

The Witch of the Glen: A Viking Love Story

Chapter 1 The Journey Begins

It was a perfectly beautiful day. The sun was shining, a soft breeze filtered down the rise of the meadow.

Clouds of stark white consistency dotted an azure, blue sky.

A perfect day indeed.

Hester Hughes did not trust such a day. Perhaps it was her Scottish heritage...but no good could come of a day like this, she was certain.

She felt it in her bones.

The girl, for she could by no means be considered anything but at this stage of her life, scowled darkly for the fact.

She sighed deeply, returning to her pastime.

Well, the day might be doubtful but the Earth herself was doing its best to make up for the deficiency.

Hester glanced at her bounty. Annie would be pleased with the gatherings of herbs bulging the packs sitting beside the girl on the fresh grass of the meadow.

It had been relatively easy to find the fresh clippings. The new Spring ground had provided a wealth of medicinal produce.

Annie was too old to forage any longer. Hester did not mind traipsing out into the musky, deep woods to search out the needed roots and plants.

Truth told, Hester would do anything for Annie Ferguson. The old woman was that dear to her heart.

Hester mentally counted out the sacks of herbs she had procured.

“This should easily last into the Fall.” She smiled her pleasure.

She had promised to spend the entire day and already it was late into the afternoon without a break, Hester realized.

The girl stretched her stiff muscles, her graceful arms lifting high above her head. A small sound of distress escaped her lips.

She was not aware of how lovely a posture she assumed.

Hester Hughes did not know just how beautiful she was. The long auburn hair alone would give most men pause to stop and stare. The lush curls fell in natural ringlets down her back and over her shoulders. Most days, the girl tried to look more sophisticated than she could ever possibly be. She had an image to uphold, after all.

She would twist the long full locks into some semblance of propriety at the nape of her neck, say...or pile the mass high on top of her head in a swirl of lovely curls that constantly strayed from their restraints, framing that lovely face in a halo of fire.

Hester would cuss under her breath, for she had learned many a fine word from the men of her village when they did not know a woman was about and some mishap had befallen their lives.

She would repeat the 'vile' words then hastily cross herself for Annie would tan her backside raw had the older woman ever heard such blasphemy coming out of Hester's full, sensuous lips.

Hester could only see that those same lips were a tiny bit asymmetrical which she believed, made her entire face 'off-kilter'...unattractive. In truth, Hester liked nothing about her face. Including the emerald eyes which Annie said, were *so beautiful, the trees in the forest were envious of Hester's gift from God.*

Annie was prejudiced, of course. Hester would smile and shake her head at such fanciful musings.

Her eyes were green, yes but an average rather sort of pale green that was nothing spectacular to note.

From the time she could understand the premise of what Annie Fergeson did in the small village the older woman and Hester called 'home,' Hester sensed the responsibility attached to learning all Annie had to teach.

Hester had watched numerous times how Annie took charge of a dire situation. How the woman had saved life after life in lo these many years Hester had been with Annie.

Not only the town's people revered and respected Annie. Her fame had spread far and wide beyond the village.

It was a grave thing, being a Healer for so many. There were no real physicians to be had in the area where Hester had grown to full womanhood. No self-respecting doctor would deign to travel so far from civilized people, Annie would say.

Farmers and fishermen were of no real import to high bred city folk.

How long had she been sitting here? Hester's mind had wandered. The girl sighed for the fact.

Her fingers ached. She experimentally stretched them, clenching her small fists into gentle balls, easing the pain. She tugged at the joints, a fixed scowl on the pretty face.

She glanced at the pumice stone by her side. "You are no m' friend!" She decided, but she put the precious tool aside carefully.

Hester glanced about the quiet of the meadow.

Birds chirped merrily to her right. A meadowlark's nest in the hollow of the fallen oak tree, marked the edge of the forest looming just behind her. The babies cried out for food.

A rabbit scurried hurriedly along just to the side, his nose twitching comically.

Hester's meanderings halted abruptly.

She felt the ground beneath her stir...

A distinct thundering vibration transmitted through the thin muslin dress she wore and into her limbs and bottom.

Her ears pricked, finally recognizing the sound. The rapidly approaching report of horses' hooves pounding heavily against the soft earth echoed about the still air.

Searching aimlessly about the area in which she reposed, Hester's senses tingled in alarm.

Several riders came from the north, appearing on the far horizon.

Hester's alarm heightened.

This would be no one from the small village Hester inhabited. Few men there could afford a steed, let alone ride one with such ferocity. She also knew those in her village had come to know and accept her. They would do her no harm.

The men who approached her now... their bodies seemed honed, sculptured, but these were not tenders of the soil as the men of her village.

These men... they were strangers.

After a brief hesitation, Hester swallowed hard when the steeds advanced with frightening speed.

For the harvest had been bountiful, Hester ventured further than normal on her collection day. She now cursed her lack of common sense, for her village was nowhere in sight.

The riders broke the high ridge directly before her, covering the distance to her location in remarkable time.

To try to hide... or escape, was sheer folly now.

"Good Lord above." She whispered shakily; her eyes fixated on the approaching individuals. "...*Four of them!*"

Her blood ran cold as the reality of her situation dawned.

What the hell had she been thinking?

Well, it was obvious... *she had not been thinking at 'tall.* Now, due to her lack of forethought, she would have to try and bluff her way out of a potentially deadly situation.

Casting her decision, Hester straightened her spine and lifted her head proudly. Life was what it was. One simply had to get through the moments.

"I knew this would be a shitty day." The woman's full mouth tightened with annoyance as Hester sat patiently...awaiting her fate.

Reining in their horses a good six meters away, the men sat, observing the woman critically. All were rather large, unkempt and frightening to look upon, were she honest with herself.

Hester observed right back. No way in hell would she be the first to speak. Surely, they would take such an action as a sign of weakness.

Seth McFarland had seen beautiful women in his day. There was something about this small waif, sitting there so quietly defiant, which caught his immediate attention.

She clearly realized she now found herself in a precarious predicament. One part of the man thought, *serves her right...* out and about without even one male to protect and advise.

Not that one male or twenty would truly assist her if the motley group he accompanied would decide to wreak havoc or mayhem of any real sort.

Which is exactly why Jarek Greyling chose these very men and himself for this outing. In case of trouble. They were not welcome in this English setting.

Another part of Seth only wished to protect, nurture and reassure. She seemed so lost and alone out here in this vast wilderness.

Hester waited on tenterhooks...

“...Are you the Healer, girl?” The obvious leader of the group inquired, his tone rough and urgent, but there was an underlying quality of smooth confidence that was almost hypnotic in nature.

Hester’s scowl deepened for the fact she noted such a thing at all, at such a moment.

The man had dark, thick hair which was windblown and mussed now. Beneath the beard, which was shorter and more esthetically pleasing than the burly man beside him, the man appeared in his late thirties, perhaps early forties.

His clothes were also of a finer cut than his associates, although these men were clearly of a higher breed than those of her village. The leather trappings of the belts and vests they sported were highly sought after. The superior cut of material from which their boots were crafted was unlike anything Hester had ever seen.

Hester tried very hard to meet the dark blue orbs staring so impatiently down at her.

There was a noticeable surliness in the man’s manner and tone.

“Annie Fergeson is the Healer.” Hester knew that much, at least.

A thought came out of the Cosmos, one of which she took as a sign from God. “... I am,” she smiled ever so pleasantly, keeping a polite countenance, “*the witch of the glen.*” Her eyes swiftly searched the menacing faces carefully... critically. “May I be of assistance?”

