



Cora woke up warm and happy, until she realized that her bed was cold and all it had been was a dream. Drawing in a deep breath to try to stifle the sudden tears that threatened, she sniffled once and then let out a small breathy chuckle. What a dream it had been! More real than the fantasies she had been plagued with after she had first seen Marcus' ship from the cliffs, this had been visceral, more realistic than any dream she could recall. And the sheer inventiveness of it! *Some ancient cult of the Magi... bah. What folderol!* She was a lovesick fool.

She flung her legs over the side of her bed and hopped onto the cold floor, yawning and stretching. She was determined to work hard today, finding some way to banish that man from her thoughts and dreams. Now, if only she could wake up without her pussy being slick and wet with wanting him, she might have a hope of success in forgetting him.

The sun was already high, no doubt her father would berate her for sleeping late. But she had lain for hours staring at the canopy above her and trying not to think about the night previous. Which of course meant that she could think of nothing but. Cora had not known it was possible to feel as though she was made of pure sensation, that her body was holy and pleasure divine.

No wonder she had dreamed of him and been in his arms though he was a madman and her future cursed. They could not possibly make a match. She should not even contemplate a future of such happiness.

Shaking her head clear of pestering thoughts, she dressed in a simple kirtle and apron, intent on working in the kitchen garden. But when she got down the stairs and to the kitchen, she finally realized from the laundry drying over the fires that it was raining outside. Opening the back door and watching the rain mist over the new leaves on the grapevines she blinked in a fair bit of shock.

"Oh deary, you are in a tizzy, aren't you? I can't remember the last time you didn't know what the weather would be long before any of the rest of us." Maggie wiped her hands on her own apron and walked over to watch the rain fall. "Don't worry, love. Your man will come back to you soon enough...rain or no."

Cora couldn't deny it. Maggie had known her too long. "How do you know for certain?"

"Pshaw, child. I saw how that man looks at you. I've seen the deadly sins often enough and a fair amount of lust in my day, though you wouldn't know to look at me now. But that wasn't just lust in those uncommonly strange eyes of his. That man loves you."

Cora closed her eyes, trying to ignore the hopeful surge in her blood. Maggie always wanted to make the best out of everything and everyone. She also ignored the voice within her begging her to whisk away the English rain so she could stick with her original plan and work herself into a dreamless sleep in the garden.

"Maggie, give me something to do." Her voice sounding just a touch desperate and whining.

"Ha! I thought never would I see the day I had a Searle child begging for chores. Still, best way to forget the itch is to stay occupied. I've got some young beans to sort and the bread starter to turn. Me old back complains too loudly about the task and I would be happy to leave it up to someone young and spry!"

*Ah bread.* Making bread could most certainly make her forget for at least a little while.

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She was elbow-deep in dough when her father stomped into the kitchen, soaking wet from the rain and a fair way toward working himself into a fine snit.

"Bloody Sir John! The man will not give up and I have no interest in offending the buffoon. He'd let his sheep over the fence and into my grapes and then where would we be! They'll be two more for supper, Maggie. Sir John and his new guest."

Cora wrinkled her nose and pushed off from her hands as much of the dough as she could, scooping the precious starter into the basket where it lived by the warm embers of the fire. "I thought you were to be checking the west fields, Papa. However did Sir John manage to finagle an invitation to supper?"

"It was a bad bit of luck. He was there with his houseguest, a Master Limber or Lumber or some such. Showing him the view from the high crags out to Sandown Bay. Why the man would be interested enough in such a thing to stand out in the rain for the view, I will never know. Maybe Sir John just didn't want to provide the man another meal and knew I would be out there this morn. That man would spend a fortune on fripperies but sets a sorry table, that's for certain. Let's do something impressive then, Maggie! Between you and my Cora, we'll show them both how a proper supper is done!"

Well, Cora had wanted more work. And this would fit the bill, if only she could stay in the kitchen for the meal...

"And don't you think of flying off and hiding, missy! I'll need you to be hostess, nice and cleaned up by the time they arrive. And talk some! It will keep them from drinking all the good vintages. Perhaps your wit will scare off the bloody sponge and we can finally have some peace!" He stomped out, muttering under his breath about being eaten out of house and home.

Cora sighed. Although she did not welcome another meal with Sir John and his no doubt uninteresting houseguest, she did remember with fondness a time when the house was full of guests and conversation, when her father would welcome good company. When her mother was still alive. Would this old house ever see those days again?

She set four rounds of the fresh dough to rise and be baked for supper. Fresh bread was always a treat and mayhap Sir John

would keep his mouth full long enough to stop his unwanted courtship. Perhaps it would all turn out well and Marcus' declaration of a formal courtship would convince the man to stop his unwanted attentions.

