt a shiver run through his body.

"Where is Jasmin?" he demanded.

"After your departure, Master Eric ordered all the servants to retire. We did as we were told. However, you instructed that I was to keep an eye out for Mistress Jasmin, to make sure she was comfortable, and see if she needed anything." Grace stopped to take a breath.

"Continue." Lucus urged, impatient and apprehensive for answers.

"When I walked into the chamber, Eric was forcing himself upon Mistress Jasmin."

Grabbing hold of Grace's arms, Lucus shook her.

"You are sure of this?" he cried.

"Yes, my Lord. My eyes do not lie. She was in a state of undress, and weeping, her clothes torn. Oh, the poor girl. I saw him strike her as I walked in."

"Where is she? Eric will pay if he has harmed her."

Pushing past Grace, he started for the staircase.

She ran off, my Lord," Disa answered. "We have searched the grounds. Alas, there is no sign of her."

"And what of my brother?" Lucus asked.

"He left, my Lord. I tried to stop him, only I could not." Disa bowed his head in shame. "I have failed you; do with me as you will, my Lord."

"You will make amends, Disa. We must find her, and before Eric does."

Disa, Lucus and an army of guards left the castle.

Oh, Jasmin, my darling, be well. If he has touched you? He did not want to think about it. Where would you go? Where would you hide? I have failed you have I not? Forgive me, my love. I promised you that you would be safe in my house, and that no one would harm you again. There is a wonderful future

waiting for us, my love, my darling.

He remembered holding her, kissing her, wanting her. He knew his life would not be the same without her. He had to find her.

However, Sir Eric found her first.

Riding to where her cries came from, he saw her lying there, he saw the spike through her leg, and the sight did not sicken him. He watched heartlessly as her blood stained the ground. He smiled as he saw Jasmin's eyes close for the last time. He was happy. She would not talk. No one would know, save Grace. He would have to do something about her, maybe an accident. His brother was not expected home for a few days, giving him plenty of time to arrange things and make up a tale of woe. He did not need to worry, he thought.

In the distance, Eric heard the thumping of hooves and soon he saw horses galloping towards him. Realizing his brother had returned early, and even though Grace had doubtlessly told Lucus what she had seen, he knew he was safe. It did not matter. His brother would never take the word of a servant over his own. He would stand his ground and keep to his story. If he fled, it would show guilt, and he knew he would not get far with a small army chasing after him.

Lucus was closer now, and when he saw Eric standing by the hill, his fury soared.

"Take him," Lucus ordered.

The soldiers rode past Lucus, dismounted, and held Eric until Lucus arrived.

"What is the meaning of this? How dare you? Release me at once!" Eric yelled and struggled in the restraint.

Lucus dismounted and looked to where his guards were staring. Peering over the edge, he was sickened by the sight.

"You did this," he screamed at his brother. Running at him, he grabbed Eric around the throat.

Eric shook with fear; he had never seen his brother so angry before. "I swear to you, I found her like this. I was leaving, to find help. You see, we had a disagreement, and she ran away. I followed her. Alas, I was too late. I discovered her before your arrival."

"And what was this disagreement about? Could it be that she did not accept your advances, dear brother?"

"You are mistaken. She came to me feely. She threw herself at me. I told her that you were her betrothed. She would not heed me. She said she despised you and that she sought me. When I refused her, she fled in shame."

Eric watched his brother's reaction carefully.

"Liar! You forced yourself on her. I have a witness. Take him away!"

Eric was stunned. "You would believe a servant over your own blood? I demand a private audience with you, my Lord."

"Granted."

Lucus had no more to say, and turned his back on his brother.

Eric was led back to the castle under arms, with instructions he was to be escorted to his chamber and guarded.

Disa climbed down the slope to where Jasmin lay.

"There is life, my Lord."

Lucus descended the slippery edge himself, and then knelt down beside her.

"Jasmin, can you hear me? It is I, Lucus."

Hearing the words, she used the last of her strength to open her eyes.

"My love, my darling. Stay with me. Be brave. I must remove the stake from your leg. Be strong, Jasmin."

She did not answer.

Lucus pulled the wooden spike from her leg.

Screaming in pain, and as the last of the wood came out, she fell unconscious.

"Go fetch Baron Bylack," Lucus ordered. "Tell him to come at once."

The baron was the closest person to the castle that Lucus knew had knowledge of medicine.

Picking up Jasmin's limp body, he carried her to his horse.

Oh, God, I beg you, let her live. My life would be a void without her.

Holding Jasmin tightly around her waist, he quickly galloped back to the castle. After shouting instructions to Grace, Lucus carried Jasmin into the reading room and carefully laid her down on a cushioned sofa.