“*Witch!*” The word did not sit easily with one of the new arrivals. This older man’s face showed alarm and suspicion, which was exactly what Hester had hoped for. It also allowed a certain menace of character she had not prepared for.

But a weak link was a weak link, and in this lot, it was amazing to find even one susceptible individual, she suspected.

Seth shifted a thoughtful stare towards the bull of a man down the line.

Angus McGavin possessed the brains of a jackass. The blacksmith would take *that* word to heart if Seth knew the man.

This could prove harmful for the stupid girl who just now opened her mouth when it would have been more advisable to simply shut the hell up.

Seth thought he could avert any further damage, however, if he played the situation to his advantage.

“I can believe it,” Seth’s deep baritone piped up, for it was just short of disrespectful, drawing attention to himself instead, “with that flock of fiery red hair.”

Shifting an annoyed glance towards the voice, Hester narrowed fiery eyes.

“But then, I would have thought... a Siren instead.” The man grinned slowly, allowing a more acceptable turn to the conversation, hopefully. “Dangerous all the same, I suppose.” He shrugged carelessly after a moment’s hesitation. “*But those captivating green eyes almost make a man forget the danger presented.*”

Hester blinked her shock. *No man had ever dared look at her person the way this man was looking.* She felt as if she was half-undressed, her cheeks suddenly flushed a vibrant pink. It was imperative she show no sign of weakness, but this person was forcing her into just such a moment.

Her gaze swept him in the same insolent manner the man had her, she hoped.

His masculine, virile features caught her attention immediately. The man’s sun-burnt flesh and dark hair caused his startling grey eyes to appear as mystical and bright as the Winter moon’s surface.

His stocky, well-trimmed bulk made the others of his kind seem small in comparison. Especially now, sitting atop his noble steed. The man leaned his forearm casually on a thick thigh, his obstinate gaze fixed solely upon her face and figure.

Hester spared the annoyance a glance before returning her attention to the one in charge. “*Be ye Saxon...or Norman?*”

The question seemed to amuse some and confuse others. Those factions, after all, had long ago disappeared into antiquity.

Seth held his amusement admirably. The cheeky little bitch. *Saxon or Norman, indeed.*

A perplexed and mystified look appeared on David Dunbar's angular face. He leaned slightly, keeping his words for Seth only. "What the hell does that mean?"

Seth chuckled lowly. "It means my little red head has more balls than you have ever had." He admired the gumption behind such a nonsensical ploy.

"*Your* red head!" David lifted an inquisitive brow. "Does the lady have no say in her choices?"

"You have a woman." Seth reminded Sotto voce, shifting his weight to better fit the saddle beneath him. "...But no. The matter is already decided in m' mind."

David scrutinized the woman carefully. "She may look the type a man fucks, then leaves in the lurch, which is exactly what you are planning, know I you."

Seth studied the woman as well, keeping his thoughts to himself.

"She looks the type to cut off a man's private parts while he sleeps then feed them to the neighborhood cat." Was David's considered opinion. "You are welcome to her, Sir. And more power to y'."

"That is not what she will do with m' private parts...trust me, lad." Seth assured confidently.

"And what of Maude Higgins?" David enjoyed causing strife and dissension from time to time, his grin saying as much.

"If I know Maude, and I do," Seth grinned right back, listening to the exchange between the Healer and Jarek Greyling to the best of his ability, "she is already entertaining another in my stead. Which is all well and good." He strained to hear the lyrical voice. "We understand each other, Maude and me."

"A wonderful arrangement if a man can achieve it." David granted.

"It is." Seth was happy with the way of things. "The perfect arrangement, ask you me."

The leader's face, etched with anxiety and stress, turned thunderous. "I have no time for this stupidity!" He snarled a strained growl. "Annie Ferguson sent me!"

The man shoved a small satchel towards the woman, demanding she take it.

Hester arose gracefully, approaching the men cautiously, tentatively taking the object to inspect. Her brows knitted, for she recognized the print on the linen. Only last season, she and Annie fashioned summer dresses from the light material.

Though hastily thrown together and crudely tied, Hester knew Annie herself created the bundle, for whatever reason.

Clasping the bag to her chest, the proclamation gave Hester pause for thought. "... Annie sent you?"

“My child is ailing! I am in need of a healer to come with me immediately!” Sensing its Master’s mood, the horse pranced about, pawing anxiously at the ground beneath its feet. Reining in the steed without thought, the man stared hard at the girl, waiting for a reply.

The girl studied the lot before her studiously, “You are no from around here. Come with you... where?”

She raked the doubtful group with more than wary eyes.

“*If we wanted you, girl,*” the largest of the men seemed slightly amused at the prospect presented, “*do y’ not think we would have already done the deed?*” His grey eyes seemed to dance with amusement at her expense. “We are here for a healer and that is all we want.”

Seth was a skilled equivocator, tempering his own truths with his friend’s needs in this instance.

Hester had read a book once. The tattered remnant of pages still resided on the tiny shelf above her cot in Annie’s cottage. It told of Normans and Saxons and knights and gallantry.

These men could have ridden straight from the pages, except these men had ridden hard and long this day. Not in a battle, but out of necessity.

Dirt and dust covered their clothes. Beards of varying lengths, windswept from their fierce riding and tangled by sweat, hid much of their rugged faces. They looked tired but determined to achieve their goal.

“We have come far. There is no time to waste!” The leader was losing patience, his tone and manner suggested as much. “You must accompany us!” He did not enjoy having to repeat himself either, Hester surmised by the dark, forbidding scowl on the handsome face.

“... How old is this child?” Why it mattered, Hester did not know. She was stalling the inevitable only.

“He is but four years of age.” The reply came in a raspy grunt.

Hester closed her eyes, then hastily gathered her herbs into two large satchels. “And how long has he ailed?” She dreaded the answer.

“We started at sunrise. He fell ill twelve hours hence.” Seth took the opportunity to advise and hopefully ingratiate himself back into the conversation...but also his thoughts were brought back to the real reason the trip was made. “He is but a wee bairn, Lass.” The heavy Scottish brogue was often difficult for Hester to understand. “We are in desperate need of your assistance.”

“Twelve hours. Which means an endless return trip.” Her features were grim. “I must warn you,” she dreaded having to do so, “such a long period without this,” she held the satchels aloft, “I cannot promise... a positive outcome.” She licked suddenly dry lips, having to stare into the frightened eyes of the boy’s sire. “Do you understand my meaning?”

Seth motioned to his companion. David dutifully brought a horse to the front.

David was not especially known for his subtle reactions to any or all situations, but the man was a fierce warrior when called to be one. Seth considered the younger man a close, trusted friend.

Not many could lay claim to such an honor.

“Mount!” The command was clipped and succinct.

Hester had not noted the riderless horse before as it was brought forth. She stared at the huge animal, somewhat taken aback.

“Can you not ride, girl?” Jarek Greyling impatiently snipped.

“Of course I can ride!” She snapped right back. “I am pondering just how to get astride the great beast!”

The steed eyed Hester challengingly, obviously high-spirited. It twisted and turned every which way, eager to allow some of that temperament free rein.

“Assist her!” Seth’s command was sent Angus McGavin’s way on purpose, his all-too-easy smile and light-hearted manner challenging the larger man in a definite way.

The one who apparently issued the orders to these men was the one who troubled Hester the most, were she honest with herself. She watched the individual closely, even now.