Somehow she doubted it.

"Maggie, give me something else to do. Anything?"

"Go track down your brother. I'm afraid he's off starin' at the sea again or mucking about in your father's books." Maggie went back to her stew.

Cora gave a halfhearted laugh, "Edgar has long surpassed Father or me at mathematics. I do wish we could engage a proper tutor for him to study on farther. But perhaps that would just encourage him toward things that cannot be."

How she wished that Edgar could have life at sea. He was a bit old now to start as an apprentice or cabin boy but he was as smart as a whip and full of enthusiasm. If only...

She cleaned her hands with the water pitcher and turned to watch Maggie as she tended a simmering pot with care and concentration, already planning all that would need to be done to finish a much expanded supper.

"Once you've tracked down your brother and made sure he'll be respectable, then find Sarah for me. I'll need a bit of help later on and you'd best not be getting dirty."

Cora looked at the pile of shelled peas, the rising bread, the peeled turnips and felt some small sense of accomplishment. At least she'd managed not to stand about like a lovestruck fool for an hour or two. She untied her apron and went in search of her brother.

Edgar wasn't in her father's study and neither was her father. She made a dash out to the stable to discover that Edgar had not had a horse saddled and that none of the stable lads had seen him walking out. Now thoroughly wet, she went up to her rooms for a dry kirtle, only to find that Edgar was sitting in his own chamber, staring out the warped window glass into the gray sky, looking toward the sea.

She knocked lightly upon his open door and he glanced at her, his eyes full of something eerily familiar. Resignation.

"Hello sister. How goes the day?" When had his voice become deeper? The voice of a man, not the child she had helped to rear?

She could have lied, told him that all was well. But for some reason she knew he would see right through that. "Not well. Trying to stay occupied, rather than dwell on the morass of my thoughts."

He gave her a half-smile. Their mother's smile. He, more than any of the children, resembled their mother, who he had never truly known. "I am not surprised. Master Mares left and after that argument I suppose you must question whether or not he will return."

She blushed to the roots of her hair but did not deny what he obviously knew. "Does Father..."

"Nay, you were mostly quiet and Papa takes a few nips of his brandy to sleep. I awoke early and happened to hear him leaving."

There was an awkward pause. Cora sat down on Edgar's bed, looking at the sketches of ships that papered the walls, from Spanish galleons to the nimble English privateers to the wide Dutch merchantmen.

"You're wrong, I think. He will come back." Edgar looked out the window once again. "If he's half as smart as he looks, he wouldn't give you up. And you shouldn't let him." He swung back suddenly, piercing her with a stare. "Be happy, Cora. I know that it's hard for you, but be happy. Don't worry about me or Papa or anything. I know my duty but I would not have you stay because of me."

"He was not asking me to leave. He..." What could she say? What had she done? Marcus had simply asked for her love, her trust. And she had refused him, not even given him a chance. "He wanted something I was not yet prepared to give."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "You weren't that quiet, Cora."

She pursed her lips and gave him her best elder sister glare. "My heart and my hand."

Edgar rolled his eyes heavenward. "Ah, leave it to you to... You are so lucky. You love it here and a fellow strolls in, practically designed for you and you manage to muck it up." He snorted derisively. "If I had the chance to have what I wanted, I would take it."

He stared out the window again and she knew from his tone she would get no more out of him. "There are guests for supper tonight. Sir John and a guest of his. Be ready and somewhat tidy, please? For Papa?"

He nodded short and sharp and she stood, wishing that she could embrace him like she had when he was a little boy. As she reached the door, she heard him whisper. "Be happy, Cora. Try."

She smiled, wishing it was just that easy.

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Cora was still in no mood for company and certainly no mood to deal with obsequious Sir John and his guest. But she was the hostess of her father's home and so the family shared a Friday's supper with Sir John and one Master Nigel Lambert. Sir John leered at her as usual, the disappearance of her erstwhile suitor having made him a good deal braver in his "appreciation" of her assets. Cora contemplated the need to start carrying a small dagger on her person, or her behind would be covered with purple pinch marks in a week's time.

Perhaps a dagger was truly not a bad idea. Sir John was one thing but the way Master Lambert stared at her— It set her skin to prickling, as though a bad wind was coming. The kind that started fires in the forest and made men speak of ghosts walking the earth. There was a hunger in his gaze, not for her body but for something she could not name. As though he wanted to consume her very soul.