"Jasmin my darling, we are home now, my love. You are safe."

He stroked her hair, wishing she would wake so he could see her beautiful eyes. Several minuets passed, and Disa returned with the baron, who went directly to her aid. He summed up the situation quickly.

"She has lost a lot of blood, my Lord. It depends on her strength. Only duration will tell whether she lives or dies."

The words cut into Lucus like a knife; of course, she was to live. He would be nothing without her.

Carrying Jasmin up to her chamber, he allowed Bylack to tend to her

wounds, and then kept vigil over her, until his eyes could no longer remain open and he fell into sleep.

Eric sat in his room. His plan had not worked; his brother did not believe him. Why would Lucus not listen to reason? His honor was at stake. What would he do now? He had to think.

Bylack gently woke Lucus. Jasmin was still asleep, and looked at peace.

Lucus bent down and kissed her, before leaving the room with the baron.

After thanking Bylack, he left to gather himself for the confrontation with his brother.

If Eric was telling the truth, why was he not aiding her? Why was he standing there watching her, waiting for her last breath? He pushed her. He wanted to kill her. Lucus was certain of it. If he had not returned when he did, surely she would be dead. A chill ran down his spine. He ordered a fire to be lit.

Eric was ushered into the hall. He watched as Lucus sat proudly on the high seat. His thought was that the throne, everything Lucus had, should be his. The guards left the two brothers alone, staring at one another in silence. Finally, Lucus spoke.

"I have decided that this matter will be taken to the council. I feel it is not my place to sit in judgment as you are my sibling."

Eric's mouth opened wide with horror. No! He would not go. He had heard of the council, terrible stories about the torture they dealt to get the confessions. Would his only brother send him to his doom? Surely not.

"You -- you would not disown your brother for a whore?"

Lucus held his tongue and did not show the anger that was threatening to explode. He sat, calm and composed.

"You are wrong, Eric. Jasmin is of noble birth, and will become Lady Gastei when she recovers, if she recovers," he added slowly. "You were aware of my intentions before you attacked her. Is that not so?"

Eric was trapped. He had been found guilty by his own brother. He would not stand a chance with the council. Nevertheless, he would not beg he had too much dignity for that. There was only one thing left to do. He stood up proud and straight.

"My Lord, I will not allow you to hand me over to the council like a thief. I am a noble man and it is my right to defend my honor." With his head held high he continued. "I challenge those who accuse me to a duel."

He knew that his brother could not refuse. It was the law of the land. If he did, his fellow peers would shun him.

Lucus had not expected this. "It is your right; very well, we will convene at noon tomorrow. Depart now."

Eric was thrilled; he knew how to handle a sword. The duel was the only way of keeping his honor and of course, a realistic way of getting rid of Lucus once and for all. However, he had yet to duel with his brother, and did not know what talents he had. Lucus was an excellent swordsman.

Lucus did not want to fight his brother, only he could not refuse. Eric would pay for his crime. Considering what the outcome of the duel would be, he decided to allow Eric to live, yet exile him from the country.

Permission for exile had to be granted by the king, so Lucus wrote explaining the situation, and sent Disa to wait for a reply.

Eric spent the day contemplating the outcome of the duel; how he would become lord, and the riches he would deserve and rightfully receive.

Lucus spent time with Jasmin, holding her, praying that she would wake. Orders were given that should she wake, she was not to be told of the duel. He did not want her distressed further.

Lucus spent the rest of the day at the chapel in vigil.

Jasmin woke late the following morning. Her body ached. She recognized the room immediately. She knew she was back in the castle, except was she safe? Where was Eric?

Grace stood outside the chamber, knocked once, and then walked inside.

"It is a joy to see you awake, my Lady. The master will be thrilled."

"Thank you, Grace. Who brought me here?"

"Lord Lucus found you, down by the creek. He was so distressed. He will be happy when I inform him of your recovery."

"Where is the Lord?" Jasmin asked curiously.

She wanted to see him, needed to see him. She needed him to hold her in his arms and tell her everything would be all right.

"The master is away on business," Grace said, muttering something else under her breath.

Jasmin believed Grace was not telling the whole truth, yet did not want to say, so as not to offend her.

Puffing up the pillows, Grace noticed Jasmin's face pale as she looked fearfully at the door.

"Do not fret, my Lady. Sir Eric will not be troubling you again."

Jasmin smiled at Grace, silently thanking her for the reassurance.

"Grace, you keep calling me 'my lady.' Is there something I should know?"