A hearty laugh erupted when the command was not immediately obeyed. This Seth person dismounted himself, covering the distance needed. “Afraid of the witch, are we, Angus?”

The latter managed a sheepish grimace. “I fear nothing!” The man moodily brooded, his dark eyes observing Hester belligerently.

Seth crossed, his eyes meeting the wide set sage green ones easily. David drew the animal close, holding the reins. Seth offered a bold sweep of the small, delicate figure before laying hands on the tiny waist. He enjoyed Hester’s gasp of maidenly shock for such an unheard-of transgression.

Sturdy hands lifted the girl bodily onto the spirited horse, another gravelly chuckle escaping the man’s throat. “Except a wee slip of a woman-child.”

Those grey eyes noted Hester’s pantaloons, which were now visible care anyone look. In his haste, he sat the woman astride the horse, as a male would ride, mindless of her dress. The muslin caught against the width of the saddle, rising above what any decent woman would show of her petticoats.

Clutching her bulging satchels to her chest, the woman hastily fixed the material as best she was able. Primly pulling the dress down, Hester shielded what must be covered. The demure action produced another grin of malice from the large man.

Hester pushed the insistent hands from her waist. “I am no child!” She met the silvery smoke of his stare defiantly.

That stare traveled her body freely. “I stand corrected.” Her antagonist offered an ever so minute bow. A rather mocking one, to Hester’s way of thinking.

“Seth!” the leader barked his waning patience. “We ride!”

Hester waited her turn to join in the line of riders, one man allowing her the space.

All obeyed the brusque command as the giant pulled himself into his saddle with effortless ease, his mood a thing of the past, a more serious expression replacing the usual sardonic one Hester had come to know.

“I envy the damned horse.” David sighed lightly, seeing the Healer could handle the animal, just. “Would not mind spending a few minutes between such fetching thighs.”

Seth held his steed in check. “It would not be more than a few ‘seconds’ between *those* thighs.” he taunted with a smile. “Considering it would be *you* doing the deed.”

David pulled a face. “Very funny. Besides,” both men urged their horses forward with practiced ease, “Jarek would cut off m’ cock were we even to think of delaying this trip for any reason, I highly suspect.”

Seth nodded, his mood altering. “Aye. We must keep the boy in mind at all times.”

It took both men little time to catch up to the riders ahead. Seth reined close to the woman, keeping his beast abreast of her own in case of mishap.

She rode better than he imagined one of her station might, but it was a grueling time ahead. He would be interested to see how she fared in the long run.

The horse beneath her jerked forward, offsetting Hester slightly. Tightening her grip on the reins, Hester grasped them more firmly in hand as the animal fell in beside her adversary.

“I knew this day would be hell.” Hester cursed her vexation, too occupied to note Seth’s grin of amusement for the stoutly stated belief.

Sighing her lot in life, she began what would be the beginning of a very long journey.

Exhausted was the only word Hester could find to describe how weary she felt. Unaccustomed to the non-stop hours on horseback, tears stung her eyes as the horse upon which she rode hit another crevice, shaking her body unforgivably.

The constant jostling created a soreness deep in her bones, the likes of which she never experienced before. Even her flesh felt raw and weather-beaten to the touch. The throbbing in her head from the constant rumble of horses’ hooves beating relentlessly against the ground made her eyes, and even her teeth, ache.

A gnawing hunger clawed at her stomach, for she had not eaten since she broke her fast that morning. The meager water offered during their trek only exacerbated the problem. Each sip of

the tepid water caused a knot to form in her empty stomach, leaving her feeling cramped and fatigued.

All in all, she had experienced better days.

She refused, however, to give her companions the satisfaction of knowing how beaten and desolate she felt.

Day gave way to night, blanketing Hester and her companions in an inky blackness that proved impossible to navigate alone. Relying on a local boy and the horse's instinct, her entourage was guided through a thickly wooded forest, mindless to her plummeting emotions.

Closing her eyes, Hester allowed her chin to drop to relieve some of the exhaustion she was experiencing. She was unaware her head continuously swayed back and forth in time with the animal's movement beneath her.

Startled from her somber thoughts, her eyes bolted open as the horse swung about without warning and shifted her off-balance. Grappling for the reins, her eyes widened with fright until she realized her adversary held them tight within his grasp.

"Easy..." Seth soothed the animal, or her, she could not be certain which.

Glancing about, Hester frowned her confusion as the men beside her dismounted from their saddles, all hastily gathering their meager belongings.

"Come..." The large man held his hands aloft, gesturing for her to lean his way. He, too, had swung down from his noble steed, standing now, before her.

Any other time, she would not deign to give the man one iota of her time, would even give him grief over his offer of assistance, for there was something about this individual which rankled.

But her body demanded she be logical in this instance.

Bracing her hands on his massive shoulders, Hester held her breath when his enormous hands easily spanned her waist. Clasping her securely in his hold, Seth drew the woman towards him before easing her softly to the ground.

Seth scented wildflowers, vanilla and mint, of all things. Altogether, a thoroughly pleasant experience.

"Thank you." She murmured quietly. The girl smoothed her dress as best she could, clearing her throat self-consciously.

Seth's expression spoke of his doubt and slight perplexity. This newfound attitude giving him pause for thought.

I am not the heathen, Sir." She knew that look. *"Annie taught me well. Tis only proper to show my gratitude for your assistance."*

“Were Jarek not in such a rush, I could suggest a proper way to show that gratitude.” he held his grin.

“But you will not.” Hester snipped. She sent over a hard scowl, and the man seemed in better spirits suddenly. She decided to ignore him completely.

Steadying herself on numb legs, she attempted a couple of wobbly steps. After such a long period on that horrid beast, she was hard pressed to find her normal stride. It felt as if the animal was still beneath her; its wide berth a phantom pressure. It was a rather bothersome anomaly.

Settling her hands at her waist, Hester stretched her back absently, pushing her fingers into the tender muscles running along her spine. Closing her eyes to the sensation, her senses shifted towards an unusual sound.

Squinting through pained eyes, she cast her attention outward just then, noting their present surroundings. Slowly swiveling her head about, her eyes widened at the sight of waves crashing along an endless stretch of beach.

White-capped waves rolled ashore, colliding against a cluster of stone and sand to create both an auditory and visually soothing scene. A mist of sea spray took to the air, wetting nearby plants and people alike in its cool wash.

Turning towards the sound of flint meeting steel, Hester watched a man shift from his crouched position to his knees before she caught sight of a small tendril of flame come to life.

Others who had gathered kindling along nearby paths tossed their bounty of fallen branches and dried grass on the smoldering ember until the flame billowed upward above her head in a stunning torch. Bits of sand and ocean spray drifted into the blistering heat before it got lost against the edge of darkness surrounding them.

One man broke ranks, gingerly climbing a stone facing. Lowering to his haunches, having found a suitable perch of rock, he peered out over the darkened sea, scanning it in a slow, meticulous sweep.

Hester’s pupils constricted rapidly as they adjusted quickly to the sudden burst of light the fire gave, allowing her to see the clearing from which they had emerged. Turning about, she watched the young boy who led them on their travels take a coin held aloft by the leader of the group. The young lad eagerly took the offering with shaking fingers before gathering the horses.

Glancing at their surroundings, Hester’s brow furrowed further when she noted... they were alone. There was no village, no other people, only dark, vague surroundings. There was nothing but a vast ocean and miles of sand in either direction.