Sir John noticed nothing and her father seemed slightly uncomfortable but nothing more. Only Edgar seemed equally disturbed by the silent brooding man who shared their supper. As it was Friday, there was no meat, but fresh cockles, fish stew, broiled mackerel, a stout bean potage, peas, turnips, the first of the season's strawberries, honeyed walnuts, yellow cheese and her warm fresh bread. Sir John ate his fill of all but the bean potage, as he was deeply suspicious of anything that smacked of the vegetable, except of course for the onion, which he had a devout fondness for. Such insights were the breadth and the breath of his conversation, which he kept up throughout the evening with little effort or attention on anyone else's part.

Master Lambert was silent, except for acknowledging the occasional question from Sir John or more rarely, Master Searle. Cora had the oddest feeling that her father was trying to pounce on the man and get him to say something unguarded. Master Searle interrupted Sir John's treatise on the best way to stew lambs' brains for just such a parry, "Master Lambert, I was quite curious as to the project you are working on. Sir John said you are here on behalf of the Navy. Do you perhaps know a Master Mares? Marcus Mares?"

Cora felt a chill in her bones and she wished fervently that her father had not mentioned her lover to this man. Lambert looked up from his trencher with wide, cold blue eyes and stared at her father just a moment too long for comfort. "No, sir. I am not familiar with the man."

Cora wished she was sitting closer to her father, rather than on the opposite end of the table. If she were closer, she could give him a good swift kick in the shins to shut him up. "Really! He is also involved in a project for the Navy. Setting up a warning system of sorts. Really very clever. I'm sure the two of you will meet, as you both seem to require going up and down the coast."

Lambert's eyes narrowed and Cora was certain he clutched his eating knife a bit harder. "How...why do you say that?"

"Oh, well, some of my men have seen you out on the cliffs, sketching away. And you've hired some of the boys from the village to carry you out in rowboats to take soundings. It is very hard to keep a small village like this from talking about your activities, Master Lambert. You are far too interesting."

Cora felt her stomach drop at the look Lambert leveled at her father. She thought she would freeze when that look traveled to her. "Young Mistress Searle. Sir John tells me that you have quite a number of swains. I can see why, you are quite a beauty."

Instead of a blush rising to her cheeks at the compliment, she felt herself drain to an unnatural pallor. She muttered a quiet, "Thank you," for the compliment but her father could not let such praise lay still.

"Oh ho, Master Lambert! You would not want to give Sir John competition for the lovely lady. He's had an eye on my daughter for years."

Lambert gave a small smile that did not reach his eyes. "I can assure you, Master Searle, that if I settled my mind to have something, then I would not dither about for years. I would have it."

Cora sank her nails into her knees under the table. She knew her complexion must now be ghostly pale.

Sir John sputtered in some approximation of laughter at the insult but mostly the echoing silence reigned. Edgar looked at her over the goblet he gripped in his hands, his eyes full of fear but more than a little bit of fierce protectiveness. Her father may not be as sensitive to the threat but Edgar at least understood that Nigel Lambert was no one to take lightly. He was deadly serious.

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Cora thought that given the disturbing nature of supper, she would certainly have similarly disturbing dreams. But she actually fell asleep quickly and slept well. In the morning, she did not even notice the breeze in her room or remember the sensation of being held through the night in comforting arms.

The weather had cleared and so she spent the day in the gardens, tending young vegetable plants and reveling in the simple peace of spring blossoms. May Day was next week and on the Isle it was a festival of flowers and one of her favorite holidays. As she knelt in the midst of the fragrant herbs, she imagined herself strolling arm in arm with Marcus through the happy crowded town square, dancing and laughing under the maypole, even jumping through the ancient Beltane fires at night. A wicked thrill ran through her at what would surely follow. Beltane was still a day of power, even if its ancient roots had been covered over with religious piety. The day was still a fertility festival and every year Cora had snuck out to watch the fires, she had felt the throb of her magic within her, a thrumming need for something she could not identify.

Now that she knew true passion, May Day would be almost unbearable with wanting a man who would be miles away. One who may already have forgotten her. She sighed loudly. If it meant that he was safe and happy, she would suffer gladly. But she would not be able to forget him so easily.

Cora attacked the unlucky weeds with particular vigor, angry though she could not say at what. Every head of burdock seemed to have the sallow staring face of Nigel Lambert, accusing and condemning her, making her life a misery because of the way she had been born. She had made no secret pact with the Devil. She had not broken every commandment, or drunk the blood of innocent infants. She did not deserve to be cursed!

When she came back into the house bearing a basket of parsley, spring onions and sage, she was muddy from head to toe.

Maggie did not ask about the tear tracks staining her cheeks. Cora could not truly have explained them. She might have tried to claim her courses had come early but Maggie would know better, as she oversaw Sarah and the laundry as well as the kitchen. No, self-pity would be the only cause Maggie would see and she would simply cackle.