"Well, it is not my place." Grace turned to make sure nobody was around. "Lord Lucus told me that he had discovered your birthright. You are Lady Kenton," she told her proudly. "You have land and property worth a great deal, or so I have been told." Grace knew that Lucus should be the one informing Jasmin, only she was too happy to keep it from her. "Of course, I knew from the start that you were a gentle."

Jasmin urged Grace to repeat herself. *I'm a lady. Is it true?* She had always known there was something better waiting for her around the corner. Now she and Lucus could truly be together. Bursting with happiness, she felt excited with the prospect of visiting her land and sharing her fortune with her betrothed Lucus.

"When do you expect Lord Lucus to return?" It was a simple enough question, so why was Grace so abrupt?

"I do not know, my Lady. I do not interfere with my master's private life. Well, if you have no more need of me, I will depart. I have other things to attend to." She curtsied and left the room quickly.

Outside, the baron was returning to Jasmin's bed chamber.

"And how does our lady fair?" he asked.

"She is quite herself, and very eager for answers, Sir." Grace curtsied and walked away leaving Bylack with a puzzled look on his face.

He entered the room and was surprised to see Jasmin sitting up, smiling at him.

"I am sorry to intrude on you, my Lady. I am Baron Bylack, a neighbour to our beloved Lord, and a physician of sorts. I aided your hurts after that unfortunate incident."

"Then I thank you kindly, Sir, for it was your aid that kept me in life. It is an honor to meet you Baron."

She held out her hand, and he bent down to kiss it.

"The honour is all mine, I assure you. If it were not too much trouble, I would care to inspect your wound. Lord Lucus would have my head if I did not aid you properly."

"Granted," she said, laughing.

He carefully applied fresh linen to her leg.

"It is healing satisfactorily. You shall be up and walking again, soon. I must say, I did not believe it when I heard what had occurred. I would never have guessed that Sir Eric was capable of such evil."

Jasmin was curious. "What do you mean by that; pray tell me what you have heard?"

The baron informed Jasmin about Lucus's accusation.

"No! You are wrong," she cried. "I slipped; my legs were weak from walking. I lost my footing and slipped. It was no one's fault, save my own."

"Are you certain? Lord Lucus assured me he saw Eric standing, doing nothing to aid you."

"I do not remember seeing him. However, I know the truth to be as I have told you."

"Oh my." Scratching his chin, he started to pace the room. "Nevertheless, Lucus was certain..."

His anxiousness worried her. "What is it? Tell me, I beg of you?"

Bylack turned and faced her. The worried look etched on his face unnerved her further.

"When Lucus accused his brother, Eric demanded a duel to defend his honor. Lord Lucus could not refuse."

"Oh no," she cried. "When is this to occur?"

"At this very moment, my Lady."

Her body turned to ice. Blood would not be shed on her account. What if Lucus was injured, maybe even killed? She could not allow herself to think such thoughts. She had to bring an end the duel before it was too late.

"Where?" she cried. "Take me there; I have to put an end to this."

"I would not. I dare not. You are in no fit condition to be moved."

He continued to pace the chamber while deciding what he should do. They would have been fighting for a while now. It could already be over.

Both were skilled swordsmen and were, so far, equal.

Lucus had never seen his brother act this way. There was hate in his eyes. He wanted blood. Lucus knew that if Eric got the chance, he would kill him. It scared him to see his brother showing his true colors.

His mind was not on the fight, he was thinking too much about Jasmin. His love, only a short distance away, lying in the chamber, helpless, and there was nothing more he could do for her. Helplessness was an emotion he had never experienced before, and never wanted to again.

Eric saw the lack of his brother's concentration, took the opportunity, and lunged at him. The cold steel just missed Lucus. However, it woke him from his muddled thoughts, and he started to concentrate harder on the duel.

"I demand you take me to where the duel is. If you do not, I shall find a

way to get there myself."

She was a stubborn woman, and the baron knew she was determined.

"Very well," he said defeated, knowing that he would have to face
Lucus's wrath.

Lifting her from the bed, he carried Jasmin in his arms, and left the
chamber.

Concentrating harder on the match, Lucas was outwitting Eric's skill. He
knew every move his brother was going to make before he made them. This
infuriated Eric and made him feel more inferior to his brother.

Eric dropped his guard, as his gaze drifted to the baron and Jasmin, who
were nearing by the second. Lucas, seizing the opportunity, lunged at Eric. The
blade caught him in the shoulder, forcing Eric to drop his sword and fall to his
knees.

"Stop this," Jasmin shouted.

Lucus swung round to the sound of her voice.

"Oh, Lucas, you have made a terrible error. He did not push me, I tripped
and fell."

"That may be so," he answered. "Nonetheless, he attacked you, did he
not?"

