

~ Second Son ~

by [A. K. Naten](#)

Summary: A Medieval-era tale that follows the story of two people who are brought together under less than ideal circumstances, and must learn to adapt to each other, as well as their new lives. Deception, heartache, and twists of fate complicate feelings and alter futures, and relationships struggle between bouts of love and despair.

Comments/Disclaimer(s): This is another one of my attempts at a 'period piece'. I dunno the exact timeframe we're talking about here - Middle Ages, that's all I can say for sure. I've tried to be as historically accurate as possible, but since I'm only an 'armchair' history scholar at best, I'm sure there are many inaccuracies and discrepancies. Just try to ignore that if you can; I like to use that 'creative license' stuff where necessary.

This is a mature piece that depicts a sexual relationship between consenting adult women. There are scenes and discussions of sexual unpleasanties as well as violence. If you know anything about medieval life, then you know that women often weren't treated very well. If you are under 18 years of age and/or this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you reside, consider yourself hereby scolded. If depictions of this nature disturb you, then stop reading and bail now. This can be considered an 'Uber' story because some characters may loosely resemble two chicks from a now-defunct TV show.

This is a work-in-progress... an unfinished, rough draft sort of thing, really, so please keep that mind and be patient with me while I continue to work (slowly) on it. I debated putting it up at all, because it just seemed to be a little too 'different', and... well... I wasn't even sure that I liked it very much myself. ??? Plus, I really don't like to post in parts, especially if it's unfinished... it just bothers me... Okay, maybe you should just ignore me and read...

Rating: R / NC-17

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PART ONE

Chapter One

The dark-haired young man had a smug, satisfied grin on his face as he walked through Weldon Manor with a slight spring in his step. His long, wiry legs carried him with an awkward gait as he made his way through the large, fortified manor and headed outside in search of his brother. He knew that his younger sibling would either be outside in the stables, fussing with one of his

prized stallions, or over at the military barracks, carousing or sparring with the guardsmen or some of the foot soldiers. Entering the stables, the young man smirked as he spied a familiar, dark-haired figure brushing down a cream-colored horse.

He walked up behind his brother, leaning on the wall of the stable, "Brushing, brushing... you're always brushing and pampering this blasted beast of yours." Aldred said without greeting.

The dark head turned and light blue eyes regarded the young man coolly. "This 'beast' is a trusted friend and deserves to be pampered, brother... not that you would understand that in any regard." Anton responded, lifting an eyebrow at his always irritating elder sibling.

Aldred laughed, "You count an animal among your friends? How very *provincial* of you, Anton!"

The antagonistic banter between the two brothers was common, and as always, Anton didn't refrain from being pulled into a battle of words.

"At least I can say that I have friends... unlike you, brother dear." Anton said, smiling with false sweetness as he resumed his brushing.

"Pah," Aldred sniffed, "I don't need friends. Especially now." He walked around Anton, dragging a hand along the horse's smooth, shiny coat as he drew in closer to the younger man. "Do you want to know *why*?" He asked, smirking again.

Anton rolled his eyes and sighed, pausing his brush strokes. "Alright... 'why, Aldred'?"

"Father has finally chosen my bride-to-be." Aldred said, a broad, smug smile filling his sharp-featured face.

"'Finally'?" don't you mean 'again'?" Anton asked sarcastically, shooting his brother a sideways glance.

"No, no... this is it. This time the girl will be my bride. Father said the deal is good as sealed."

"Deal? What happened to the 'deal' that was supposed to be struck with Viscount Langeley?"

Aldred huffed, "Pah! Langeley was practically a peasant... he didn't have nearly the money nor holdings that he claimed. And besides, his daughter isn't as fetching as this new one."

Anton rolled his eyes again and shook his head at his brother's comments, then turned his back and resumed his brushing. "Well, congratulations, brother; I hope it all works out for you." He said, his voice intentionally flat and monotone to prove his lack of awe.

"Anton!" Aldred scolded, "Come on! Aren't you curious? Don't you want to know who she is?"