"I am quite fatigued, Maggie. I will not be down for supper." Cora escaped to her rooms, locking the door and shedding her dirty clothing. She stood nude in the light of the late afternoon. Pouring water from the clay pitcher into a shallow basin, she wet a cloth and drew it over her sunburned skin, the sting of the burn bringing more tears to her eyes, tears she had no will to fight. The cooling cloth was no substitute for the lover's hands she needed and longed for. Even trying to touch herself, an activity that had long brought her relief, was unsatisfactory now. When she was clean, she simply crawled under the soft sheets and heavy blankets and let her tears flow until sleep claimed her.

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She stood once again behind a hedge of witch hazel, contemplating the man walking south on the Ryde road. This time was slightly different from the first though. Not only was she completely naked to the elements, the soft breeze tightening her nipples to hard points but the man walking flagrantly down the highway was also wonderfully nude. Well toned calves, hard muscular thighs, his cock proudly on display already half hard as his golden-brown eyes searched the woods with uncanny accuracy.

She knew she could not hide for long, nor did she want to. She wanted to run her hands through the untidy mess of his white-streaked black hair, kiss the sun-baked lines on his face, be held in the strength of his tanned arms. Ignoring the sting and scrapes from the branches, she walked around the bush, smiling at Marcus while appraising him from head to muddy toes.

"Your footwear has improved."

He grinned back, looking her over just as thoroughly, making her shiver with need. His cock revealed as much of his thoughts as did her blushes.

His voice was deep and rough when he returned her quip. "You do not like my fine red boots? You must own that they are an improvement over what I wore the first time I traversed this road. And they've been kind to my poor feet the rest of the journey, though I hate every step that takes me away from you."

She stared at him a moment, realizing how very odd this dream was. It must be a dream, for she could not remember how she could have ended up naked on the edge of the North Forest. She was certain that in her fantasies, she would not have him speak so. It was almost as though it was him, not a dream of him. Cora was not certain which she would prefer.

"No matter how comfortable those garish things may be, I prefer to see the feet they cover." Perhaps not the most witty of retorts but her mind was all a muddle. And it was true. He did have handsome feet, not horned or furry, just strong and sturdy. She never thought a man's feet could be attractive but his were. She wanted to hold them in her lap and rub the soles after a long day. Then, to hear him sigh in pleasure as he relaxed, then yell in surprise as she leaned over to kiss the tip of his cock.

She blinked, trying to understand how she could fall into a lust-filled reverie in the middle of a dream. He smile quirked sideways and amusement made his eyes bright and showed off the dimple in his left cheek. He must have suspected what she was thinking of. "It is a pleasure to see your...feet again as well. And the lovely legs that rise above...and..." He took a step forward and her heart fluttered.

If this was a fantasy, she would be more than happy to fuck him right here and now, in the mud of the road under the open sky with nary a care in the world. But something made her hesitant. Something at the edge of her vision that flickered and made her nervous. And the simple fact that he was not the brash demanding lover of her past dreams, now he was the complex man she longed to know body and soul. Even if this was a figment of her imagination, she wanted privacy to be able to explore his body and his mind.

Marcus reached out, closing the gap between them not with a fervent kiss but with the gentlest touch, cupping her cheek in his hand. She leaned slightly against him, reveling in the warmth of him and his unhurried tenderness. With his other hand, he took hers and tugged her back toward the forest, unconsciously taking the same route by which she had sprinted away from him only a few days previously.

His fingered entwined with hers, they walked slowly through the dappled shade, catching glimpses of each other's nude body but keeping apart out of an unspoken need for time.

"What troubles you, *ashavi*? Talk to me, sweet one. I would know anything and everything of your life, your thoughts, your dreams..." His voice pitched lower and his eyes drifted over her body to rest on the peaks of her nipples but suddenly those eyes closed and his gaze returned to her face. He seemed determined not to make the first move toward realizing their passion. It would be easier to simply have wild sex on the forest floor and awaken, rather than having to talk about her innermost thoughts. And yet it would be such a relief to speak.

"We do not need to speak of us, our connection. Tell me of your childhood and I will tell you of mine. For that is where everything begins, does it not?"

Before she could think of stopping herself, words poured forth, with Marcus listening attentively even when she seemed lost in another world.

"Papa and Edgar and Edmund worked hard managing the vineyard, tending the grapes with all the care that Mama had given us when she was alive. But Mama knew I was different and impressed upon Papa that he let me be if I could be spared. So as often as I would dare, I ran far from the vines and fields and clung to the coast, feeling the salt air touch my lips. The beauty of the sea