“What on earth?” she muttered. *What possible direction were they to take from here? Were they to grow wings and fly?*

The sentinel raised up, his arm pointing in a direction. The others seemed to instinctively know the signal’s meaning, even though the man had not uttered a word.

Hester stared blankly as the men began kicking sand atop the hastily constructed fire in a bid to extinguish the fiery glow. Were they not to have even the briefest of respites?

“*Wait!*” Hester strenuously bid, rushing for the warmth the fire provided. Hesitating in their actions, the men frowned at the stressed demand.

“Give her a moment to warm herself.” Seth bid his men as the woman rushed forward, almost throwing herself towards the welcome heat as if offering herself up as a sacrifice. “Go, we will not be far behind.” He ordered brusquely, motioning with his hand.

Leaning towards the warmth provided, Hester sighed blissfully as it seeped into her cold and tired bones. She knelt slowly, moving closer to the blessed relief.

Glancing down at the woman, Seth’s breath caught, staggered by the beauty afforded him. Never had he seen such a stunning sight.

The firelight against the woman’s pale flesh was reminiscent of the moon’s glow shimmering like crystals off the dark abyss of the ocean.

A raw desire, the likes of which he never before experienced, clawed at his gut as he stared at Hester’s sensuous mouth. He would give a weight in gold to place his mouth against her lips to see if they felt as soft as they looked.

Hester’s fiery red hair whipped about in a frenzy like flames licking the night sky; the wind was that strong here, in their present position. He longed to touch the silken-like tresses and knot them into his fist as he lay claim to her bee-stung lips.

Releasing a fitful sigh, Seth turned his eyes away from the temptation to stare out at the black sea.

The shrill cry of a flock of seagulls overhead broke Hester’s unfocused gaze away from the crackling fire and upwards towards the sky. She hesitated in her movement as she noted Seth’s eyes were fixed stoically on the vast darkness.

“What is it?” she asked of the man.

The answer to her query appeared rapidly enough, much to her dismay.

Turning back to look out at the turbulent waters, *Hester visibly started and gasped her fright as an apparition emerged from the thick rolling fog and crept menacingly towards shore.* The woman’s eyes widened in fear as the demonic looking creature loomed overhead.

She staggered slightly, arising hastily, her movements clumsy, unsure.

The dragon-like beast crept closer, revealing its evil eyes and grisly tongue. Its lowered head appeared ready to strike out at its unsuspecting prey, where its unfurled tongue would wrap about its victim and take him, or her, into the wide gap of its open mouth. Hester swore, any moment, the grotesque monster would breathe fire and incinerate all in its path.

Hastily crossing herself, Hester mumbled an incoherent prayer of salvation, but the danger continued its ominous approach.

The girl gasped audibly, rushing to the only source of safety afforded her. Her slender arms lifted, reaching for the stability of the man's neckline, her body crashing into his immovable chest. She hid her face in the warmth of his neckline, her shaky breath delighting his flesh as it whiffed along the suntanned surface.

Seth instinctively offered protection, his smile a gentle one. His arms securely enfolded the tiny body, holding the curves and softness pressed to his straining tautness.

Hester closed her eyes tightly, awaiting her fate. She trembled slightly, tension coursing through her tense frame.

"It is only a ship." He murmured soothingly.

Hester held tight to the front of his shirt, the material clutched in a death grip but she chanced a quick glimpse to the fearsome thing that now sat, quietly perched on the very edge of the ocean itself, as if daring her to approach.

She drew her gaze from its wickedly evil stare, preferring the warmth of the man's neckline for the time being. Lifting to her tip toes, the small arms clung to the man's six-foot frame.

"An intricately carved one, granted." Seth grinned up at the massive figurehead staring belligerently down at the two helpless humans on the shore. "Designed to instill concern to all it encounters," the man related, "but a ship, nonetheless."

"Your craftsmen are very efficient." Hester gulped, unable to pull her eyes from the terrifying sight.

The girl suddenly realized her predicament, drawing in a small incoherent sigh, hastily releasing the man's shirt. She stepped back, her cheeks flushing her embarrassment. The awkward moment progressed into infinity.

"She will convey us to our destination." Seth had reluctantly allowed her release, his arms falling to his sides.

Hester's mouth opened, a small gasp escaping at the news. "She will convey you, mayhap! Tis no way I will be going out on that ocean!"

"Afraid?" Seth taunted. In just this short time, he felt he may have found a way around this woman's stubborn outlook on life.

"Deathly so!" Hester shared freely, backing away from the vessel looming large now on the shoreline. A monster she still believed, waiting to devour any unsuspecting land creature.

"Jarek will be displeased." Seth sighed his woe.

"Poor, Jarek." Hester sympathized. "You'll no be getting me on that monstrosity! No one said anything about being eaten by a Kraken!"

The large man chuckled. "You will be as safe as if you were in my arms, girl. I promise."

"Which does little to appease." The red curls were swished negatively. "I canna do the sea, man! I canna!"

"I believe you." Seth understood Hester's trepidation. "But Jarek's will is stronger than your fear."

"We shall see." Hester vowed. "Men were no meant to be...out there! It is unnatural! We are meant for the land. God put us here!" She stomped the sand beneath her shoe. "And here I shall stay!"

"I have traveled the seas all m' life, girl." Seth shook his head for such a foolish outlook. "It is a wondrous thing, the ocean."

"You just go travel all y' please." She motioned. "I like it here just fine, thank you."

"He will simply pick you up and put you aboard." Seth prophesied with a slight shrug of his massive shoulders.

"He will try!" Hester gasped indignantly.

Seth's slate eyes softened. "He will succeed."

Hester deflated, knowing the truth when she heard it.

"You know, girl," the man spread his hands, "there are moments in life one simply must endure."

Well, that much Hester already knew, her expression saying as much.

"His child is sick. It is all he knows or cares to know and he believes you," he pointed to her person, "can help that child. What would you do under similar circumstances?"

Hester closed her eyes to the inevitable. "... I no like the ocean."

"Give her a chance to show you her majesty." Seth quietly suggested.

Jarek impatiently waved Hester and her companion onward as his men waded out into the pounding surf.

"Come along." Seth extended his hand to that companion. "I will carry you that you stay dry."

"No man will carry me." The girl trudged forward determinedly. "I carry m' own load."

"Stubborn little bitch." The man voiced sotto voce as the girl passed, with a woeful shake of his head and a grin she did not see.

Hester turned, ready for battle. "What did you call me?" She dared the man say it to her face.

"... Stubborn little witch." Came the innocent enough reply. "What is it you thought was said? You, yourself, have given claim to the title, after all." he practically taunted.

Hester's eyes narrowed, but she was given no other recourse but to plod across the grainy sand. Holding her parcels aloft, she gathered her skirts in hand. The coarse surface of sand collapsed under her lightweight as she plunged foot first into the icy black surf.

The girl gasped her shock, first for the frigid blast of the water itself and second, that her very feet seemed to be pulled from beneath her by a force stronger than she had ever experienced.

Lifting her skirts upward as high as modesty would allow, she sucked in a sharp breath as the cold water seeped into her undergarments. Wading into the shifting waters, she hurriedly steadied herself as a particularly strong wave hit. Damning propriety, she pulled her skirts higher out of the way of an incoming wave.

The woman stilled in her tracks, frozen in place as the shocking cold hit her buttocks. A stark reminder, she was in the ocean, a place she feared with every ounce of her being.

Before she could bolt for the safety of the shoreline, muscular hands grasped her hips just as another powerful wave jostled her slight frame. Her eyes closed, relieved by the man's strong and steadying presence.