Anton sighed again and pushed away from the horse, crossing his arms. "Very well, Aldred..."

who is the lucky wench?"

Aldred glared at the younger man, "She's *not* a wench... she's *glorious!* The *most* beautiful girl in the realm!"

"If I recall, that's what you said about Celene of Langeley." Anton dead-panned.

"Oh no, no," Aldred shook his head forcefully, "Lady Gwynneth is much better than Celene. Earl Leopold of Clarendon has vast land holdings and numerous knights sworn to his service. It's a much better alliance than Langeley. Father feels certain."

Anton's brows frowned in question, "Father feels we need an ally for war purposes?"

"Not necessarily *war*, Anton. He just feels that it would not be unwise to align ourselves with someone who possesses a reasonable amount of strength, that's all."

Anton considered the words for a moment, filing them away for later contemplation. "So... Lady Gwynneth, hmm?" Anton asked, an eyebrow creeping upwards again.

"Indeed. 'Lady Gwynneth of Clarendon'... isn't it a lovely name? ...A beautiful name for an equally beautiful woman." Aldred said, his chest puffed out in pride.

"You've already met her?"

"No."

"Well then, how can you be so certain of her beauty?"

"Father said she's reported to be very lovely. 'Young, pure and beautiful' is what the rumors say."

"Ha," Anton sniffed, "Rumors are rarely true, Aldred. You may find yourself dreadfully disappointed when your wedding day arrives and you lift your bride's veil to find a gawky, pimple-faced child staring at you."

Aldred shook his head and made a clucking noise with his tongue, "Poor Anton... of course you would react negatively to this news. You won't ever be able to experience your own wedded bliss, so you can only stew and fret over mine." He gloated, smirking at the younger man. "I suppose you'll always be envious of me for that, won't you?"

Anton turned and regarded Aldred darkly, "Envious? No, brother," Anton said, leveling a warning glare at his sibling. "I feel many things for you, but envy is not one of them."

The two young men glared at each other for a moment, each harboring his own thoughts and feelings on their circumstances and their perpetual sibling rivalry.

Aldred finally broke the spell and smiled falsely again, "Father intends to make the formal

announcement at dinner these evening," he said, slapping Anton harshly on the back. Before he walked away, however, he turned back to his younger brother, "I'll tell him that you'll be in attendance." He said as he exited the stables, leaving Anton alone again.

Anton could only stare after his older brother, hating the way the Aldred treated and condescended to him. The young man knew that his older brother was right, though... he would never experience the satisfaction of marriage. Anton would never have a woman by his side, children at his feet, nor a family and a manor to call his own.

He would never have this, because, unlike Aldred, he wasn't really his father's son.

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Anton and Aldred called Weldon Manor their home. It was a small but wealthy fiefdom that sat peacefully along the coast, and it was ruled by their father, the Marquess Edgar. Edgar of Weldon was an intelligent mountain of a man who governed his people with fairness and high expectations. He was respected and loved, and his kingdom flourished quietly. Medieval life at Weldon was good.

Unfortunately, many years ago, the small kingdom was a vassal that served the cruel and tyrannical King Wesley. Wesley of Rencor was a former warlord who won the throne by defeating King Joffrey a little over two decades ago in a bloody battle that lasted for months and ended with the death of Joffrey and the devastation of nearly his entire family. Wesley usurped the throne and announced himself King of all the lands, daring anyone to challenge him for it. Of course none of the smaller fiefdoms had the means nor the manpower to fight against the powerful Wesley, so they were forced to submit to him. Wesley immediately began his rule by sending his armies to all the smaller manors and fiefdoms in the realm and demanding gold, silver, weapons - anything and everything that would increase his wealth, power and holdings. He also made a point of taking 'prisoners' from his new vassals; specifically, the female children of the ruling nobles.