Jasmin saw the anger in his eyes, yet understood it was not for her.

"Yes, my Lord, it is true. Nevertheless, I beg you to end this. He has been
punished enough. Do not forget you are brothers."

Lucus saw the pity in her face; she had forgiven Eric. Should he do the
same?

Disa came galloping up to the gathering. Breathlessly, he nodded to Lucas, then turned his horse away and rode back to the castle.

"Very well. At your request, my Lady." Lucas bowed, and then turned his attention back to his brother. "You are to depart from the castle and my land, never to return. The exile is ordered by the King."

Standing up, Eric held onto his bloody arm and stared at them both. "You should have killed me when you had the opportunity. You will both live to regret this."

Jasmin gasped as Lucas held his sword to Eric's throat.

"Watch your tongue brother, you speak of treachery. Be warned, should you ever return to my land you shall be arrested at once. Do I make myself understood?"

Eric silently glared at them both before departing quickly.

Lucas watched, until his brother was out of sight, then turned and faced the baron, his face a frown.

"I see you two have been formally introduced, however, I must say, Bylack, you have a funny way of looking after my Lady."

"Do not scold him, my Lord. I demanded to see you. He really had no choice."

"Why does this not surprise me?" Lucas grinned. "I will take Lady Jasmin now."

The baron handed Jasmin over into Lucas's arms.

Smiling down at her, Lucas said. "It pleases me to see you well recovered Jasmin, however, you should not be out here. You will get a chill. We shall go inside I have much to relate to you."

He turned to the baron. "I cannot thank you enough for your kindness and friendship. If it were not for you, well I am sure you understand. You shall be well rewarded for your trouble."

"That shall not be necessary, my Lord. It is reward enough to see Lady Jasmin well, and yourself happier than I have ever seen you. I am your servant as always." He bowed and then left.

Lucus took Jasmin into their home, while speaking about their future and of her land, Kenton.

"Are you happy Jasmin?" He asked her.

"Yes, Lucus, happier than I thought could ever be possible. You have given me back my life, my title. I am indebted to you. I have so much to look forward to in life. I love you, Lucus, and I am eager to become your wife."

"Your eagerness pleases me. Nevertheless, you should be well recovered and introduced to court before we marry."

Jasmin recovered quickly. As soon as she was strong enough, they visited Kenton

Her kinsmen rejoiced at the news that their mistress had been found. Once again, a gentle would govern the land.

Kenton was rich and green, and her land stretched as far as sight would allow. Lucus was proud of his betrothed and the beauty of her land, and of course, it would mean an alliance between two wealthy lands.

The time came for them to be presented at court. Jasmin felt nervous about meeting the king; However, he understood her situation and soon put her at ease. So taken aback by her beauty and the displayed love and happiness of the

couple, the king ordered the wedding to take place at the palace. Of course, Lucas and Jasmin were thrilled at the request, and could not refuse the king even if they had wanted to.

Word soon spread of the forthcoming marriage and the return of Lady Kenton. Both lands rejoiced and celebrated.

It was only right that they should spend the eve before the wedding at her home in Kenton. There was great merriment and excitement at the castle. Many people traveled afar to join in with the celebrations, and all were welcome. Although there were celebrations inside the castle, the couple made an appearance at the outside festivals. Lucas and Jasmin made sure all their guests, as well as visitors, were well and comfortable. Tents were set up around the castle and tables were laden with food and good wine. Villagers from both great lands celebrated with dancing and games everyone was full of joy and glad tidings for the couple.

Jasmin was the happiest person there; her heart was so full of love. She had loyal subjects and everyone displayed their devotion to her. She had a loving partner, and had even been accepted by the king. Jasmin believed that if she felt any happier, she would burst.

The morning of the wedding came. The king's guards were ready to escort them to the palace. Many people watched the rich procession led by the royal band playing a salute. In fact, there was such a crowd that no one paid notice to a handful of guards that suddenly left and turned from the procession. It was not until further into the journey that Jasmin and Lucas learnt about an attempt on Lucas's life, and that the king's guards had arrested Eric. Lucas could not save his brother. Eric was found guilty of crimes to the state and the crown,

and was sentenced to execution.

Jasmin became Lady Gastei, and they lived happily together at Lucas's castle, often visiting Kenton for short stays and to make certain the land was running well.

Noticing the energy and happy atmosphere the couple brought with them every time they attended court, the king rewarded Lucas for his loyalty to the crown, by making him High Protector to the State, knowing that the title forced a presence of Lucas at court, and that Jasmin would always be by his side.

The couple had a glorious life ahead of them. Although uncertain about the future, they held onto one another, knowing whatever storms might cross their path they would conquer them together.

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