"I have you." Seth assured, stepping in behind the diminutive figure. "Hold tight." he warned, reaffirming his grip on her waist.

"My satchels..." Hester protested, stiffening in his grasp. Claspng her possessions protectively to her chest, Seth lifted her upright and towards the men already waiting onboard.

"Her things." Seth called out over the loud crash of the waves.

A man stepped in to her left, carefully taking the cloth bags, then sat them safely onboard. Hester breathed a sigh of relief.

"He will fetch you aboard." The voice behind her was calm, directing her actions. The girl glanced up to see another man come into view. He was young and sturdy, holding his hands down the ship's side.

Hester stretched her now empty arms out. The bearded man bodily lifted her upwards, depositing her on the smooth and gleaming wood deck.

Grasping the edge just above his head, Seth pulled his weight upright, heaving himself over the side with little effort. Gesturing to an empty spot, the man graciously waved a hand for her to sit. "*You are all wet.*" he tried to hide his amusement as his eyes swept her condition, but he did not try very hard.

Hester was freezing suddenly, glad to find any shelter from the stinging winds whipping the ship's deck.

Mumbling dejectedly, Hester cast the large man a resentful glare as she settled down into the spot chosen for her. She watched his retreat, a smug smile on that rather acceptable face. "...He said, *bitch.*" She was relatively certain, muttering the belief. "I know as much."

She begrudgingly huddled down beneath the out jutting of that pagan monstrosity which graced the bow of this boat. There she found a small hollowed out spot protected from the wind and salt spray the oars kicked up out of the cold sea.

She spared the man yet another scathing look. Somehow, this was all his fault. Hester did not know how just yet, but the accusation made perfect sense in her world.

Shifting her aching body, Hester grimaced as her wet undergarments clung uncomfortably to her cold, aching body. She felt absolutely miserable; even more so than she had only a short while ago.

She could only imagine how her ship mates felt out there in the elements. Their garments were just as wet as her own, but the men had no protection from the fierce winds at all.

This was turning out to be one of the worse days of Hester's young life, nor was it over yet, Hester knew.

The large one approached, his features carefully composed. He tossed a mammoth cloak over her shivering body. "Can not have you catching your death. *Jarek has use of you... and so do I.*"

Completely distracted by the offer of warmth, Hester hastily tugged the heavy garment to her shivering chin. Huddling under the minuscule comfort provided, the man's words slowly repeated in her mind. "I beg your pardon?"

Smiling, Seth returned to his post, reclaiming the massive oars he held so capably in his large hands. At length, he once again fell into the rhythmic cadence the other men had established.

Hester realized, had she not been so stupid, insisting on entering the boat under her own steam, she would not be miserable, cold and wet now.

Hindsight.

"You'll very much regret that stubborn, willful way, Hester Hughes." Annie Ferguson was fond of saying... repeatedly.

Hester lived that regret now. Truth told, she was often regretful of her inability to see reason. She never let on, of course. That would never do, to let them see how contrite one was.

Sensing she was the object of interest to someone's scrutiny; Hester lifted her gaze to find a knowing and lifted brow directed her way.

Seth knew she was miserable and regretted not accepting his help earlier.

Hester's mood dropped considerably. Shifting her attention away, she fought to keep her expression perfectly composed and neutral.

Time passed... slowly.

Concentrating on keeping warm, Hester desperately fought against the exhaustion plaguing her. Sleep beckoned as the weight of the heavy thick wool created a web of security, welcome heat to envelop her body.

“You must eat, healer.” Seth had arisen, daring to approach yet again. This time, his expression was of a more serious nature. “It is a long journey.”

“I do not have to do anything but die and pay taxes.” She reminded irritably, taking her mood out on anyone nearby, as was her way. “The Bible states as much.”

She was uncertain of that last point of contention, but it sounded good to her ears.

“I do not recall reading that particular scripture.” Her bluff was called. The man stood before her, hands on hips, his scowl an amused one. “Where is it to be found?”

Hester’s mouth fell agape. “You read?!” She allowed her astonishment. “You know of the Good Book?”

“I know a good many things.” Something in his tone caused a rift of mirth to pass through the diligently rowing oarsmen.

The girl’s face registered suspicion. They were making sport of her, of course, but she lacked the maturity to know its source. “You are a Pagan!” She highly suspected. *“You are all Pagans!”* She gladly included those mocking her in her growing wrath as she got back a little of her own.

The remark only caused more amusement to pass among the heathens gathered.

“Eat!” Jarek Greyling’s mood was considerably darker than Hester’s, she was surprised to note. “You will be no good to me if you are exhausted and weak.” The man’s tone was a harsh, impatient one. “You must try to sleep.”

“Since y’ asked so pleasantly.” Hester sat back, relieved to do so, in truth.

The silence came once again. The only sound was that of the rhythmic strokes of the oars slicing seamlessly through the water and the wind whistling by. Seth had shaken his head for the exchange, his expression a scolding one.

Hester felt like sticking her tongue out at the smug individual, but she opted for a more sedate grimace of that cute little nose, which only produced another grin from the giant.

The girl sat back, leaning on the hard wood of the monster on whose backbone she rested. She often craned her neck to see the frightening figurehead. Up this close, the effect was even more disturbing; she realized.

Hester’s eyes were drawn to the side of the boat as a hundred times before. She sat remarkably close to that water.

The boat was shallow, streamlined, built for speed and speed she was delivering. Hester had never traveled so fast. The powerful strokes of the eight-man crew propelled the craft at a frightening rate of acceleration.

They had ridden the horses hard and fast as well, on land. Hester was loath to maintain her stamina with such experienced riders.

She recalled earlier the surprise she felt when first the men pulled into a small farm about two hours into the ride. The detour was to change out a fresh team of horses, of course.

She had not expected money to change hands. These were Norman invaders, after all. They had a reputation for taking what they wanted... whenever they wanted.

Or at least, that was the impression the tattered pages of the book she so coveted implied. The girl kept the parcel neatly wrapped beneath her bed, that Annie could not see the scandalous print.

How many times had Hester read and re-read those yellowed pages, her imagination taking flight?

But these men had paid for the steeds given over. Each exchange was the same. Hester found herself a little disappointed, were she truthful with herself. She was happy for the people who did not lose any profit, but, well, matters just seemed somewhat anticlimactic somehow.

While waiting for fresh horses to be harnessed, Hester blatantly eavesdropped on a private conversation between the large one and the one she was beginning to know as, Jarek. She had never eavesdropped in her entire life. The sensation left an unpleasant taste in her mouth. But it also altered her perspective on Jarek's character.

"It will be alright." Seth had placed a gentle hand on his friend's shoulder, for the other man had seemed so desolate. "Ian will be fine. Our Gods would not allow any misfortune to befall such a noble lad."

"I have never felt so helpless or powerless in my entire existence." Jarek's head bowed, and Hester had sensed the weight of the world was on those broad shoulders.

"I know, but we must keep the faith strong." Seth had nodded his understanding. "They sent this woman for a reason. We found her so quickly. We make excellent time on our return to the boy."

Jarek sighed heavily. "I confess... I do not have that much faith in our Gods." The man's tone was a broken, desperate one.

Seth held his piece for a spell. "Then have faith in her God." He motioned to the small figure standing off to the side of the hay wagon. "I hear tell, he is a powerful deity, indeed. And she seems to put much store in his abilities."