Wesley had several sons and numerous brothers and half-brothers, so he decided that the best way to protect his throne and secure the loyalty and allegiance of his vassals was to take their noble women and marry them to his own blood. Sometimes he didn't even bother to marry them; sometimes he just sent the young ladies to serve as concubines or servants in the homes of his children and family members. Horrible stories circulated around the realm concerning the fate and treatment of the young female nobility that Wesley forcibly abducted. It seemed that Wesley and his sons and brothers took great pleasure in using and abusing the young women, and it also seemed that no one could stop them.

Every noble in the realm feared the day when their daughters reached their teenage years, for that was when they'd be snatched away, sent to a life of abusive servitude. People began sending their daughters away as early as possible. They'd marry them off to knights when they were just children, or send them to live with commoners - anything to preserve their lives and protect them from Wesley and his cruel brood. This is how Anton came to meet his destiny.

Marquess Edgar and Marchioness Marina of Weldon had a son one year after their betrothal. They named him Aldred, and deemed that he would one day take over Weldon and rule it as his own. One year later, the realm was being overthrown by Wesley and his forces, and Edgar found himself subjugated by a man who was feared as much as he was hated. Only a few months after Wesley's takeover, Lady Marina became pregnant again. Edgar was thrilled, but once they heard about Wesley's abduction and forced servitude of young female nobles, both Edgar and Marina prayed that they would have another son.

When the child was at last born, Edgar and Marina were dismayed to find that they were the parents of a baby girl - a strong, vibrant baby girl, but a female, nonetheless. They knew that they had to do something drastic. Once the babe's birth was announced to the whole kingdom, the news would reach Wesley, and the girl would be marked as a future possession for the ruthless King and his heirs. Edgar decided that it would never happen. He would never give his daughter up to Wesley and his monstrous offspring, and he would not send her away nor marry her off as a child. He would not deny her the life she was entitled to. So he made a decision. They would announce the birth of a second son, and they would raise the child as a boy. He would be called Anton - named for Marina's Spanish mother, Antonia. It was a risk, but they decided that it was one they had to take. No child of theirs was going to be snatched up or given away.

Anton grew quickly, unaware that she was any different from her brother Aldred and, in fact, proving many times over that she was much stronger and braver than he was. It almost seemed as though she really should have been born a boy. She looked very much like Aldred, and in her male attire, no one could tell the difference. When Anton was nine summers old, Marina and Edgar sat the two children down and explained to them how and why Anton was different, and why it was absolutely necessary for them to keep it a secret. The two siblings seemed to understand, although Aldred made it a point thereafter to tease Anton whenever they were alone. As they grew older, both sons received constant lectures and coaching from Edgar as he explained their roles at Weldon and their responsibilities for the future. Anton understood that her role was mostly just to appear as the second son, but as she matured into a young woman, she increasingly began to have trouble with the deception and the confusion that dwelled inside her.

Nevertheless, she grew into a fetching young 'man'. Tall, strong, and athletic, Anton showed great prowess with a sword as well as the bow and arrow. Her warrior skills were so impressive, in fact, that her father placed her in charge of his small army of soldiers when she was just eighteen years of age. Despite her age and hidden gender, Anton showed great aptitude for leadership, and her troops respected her a great deal. When the day finally came when all the feudal kingdoms banded together and rose up to overthrow King Wesley, Anton lead her men into battle. The 'War of Insurrection', as it came to be known, was a long, bloody conflict, but the fiefdoms persevered and won their freedom. The former King Joffrey's only remaining son, Joffrey III, was reinstated as the rightful ruler, and all was right in the realm once again.

At twenty-one years of age, Anton was renowned as a fierce warrior and highly capable military commander. After being knighted by King Joffrey, Anton purchased her own small manor along the coast and spent most of her time there. Wextony Manor certainly wasn't Weldon, but it was the place Anton now preferred to call 'home'. Since the task of filling her father's shoes was put upon Aldred's shoulders, Anton was free to live a simple, quiet life at Wextony, away from

everyone's prying eyes. She knew that she would not marry, but figured it was a small price to pay for the luxury of being able to live her life the way she pleased rather than being saddled with the responsibilities of ruling her father's house. She gladly left that task to Aldred. Being alone suited Anton, and she enjoyed her freedom.

Aldred, on the other hand, spent most of his young adulthood shadowing his father while learning the trade of being the next Marquess of Weldon. The time that he didn't spend with his father he spent drinking and visiting ladies of ill repute. It was a well known fact that Aldred frequented brothels, and he didn't bother to deny it. Lord Edgar did his best to discourage his son from carrying on in such a disrespectful manner, but Aldred didn't seem to care. He didn't seem to care about much, in fact. Unlike most of the noble sons of the realm, Aldred did not fight in the War of Insurrection, and he had no interest in earning the respect and loyalty of his army, nor his people. Aldred was proving to be a very incapable leader of limited intellect, and Edgar worried greatly about the future of his small kingdom.

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Anton was fashionably late to the lavish dinner her parents had thrown in honor of Aldred's engagement announcement. She had been staying at Weldon for the past week, her father beckoning her from Wextony by saying he needed to discuss plans for the future with her. She was somewhat disappointed to find that the 'future plans' seemed to only consist of announcing Aldred's betrothal, and she planned to return home as soon as possible.

After dinner was over and the engagement announcement was made, Anton promptly disappeared, eager to return to Wextony and escape the forced excitement that surrounded Aldred tonight. Sensing his younger child's disgust, the Marquess sent for Anton in the hopes of speaking with her before she disappeared.

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Anton approached her father's chambers knowing that she would be in for a tongue lashing. She couldn't help her disinterest and inattentiveness at dinner; watching Aldred's drunken, conceited arrogance made her ill. Anton drew a deep breath and knocked loudly on the heavy wooden door. Hearing her father's deep voice as he instructed her to enter, she swung the door open. Her father was reclined in a large chair, his once robust frame now withered and weak as he got on in years and fought one illness after another. Still, he smiled warmly at her as she stepped inside.

"Anton," Edgar said with a grin, "come in and sit with me for a while." The door was closed behind Anton and Edgar watched her as she walked in and took a seat.

She was such a striking figure. He wondered if she ever resented him for the fate he forced upon her at her birth. It really was amazing that she'd gotten away with her secret for so many years. It almost seemed as though it were meant to be, in many ways. Stern-faced and tall, Anton had a powerful, commanding presence without even trying. She carried herself with grace and dignity, yet within the deceptively lean figure lay the strength and cunning of a skillful warrior. She had a face that was chiseled and fierce, yet subtly beautiful; the strong features of her father coupled

with the piercing blue eyes of her mother made her equal parts intimidating and alluring. She was not overly masculine in appearance, but she certainly wasn't feminine either. Most importantly, she was intelligent, level-headed, and brave. She had the respect and admiration that Aldred could never and would never garner from the people. She was the heir Edgar should have had... oh how he wished she had been his first-born son.

Edgar forced the thoughts from his mind as the servant poured wine for the two men before being dismissed. "I assume you'll be leaving at dawn?" Edgar asked, taking a sip of his wine while regarding Anton with steady gray eyes.

"Yes. I have no reason to stay on here... do I?" Anton returned carefully.

"Actually," the Marquess began, placing his cup on a nearby table. "I'd like you to stay so that you could meet Earl Leopold of Clarendon and his son, Gerrod."

Anton frowned, her curiosity immediately piqued, "When are they coming?" She leaned forward, placing her cup on the table as well. "And why should I meet with them? Isn't Aldred the only one they should be concerned with?"

Edgar sighed. He dreaded going over all this with Anton. She surely wouldn't understand. "I plan to arrange Aldred's wedding as soon as possible."

Again Anton frowned, "Why? Why such a hurry?"

"Anton," Edgar paused, looking into his daughter's concerned eyes. "Daughter... I am not well."

Anton's face tightened. She knew that her father had been ill recently. Her mother had told her that her father's health was declining to the point that he had to be assisted nearly everywhere he went. Still, Anton thought that he was carrying on most of his duties as usual. However, scanning her eyes scanning over her father's face now, she could see the weariness evident in his gray depths.