"I just want to be with my son again." Jarek lay his head on Seth's massive shoulder; the exhaustion of worry and stress taking its toll, clearly.

"We are ever so close." Seth's massive hand cradled the back of Jarek's neck, the thick fingers squeezing hard to take the tension from the area. "We have made up time, and already we near the shoreline. Take hope."

Hester sat now, reliving the scene, her eyes fixed on the handsome face of the little boy's father. She could not stand to watch the troubled soul for any great length of time, however, for her own fears surfaced if she did.

Would she be able to assist this man's little one? Would Jehovah God step in to ease the suffering this man was experiencing? Was Jarek a noble, sincere, good man? She did not know any answers to any questions.

The uncertainty filled her own mind with dread. She turned her attention to other things in order to keep such thoughts at bay.

At least she was off that damnable horse. The realization brightened her outlook somewhat.

So now...here she was. On yet another form of conveyance, a remarkably swift one. The girl examined the expanse of water about her. There was nothing else to see, after all, but the stars.

Oh! The stars took her breath away!

So many...so vast! Each time she chanced an upward glance of the heavens, the waiting sight filled her young heart with awe.

Seth watched the girl closely, his thoughts private ones. Her face was very expressive. She felt the wonder of the heavens surrounding her. A smile touched his lips, but he was not aware of it doing so.

Hester appeared much warmer now under his cloak, he was pleased to note. That red hair was a mess, however. His smile widened at the sight of the beautiful, wild, untamed locks. She would have a time getting a comb through the lush mass.

He knew for certain, she would not allow any man such a liberty. The thought only amused more. But what he wouldn't give to get his hands on that soft, luscious fluff if only for a few moments of blissful play.

He would wound the silk about his cock while she suckled him passionately, holding her to the exquisite pastime until he could stand the pleasure no more. And then he would cum in that pout of a mouth, releasing all the wondrous emotions she could evoke.

Seth straightened, clearing his throat for it had become dry and raspy suddenly. A scowl came and went for such meanderings. The man willed his semi-erected state away with sheer determination. It would be no good for his fellow seamen to note such a weakness.

All the woman needed was a strong, capable hand to guide and stroke her gently in all the right places. Her moods, foul as they were, and her sharp little tongue amused him. He could tame her, he was certain.

"Careful, Seth." Seth's fellow oarsman rudely interrupted the man's musings. "Your interest is showing."

Seth cast the man a surly glare. "Mind your business, Patrick." The gruff rejoinder rebuffed the other man.

“That one has the tongue of an adder.” Patrick shook his head negatively. “You are just asking for trouble, and she be the one to give it over, methinks.”

“*You* will be asking for trouble if you do not keep your mind on those oars.” Seth motioned curtly. “Ian needs us to get the woman to him. That is what we will do.”

The man returned to his pastime, nodding his assent. Seth returned his interest to his former pastime, content to do so.

Settling back into the dark recesses of her cubbyhole, Hester eased her body this way and that, trying to find a comfortable enough position.

Hester’s gaze fell upon the stout-hearted individuals accompanying her, stifling a moan, loathe for the men to know her weakness. Riding the crest of pain, she shifted restlessly. Her legs, cramped and cold from the damp cloth of her dress, felt stiffened.

She had no concept of time. How much had passed since she clambered aboard this vessel?

How long had these men labored at the oars, without a break, nor a word of protest for the pace their leader set?

Hester noted honed muscles straining against the pull of the water, each man’s face placidly set.

No one spoke.

The wind hurried past, the pounding of the wooden paddles lapped against the sea over and over again.

Seth was careful not to allow the girl see his gaze resting upon her. He would turn to other things if he sensed those green eyes approaching. Hester was hurting, he knew. Her body was unaccustomed to the rigors demanded of it this day.

He had heard the small moan of protest, moved by it. She was really doing remarkably well, considering the pace Jarek had set, the cold sea, and the conditions on the ship she had to suffer.

Seth glanced ahead at Jarek’s stiff posture. The man was driving himself and others beyond their endurance. Seth knew his men would not complain. He sensed the woman would not do so either.

He racked his brain for a suitable reason to find some sort of reprieve for all concerned.

Hester felt the weight of the cloth sack one man had tossed into her lap earlier. The smell of food drifted upward, enticing her senses. Bread and meat beckoned her hungry body. She had staved off the urges as long as humanly possible.

Her stomach demanded sustenance.

Searching out the stoic faces yet again, she was relieved to see no one taking any note of her what-so-ever. Hester hastily withdrew a biscuit, closing her eyes to the mouth-watering aroma, the deliciously mellow consistency which assailed her taste buds.

Nibbling delicately on the bread, Hester forced herself to take small bites when all she wanted to do was stuff the savory morsel whole into her mouth. But guilt set in as she once again noted the placid faces of those stoic individuals who manned the oars so diligently.

“... T-There is plenty.” She meekly offered her fellow travelers the fare found in the sack. “Would anyone care for food?”

Several eyes looked her over, but none took the offer of kindness.

“We will eat soon, girl.” Seth smiled at her, as always, finding something amusing. “You go ahead. I suspect your night shall be a long one.”

Hester scowled, the bit of information unsettling her a tad. What did lay ahead, she wondered.”

“There is wine there.” Several long bags made of animal skins hanging just to her left were indicated. “And fresh water there.” Even more such dressing draped the other side of her cubby.

The girl nodded her gratitude, returning to the crisply cooked pork inside the pouch, which resided at her side now. The meat was hearty, crackling savoringly on her tongue. It complimented the bread to perfection. Whomever prepared this feast was an excellent cook.

She quickly finished her portion, secretly desiring more but discretely closed the bag, setting it aside. Settling down into the heavy cloak, her spirits slightly revived, Hester felt the warmth encase her body. She could still feel the dampness at the bottom of her dress, but the cold had abated.

The large one insisted she remove her shoes, just as the men had their boots upon entering the boat. The large boots lined the edges where the wind could hopefully dry them a bit before the necessity of having to put them back on reared its ugly head.

The boat sailed on into the moonless night.

Her companions seemed to know their way on this harrowing voyage, but the *how* of it eluded the girl.

Directions appeared impossible to gauge in this vast expanse of water. No land marks appeared off any side of the vessel. They must navigate by the stars, but no one had even really looked up to the heavens. Well, no one, she noticed, at least.

There was little choice but to put her trust in these experienced seamen.

With each minute spent, Hester was acutely aware just how much distance was put between all she had known.

What awaited was an abstract. Her fate was taken from her hands, so there seemed little need to fret over the matter.

Once again, Hester’s interest was caught by the unfathomable sadness imitating from the leader’s eyes. The man’s features were chiseled with worry and strain. She tried one last time, for he seemed so pitiable.

“My lord,” she sat forward, seeking the light blue gaze, “your strength will be required upon our arrival, just as my skill, for lack of a better word.” She tried a smile she did not feel. “Your son will rely on your presence.”

The stoic face remained religiously impassive, the quick, even strokes of the oars continued steadily.

The large one lay a staying hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Aye, Jarek, the men would appreciate a brief moment.”

Jarek closed his eyes wearily, his head bowing.

“Ian is a strong lad. He will not give in so easily.” Seth reminded. “See that his sire does no less.”

Jarek grimaced from the strain as he hoisted his oar into place. “Aye, Seth... aye.” He called over his shoulder to his counterpart. “A respite then, but only enough time to eat and drink.”

“... *And relieve ourselves?*” Seth chuckled lowly, rising with steady strides to the back of the ship. “I have held it about as long as humanly possible.”