Anton stood up and walked over to the fireplace. "Why will Aldred's marriage help your illness, father?" She said as she turned around to face the older man, suddenly angry that he was, apparently, preparing to turn everything over to her imbecilic brother. "And why have you chosen this Earl of Clarendon fellow anyway? Aldred told me that he has virtually no money, only many knights sworn to fealty. Why must we be so concerned with military might?" Anton spat the questions out quickly, her piercing eyes demanding answers.

"It is always wise to be allied with someone of power, Anton, you know that. We aren't at risk now, but you know the rumors that abound regarding Wesley of Rencor's sons and their constant threats that they'll return one day and war with us again." Edgar reasoned. "Earl Leopold is not very wealthy, that's true, but he has vast land holdings, a large army, and his son Gerrod is a knight in his own right. He needs our financial assistance, and we need his military reinforcement. With our combined forces, we'll make an ideal alliance."

Anton turned away from her father, considering his words. "I still don't understand the need for a rushed marriage and how that affects your health."

"I want to be prepared."

"Prepared for what?!"

"I want Aldred to be married and settled when the time comes for him to be Marquess. I need to know that everything is in place before my time comes."

Anton snorted, "Aldred will *never* be settled. He will *never* be prepared to take over. No alliance can solve the problem of his incompetence, father."

Edgar sighed, "I know this, Anton. And this is why I want you to be acquainted with Earl Leopold and his son. I need them to realize that Aldred is not the sole representation of our house." Anton began to scowl at her father. "I feel they will be reassured once they meet you."

The dark, angry look that appeared on Anton's face told Edgar that he was pushing his luck. He'd hoped to win Anton's support without demanding it of her, but judging from the look in her eyes now, he wasn't so sure. "I'm sorry to make such a request of you, daughter, but I need your help... just as Aldred will need your help in the future."

Anton made a noise of disgust and shook her head, her anger bubbling close to the surface. She walked briskly toward the chamber door, turning to look back at her father once she reached it, "I'm leaving for Wextony at sunrise. Send for me when the Earl and his son arrive and I shall make an attempt to come. But keep in mind that I do this *only* for you, father, not for Aldred." With that, Anton disappeared.

Edgar sighed again, hating himself for forcing yet another task on his daughter. He knew she was angry with him and truthfully, he couldn't blame her. However, despite their occasional bouts of disagreement, Anton was devoted to her father and would do nearly anything he asked. Edgar knew that Anton was well aware of why he asked for her assistance now. They both knew that Aldred needed every bit of help and reinforcement he could garner, and the only one Edgar truly trusted was Anton. The ailing Marquess just hoped that his daughter would come through for him in the end.

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Chapter Two

"Oh, Milady, look! There 'tis!" The ladies maid pointed out the window of the carriage to the looming image of Weldon Manor in the distance.

Lady Gwynneth of Clarendon strained her neck to see the stone manor that would be her new home. "Good heavens... it is big, isn't it?" she marveled. Although she was nervous about her

reasons for coming to Weldon, she was grateful that the long journey from Clarendon was finally nearing its end. The winter weather made the trip miserable and dreadfully cold, and she could hardly wait to have a warm bath and sleep in a real bed.

Her home in Clarendon was small, and she was eager to see Weldon and experience the wealth and lavishness that it reportedly enjoyed. Weeks ago, her father and brother had visited with the Marquess of Weldon and her husband-to-be, Aldred, and they had told her that Marquess Edgar was indeed a wealthy man. Although her father assured her that the alliance with the House of Weldon would be a good one, her brother Gerrod told her in private that the Lord Aldred was a brash and arrogant fop who spent all his time drinking and bragging about his exploits with women. The Marquess had a second son also, but Gerrod only said that he seemed standoffish and snobbish. Gwynneth and Gerrod didn't get along with one another, and the fact that he made it a point to tell her these things worried her intensely. She wasn't sure if he was just saying it to make her fret, or if he was being sincere. One thing she knew for certain was that she would be marrying the young Lord Aldred of Weldon very shortly, and there was nothing she could do to change that. Her fears and misgivings didn't matter in the slightest; she was merely the vessel to join their houses and bear the offspring that would link them forever. She wished, not for the first time, that she had been born a boy instead of a girl.

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As nightfall approached Weldon Manor, Lady Gwynneth rested in her guest chambers, still struggling to get warm while reflecting back on the harrowing first two days at her new home. With the wedding only five days away, she was filled with anxiety and dread, and the activities that buzzed all around her in preparation for the big event made her head swim.

Weldon was gorgeous - her father had been right about that - and the Marquess and Marchioness were gracious hosts. The manor itself sat high on a hill and overlooked a picturesque countryside of rich, fertile farmland. Inside, the House of Weldon enjoyed luxuries that she experienced little of at her former home. Fine tapestries and furniture filled every room, sumptuous, extravagant meals were served every day, and there seemed to be a servant or handmaid to cater to her every whim and desire. The one blemish on this otherwise picture-perfect setting was her husband-to-be.

Aldred of Weldon was positively repulsive.

It wasn't that he was ugly or offensive-looking, he was just obnoxious and pompous, and he always smelled of alcohol. Upon their very first meeting, Aldred made rude, lecherous comments to her, and the sinister look in his eyes chilled Gwynneth right to her very core. She knew that it wasn't so unusual for a man to treat a woman in such a way, and in all honesty, she had been expecting such; but there was something about Aldred that truly frightened her.

"Would ye like me to brush yer hair now, Milady?" The soft lilting voice of her ladies maid pulled Gwynneth from her reverie.

"Yes, Alice, thank you."

As Alice began brushing the long blonde locks, Gwynneth resolved to tell herself that she simply had to accept her fate. Her role was to marry Aldred and bear his children, period. She could not escape it, and it didn't matter if she liked it or not. She could only hope that she might find something or someone at Weldon to occupy her time and brighten her days. At the moment, the only friend she had was Alice.

Gwynneth closed her eyes, enjoying her handmaid's gentle ministrations, when a knock sounded at her door. Alice opened it and Gwynneth was shocked to see Aldred standing there.

"My Lord," Gwynneth said, unable to hide the surprise in her voice.

Aldred boldly stepped into the room, coming to stand in front of the petite blonde beauty who would belong to him in a matter of days. "Lady Gwynneth," Aldred said, reaching out to take her hand and place a wet kiss upon it. "Forgive me for barging in like this, but," he paused, fighting to quell the sinister grin on his lips, "I wondered if I might have a word with you," he said, then turned to glare at Alice. "...Alone."

Gwynneth's heart leapt into her throat and she shot a nervous glance at her ladies maid. Alice gave her a wide-eyed look, knowing full well that it was highly inappropriate for Aldred to be here like this before the wedding. If anyone were to find out, Lady Gwynneth's reputation would be severely tarnished, and the whole wedding could, in fact, be negated. Alice knew that her mistress was already frightened of the abrasive, crude young man, but what could she do? Gwynneth nodded at Alice to leave, and the maid did so, though unwillingly.

When the door closed behind the ladies maid, Aldred's lips twisted subtly in glee. This would be a cinch.

"W-What is it that you need, My Lord?" Gwynneth nervously asked, her heart thundering in her chest at the strange predicament she now found herself in. She could smell the overpowering odor of wine on Aldred as soon as he entered her room, and it sent a shiver of dread through her.

Aldred sighed and sat himself upon Gwynneth's bed, earning another silent, shocked look from the blonde, though he was unaware. He then put on his best pathetic act and looked up to face his unsuspecting bride-to-be. "Sweet Lady Gwynneth," he began, staring at the young woman with sad, earnest eyes, "I am frightened."

Gwynneth regarded him skeptically, "Frightened, My Lord? Of what?" she asked.

Aldred looked away, his face a perfect picture of despair, "Frightened that I may not be... the man you need me to be."

Gwynneth frowned at him. *Whatever is he talking about?* she wondered.

Before she could say anything else, Aldred turned back to her, "You see, dear Lady, my act of bravery and arrogance is but a ruse... a ruse to cover the truth."