Gasping her shock as she realized his meaning, Hester averted her eyes post-haste before the man unlaced the front of his breeches, reaching inside.

Hester squeezed her eyes shut tight, but the sound was unmistakable as the released urine hit the watery depths a second later.

She lifted a shaky hand to her forehead to hide her line of sight as the other males followed suit, each taking a turn at the make-shift urinal.

“Indelicate.” Seth stood directly before her for she could see his stocking feet, fearful of looking higher. “But necessity calls, lady. We could fashion a make-shift screen of cloaks if you...”

“No!” Hester hastily vetoed the notion. “No, I-I am fine, thank you.”

Jarek exchanged vexed looks with an amused Seth McFarland. The healer would have to be a female! Jarek Greyling cursed his luck.

“It is merely nature’s call, girl.” Seth reminded casually.

“I am well aware, Sir.” Hester snapped her growing pique, annoyed that such a delicate subject was being aired so freely. “But it is a matter best left for a more,” she sought for a word, “... opportune time, perhaps.”

Sending Seth a scolding glare over the shield of her hand, Hester determined to weather the remaining moments of the other seamen’s activities with a mediocre of propriety.

The men finally settled in to partake of food and drink, but the interval was short.

Hester noted that Jarek Greyling ate little, but Seth made certain his friend was supplied with some sustenance. Anything on Jarek’s stomach was better than nothing, Hester reasoned.

The oars were soon lowered, the fast pace resumed.

Hester closed her eyes at length, attempting to rest as she sailed on to her destination.

“We have arrived, girl.” A gentle shake awakened Hester from a light sleep.

She stirred, presently throwing back the heavy cloak covering her body, stumbling from its folds.

Seth offered a hand, which was accepted this time. The warm palm felt odd against her skin. She arose groggily, surveying her surroundings through bleary eyelids. She sought her shoes.

Taking a step, Hester struggled as the boat rocked gently with the drift of the waves.

She caught the side of the ship, regaining her balance. “...Where is everyone?” The boat was empty except for her companion.

“Jarek thought to allow you be until he had the horses readied.” Her shoes were handed over.

“Horses!” Hester bemoaned the very word. “My God, man. How much further...” she struggled with the straps of the worn leather. The shoes were still damp and felt cold on her stocking feet.

“Up yon hill.” Seth lifted a hand to indicate.

The dawn was breaking, the twilight showing an outline of an enormous structure looming large, rising above a craggily shoreline.

“Walking the road will take valuable time.” Seth was saying. “The horses will get you there faster.”

Hester had different priorities. “What tis wrong with m’ legs?” the appendages felt rubbery, unstable.

Seth chuckled. “I will steady you.” He did so. “Are you going to be stupid again and attempt wade ashore?” He motioned to the deep water off the port side of the ship.

Hester glanced into the dark water.

“Do not call me stupid!” She rebuked.

“Then do not act the part.” It was summarily suggested. “I can easily carry your weight which means you will be dry once ashore...that you may tend the child without the bother of changing clothing.”

She stared up at the hulk of a man, her expression a critical one. “One could have simply explained it in those terms beforehand.”

The man lifted his head, inhaling a calming breath, allowing the remark to pass.

He cleared the side of the boat easily, waist deep suddenly in the surging waves. He lifted his arms. “Wait until the waves recede.”

Hester dutifully timed her dissent, falling into capable arms that held her out of the water's reach.

The man waded effortlessly until he deposited the girl safely on the sandy beach.

Hester was pleasantly surprised by his scent. But annoyed for noting the light woodsy musk at all.

She expected he would be as the men in her village, the ones she attended when they ailed or had been hurt in some unseen fashion.

Men of the land who worked hard, spending long hours in the fields.

Hester had forgiven them the need to bathe for other matters took precedence in their world.

Putting food on the table, keeping a roof over one's family's head, tending the animals that provided a livelihood...bathing took a low position on a man's 'to-do- list.

But this man...his scent was intoxicating, pleasant even after all the hours of strenuous rowing on that blasted monstrosity of a ship.

This close, the virile quality of the specimen captivated. Hester stared at the bristled jawline, unaware of her pastime.

Those grey eyes with the specks of gold turned her way unexpectedly. "What tis it?" the deep, quiet tone soothed the girl's frayed nerves.

Hester started to awareness. "What?" She flushed a response.

"You were staring at me." Seth's eyes dropped to her mouth.

"I most certainly was not!" The girl took umbrage to the truth. "Why ever would I?"

"That is what I am attempting to ascertain." Seth remarked idly, still very much focused on those pouty lips so close to his.

"I was merely deep in thought." Hester assured any and all.

"Jarek is waiting." Seth motioned to the man just up the hill, having sat his bundle down gently.

"We must not keep Jarek waiting!" She lifted her skirts, trudging up the incline but her legs still refused to cooperate with her brain's commands so several times, she stumbled over the unfamiliar terrain.

Seth's attempts to offer aid were slapped aside.

"I am no helpless female, man!" She could not explain the surly mood she found herself engulfed within, only accepted it. "I can make my way up a simple hill, thank you very much."

"You are doing a splendid job of it." The wry remark caused further consternation.

"You may well be accustomed to the sea and her ways, but I am not!" It was impatiently explained. "I dinna take you from your home and toss y' out on the treacherous waters, did I!

She did not see the man's expression soften. "Nay, I suppose you did not." It was granted. "Considering, you have done well, given the circumstances."

"Damned right I have and will continue to do so." She took the reins Jarek handed over for the man had sat, aside his great steed, clearly frustrated with her lackadaisical attitude where time was concerned.

"Do you never shut it?" The leader snapped. "You talk too fucking much, woman!"

"And you are an asshole, Sir!" Hester bit the retort. "And...I hate you to my core!"

"Just do your damned job!" The words cut.

Seth hefted the girl into the saddle, slapping the rump of the animal smartly, sending it on its way, ending the confrontation with one decided blow.

Hester, caught by surprise, wrestled with the lumbering horse for a moment before bringing it under control.

Jarek easily overtook and passed her position, obviously an experienced, capable rider.

Hester pulled a face as he passed. "Asshole." She muttered her considered opinion of the man's merit.

Seth McFarland held his amusement, for he had heard the accusation, having kept his steed close by the woman in case of mishaps.

Jarek passed through the main entrance to the castle, entering a spacious courtyard. Massive iron gates were flung wide, allowing Hester's entrance shortly thereafter.

The light from the courtyard poured out into the area, the horses' hooves clicked noisily on the cobblestones under foot.

Seth was instantly there to assist with the dismount.

"There is no moat." Hester could not keep the surprise from her voice as she slid into the waiting arms. Heavy stones comprised the sturdy walls of what appeared to be, a medieval castle.

"We have never needed one." Seth's tone held a definite superiority about it.

Hester had no time to acquaint herself with her surroundings.

"It is this way." The large man's hand swept the direction needed.

She followed his lead, taking in the sights and sounds as she went. Several people milled about a spacious foyer, all eyeing the new arrival suspiciously.

Hester ignored their rudeness, Seth's pace difficult to keep abreast. They climbed a wide staircase which veered off to the right once atop the first landing.

The walls were hung with tapestries of vibrant color and richly brocade scenes. The furniture, while scarce, was ornate and cumbersome.

They passed a long table which was laden with stacks of clothing and blankets.

It was the only piece in the hallway down which they stepped.