"The truth?"

"Yes... the truth that... that I am just a pathetic fool of a man who is sorely lacking in the experience and wisdom of how to love a Lady such as yourself." Aldred lied, laying it on as thick as he could. "I fear that I won't be able to fulfill my role, and that you will find me unfit for my husbandly duties."

Gwynneth was shocked by Aldred's words, and did not know how to respond. "Well, My Lord, I-I doubt very much that you will be unable to fulfill your... duties." She stammered unsteadily. She didn't know what to say to him - what could she say? "I'm a bit nervous myself, but I'm sure that everything will be fine once the wedding is over and the pressure eases." She offered, trying to sound upbeat and reassure the young man.

Aldred's dark eyes glistened as he looked up at her and smiled, "My dear, sweet Lady... you are as wise as you are beautiful." He practically sang the words to her and reached out to place another sloppy kiss upon her hand.

Gwynneth blushed at his gesture and darted her eyes away. Her heart was pounding harshly and every hair felt like it was standing on end. Something in Aldred's eyes was unnerving her tremendously, and she fought to quell the nauseous feeling that churned in her stomach. He seemed different than before, and though she wanted to believe his claim that his obnoxious behavior was just an act, something inside her told her that it didn't make complete sense. If he truly were unsure and fearful, he wouldn't have had the brashness to come to her like this, would he? The confusing thoughts were dashed away when Gwynneth felt Aldred's hands grasping her upper arms.

"Dearest Gwynneth... I believe I have a solution that will ease both our minds and lay our fears to rest." Aldred said, his voice suddenly low and husky.

Gwynneth looked into his blackened orbs, her heart increasing its thumping tempo tenfold. "M-My Lord?" she whispered uncertainly.

Aldred continued to stare at her, a malevolent gleam in his eyes. He spun her around and sat her down upon her bed, making her gasp aloud. When he quickly grabbed her nightgown and slid it upwards while pushing her knees apart, she yelped aloud.

"My Lord! What are you doing?!" Gwynneth squawked, grabbing her gown and trying to push it back down.

Aldred grabbed her wrists and wedged himself in-between her knees, forcing them open farther. "Now, now, my dear Lady... you would be wise not fight me." He said, his upper lip curling into a feral snarl. "If you just let me have my way with you now, we won't have to worry about the dreaded 'wedding night', you see?" he said, explaining his perverted reasoning to the frightened young woman.

"B-But, we can't!" Gwynneth sputtered.

"Of course we can, my dearest... I only want to *sample* you," he purred falsely, "consider it your *duty* to give yourself to me in this way." He said, grinning at her cruelly.

"But My Lord, it isn't proper! It's sinful!" Gwynneth insisted, trying to wriggle back away from the man.

The slap to her face caught her completely by surprise. Aldred laughed at her stunned, horrified expression. It was a vicious, hateful sound that assaulted the young woman's ears and turned her stomach inside out.

Quickly reaching out, Aldred grabbed her arms and pulled the small blonde toward him, leaning his face in close to hers. "One day very soon, this kingdom will be *mine*... *I* will own *everything* - and every *one* - within its domain. Therefore, whatever I desire, I *get*... and right now, I desire *you*. Do you understand that, my dearest?" He spat the words at her, and Gwynneth could feel the tiny flecks of spittle hit her cheek as she turned her face away, fearful that he'd strike her again. He harshly grabbed her face and twisted her head so that she faced him, "*I* am your new Lord and Master, and you will do what *I* say. Never forget that, dear Gwynneth... never *ever* forget."

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Anton made her way up to one of the open towers. She was exhausted after making her journey from Wextony, and she wanted to enjoy the peace and quiet that the darkness of the night sky offered before retiring for the evening. Her brother's wedding was just a few days away, and even though she'd just arrived, she was already tired of all the activity and excitement.