Seth's boot heels echoed in the empty space. The man's right hand rested on the handle of a dangerous looking knife which was housed in a masterfully crafted leather sheath fastened about his waist.

Hester had not noted the weapon before.

Ahead, at the end of the hall, a door was opened, a fire flickering inside the room's depths.

Eerie shadows danced on the walls about them.

The scent of blood assailed Hester's senses. She instantly lifted her hand to her mouth to ward off the sickening stench, preparing herself for what was surely inside that fateful room.

But, in reality, nothing could have prepared her for the visual carnage awaiting her.

The light of the hearth first drew her eyes to the several heaping carcasses lying inside a gigantic tray of refined silver.

Several pairs of dead, sightless eyes stared back at Hester's horrified ones.

Limp bodies of birds, squirrels, rats, even a small goat, lie splayed out...one on top of another. The stench of death was an overpowering entity surrounding anyone so unwise as to enter the domain.

Hester stood, rooted to the spot, stunned into silence.

She felt the presence beside her, seeking some sort of explanation. "By all that is Holy!" She whispered sacredly. "What in God's name goes on here?"

Jarek's face tightened, his eyes flitting uncharacteristically from the clear accusation.

"She offers appeasement to the Gods." A hand was lifted to the dead animals, the reply a surly one. "You are not here to judge our ways...tend the child."

Hester searched for a 'child' in this shadowy place of demons.

A woman of undeterminable age sat beside a huddled bundle hidden beneath layers of bedding. The woman was so incredibly beautiful of face and form, Hester momentarily blinked her shock, simply staring at the vision but then, the horrible odor of death shook her aware once again.

"What imbecile would bring a child into this din of iniquity?" Hester demanded an answer, stomping across the heavy stone floors.

Arriving at her destination, she stared down into the tiny face of the most angelic of creatures. The little one was the image of his Sire, with black hair the color of a raven's wing. That hair

was wet and matted now, from the fever, Hester suspected. The tiny face swaddled within the bundled mass of coverlets shone a sickly sheen of pale.

She knelt slowly, instinctively reaching, needing to gauge if her worst fears had materialized.

“NO!” a shrill denial met with the effort.

Hester gasped for the unexpected objection. She swept her protagonist with disinterested eyes. This close, the woman was even more lovely, even though the perfect face was now marred with lines of stress, fatigue and alarm. Golden blonde hair adorned the classically elegant features. Bewitching hazel eyes stared belligerently at Hester’s presence.

Green eyes clashed with soft brown orbs.

“Do not dare touch my son!” The woman leaned over the child, protectively.

“You are the one bringing harm to this little one, Madame...not I!” Hester found her voice, her temper spiking. “How dare you allow him to remain in this filth and degradation! What are y’ that y’ could?!”

The other woman gasped inarticulately. “Remove her from this chamber, Jarek! Instantly!”

“The child is the one who should be removed.” Hester arose, shaking with rage. “And you wonder why he has not recovered from his sickness?” She turned her wrath on the man who stood so solemnly across the way, his attention riveted and direct on the feuding females. “She is the sickness!”

The frantic woman rushed the steps to the man, her eyes pleading openly. “She ridicules our Gods, Jarek! He is better...Ian is better! Can you not see?” She pointed a hand to the child’s vicinity. “She must leave before she angers...”

“Stop!” Jarek’s tone echoed down the halls of this establishment. “He is not better!” Jarek had so hoped to find the boy improved but he had to face the truth. “You delude yourself, woman! He lumbered forth, grasping the small child in a death hold.

The man looked down to the tiny face for a long moment, his own features tortured.

The woman approached; terror filled eyes beseeched the man. “Return him to my care! Leave him, Jarek! He is mine!”

He lifted the boy, glaring down at the stricken face. “Do not interfere, Astrid.” His tone brooked no argument. He exited, his strides swift and sure.

Astrid’s wrath was instantly turned, the wild-eyed fury heatedly venomous in nature. “See what you have done!”

“See what *you* have done...you stupid, stupid woman!” Hester’s bitter accusation served to nullify her accuser’s animosity.

“Have you no common sense or decency what-so-ever?” Hester ranted, glancing again about the evil place in which the small boy had languished for God knows how long.

“Whatever the outcome of this night, Madame...I assure you, the blame will not set with me! You, yourself, have condemned your child! But God willing...” Hester closed her eyes, trying to master her rage, her voice tight. “In his mercy, he will guide me out of this place of demons and bring your child back to the light!”

Hester marched hastily away, her temper still high. She muttered sincere obscenities as she searched aimlessly through cavernous room after room.

“Here.” Seth McFarland stepped out of the shadows on the right, a few doors down, beckoning.

Hester rushed forward, eager to see her patient’s condition. She knelt beside the bed in which Jarek had placed the boy hastily uncovering layer upon layer of bedding as quickly as possible.

“Leave him!” An interloper rushed to prevent the feat, physically shoving Hester aside. “He must stay covered! He burns!”

Hester righted herself, her mouth setting. She arose, pushing hard on the other woman, sending Astrid careening away from the bed. “That the fever might consume him entirely? You hateful cow?” Hester pointed a warning finger. “Touch me again...and I will end you!”

Something in the girl’s eyes calmed Astrid Greyling. She remained by the hearth where her fall had landed her.

“Move this bed away from the hearth.” Hester took charge, pointing to a suitable spot. “Remove those tapestries from yon window. Allow fresh air in!”

Jarek was clearly torn, his wife’s pleading expression causing his own doubts to surface.

Seth moved the bed effortlessly, crossing to unhook the heavy drapes from the window. He sent his friend a reassuring look.

“Keep the blankets here.” Hester unburdened herself of her satchels, quickly assessing her needs. “He will fluctuate between chills and fever...” Her brow furrowed. “I shall need more light.” She returned to the child, stroking his head gently, her expression carefully placid. “Bring cool water. Did you put up ice last winter.”

Jarek nodded in the affirmative, his brow gravely set. He had not taken his eyes off his son’s face for any great amount of time.

“I need fresh clothing.” Hester unfastened ties hastily. “These reek of that chamber of horrors.” She muttered lowly. She lifted her hand. “My satchel, if you will.” She did not wish to leave the little one.

Jarek moved, retrieving the object, handing it over. He moved closer to his son, a protective specter hovering about.

Hester glanced up. “I said...I need more light.” She frowned superficially. “And water...*now!*”

“Obey her.” Jarek’s decision was cast.

Astrid arose, her fear for her son outweighing all else. “I will not! You murder our child!”

“Do not test me, woman!” Jarek barked angrily. “Not this night!”

Astrid settled down, whimpering despondently but she was wise enough to obey the threat.

“I will fetch the articles needed.” Seth secured the aid of an old servant in the room and in moments, Hester had all she required to begin her work.

She spared the mother a glance. Astrid huddled by the fire, a heap of misery and ensuing despondency. A part of Hester felt empathy for the woman.

Herbs and potions were mixed and administered. The listless boy lay quietly.

“There little one...something to help you fight the fever.” Hester held the tiny body close, fretting over the hot flesh. She pressed her lips to the heated forehead repeatedly. “Poor bairn.”

She carefully removed the heavy quilts, layer by layer, exposing the small body to the warm air of the room.

An old woman appeared at her side, startling Hester somewhat. A pitcher of water was sat on a nightstand with quiet efficiency.

The wrinkled old woman reminded the girl of Annie Fergeson. What Hester would not give to have Annie by her side now, but the true Healer had taught her pupil well.

Hester knew what must be done to aid the child.