Climbing the stairs, she inhaled a lungful of fresh air when she reached the top of the tower. Walking over to the parapet, she peered out over the countryside. This was her homeland, but she enjoyed Wextony much more. It was small, simple, and quiet, as compared to the pomp and circumstance that usually surrounded the goings-on at Weldon. Once Aldred was married, their father would officially make him his steward, and he would turn over most of his duties. Anton vowed that she would leave immediately thereafter and return to Wextony, lest Aldred come up with some ridiculous reason for her to stay on and assist him with something. She would *not* stick around and be Aldred's patsy. Aldred wanted to play the part of Marquess, so she would let him play it, fully.

A quiet gasp interrupted Anton's thoughts, and she turned around to find a petite young woman entering the open space of the tower as well.

"Oh, forgive me... I-I didn't realize anyone else was here," the woman said as she grasped the shawl that covered her head and shoulders.

"It's alright... I was just getting some fresh air." Anton said, motioning casually with her hand. The young woman wavered hesitantly for a moment, as though she were frightened of the idea of

being in Anton's presence. Since it was dark, Anton couldn't make out her features, but she looked quite young, more like a girl than a woman. Wisps of light-colored hair peeked out of her shawl covering, and she wore a dress that looked fairly simple, but nice. Anton didn't recognize her and figured that she must be one of the Clarendon staff people or someone who was involved with the wedding somehow.

"I-I think perhaps I should come back later," the young woman finally said, backing away toward the steps.

Anton shrugged, "Suit yourself." She said, returning her gaze to the dark landscape of Weldon and not giving the young woman another thought.

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Loud banging combined with shouting noises woke Anton from a deep sleep. Normally an early riser, she wanted to sleep later than usual today because of her long journey yesterday. Apparently, that was not meant to be.

Dragging herself out of bed, she opened the door, "Good heavens man! What is going on?!" she growled to the man who stood before her. It was one of her father's servants.

"Milord, you must come quickly!" the man choked out, breathing heavily.

"Why? What's the matter?" Anton asked, feeling a sense of dread fill her.

"Your father needs to see you in his chambers, immediately!" the man rasped, then turned and sped down the hallway toward the stairs.

"What the devil's going on!?" Anton shouted to no one in particular.

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A few minutes later, after dressing hastily, Anton entered her father's chambers to find the man sitting in a chair, his large frame slumped, his face ashen, his eyes bloodshot and red. Her mother, the Marchioness, sat in another chair, weeping openly.

"Father?" Anton said as she approached him. The Marquess didn't stir. "Father?" Anton repeated, "What's going on?"

A long silence ensued until Edgar finally spoke, "There's been an accident, Anton," he said, his eyes staring, unblinking, at the wall.

"An accident?" Anton said, "What kind of accident?" The Marquess swallowed and closed his eyes. "Father?" Anton pressed.

"Your brother is dead."

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Anton had stood in shocked disbelief as the tale of Aldred's sudden, unexpected demise was laid out before her. It seemed that Aldred had gone riding with a 'lady friend' in the early hours of the morning - with the intention of sowing some 'wild oats', no doubt - and somehow, for some reason, he was thrown from his horse. His neck snapped when he landed on the ground, killing him instantly. The 'lady friend' was questioned, and she claimed that Aldred's horse simply went crazy and began rearing and bucking, and Aldred couldn't control the beast.

It sounded suspicious to Anton. Not only would Aldred not sit himself upon a horse and go riding, she couldn't remember the last time her brother had arisen from his chambers at an early hour. The man was usually in such a drunken state the night before that he always slumbered well past the breakfast meal. The only thing that did seem reasonable was that Aldred would take off to have a tryst with some woman only days before he was to marry another - that part didn't surprise Anton in the least.

Another day passed as Anton continued to discuss the situation with her father while trying to console her mother. Once the realization sunk in and everyone began to calm down, Lord Edgar realized that they needed to do something about the wedding and the alliance that was to have occurred between the House of Weldon and the House of Clarendon.

It was a few days later when the Marquess again summoned Anton to his chambers. Obviously some type of agreement had been reached with the Earl of Clarendon, and Anton had to admit that she was curious. How disappointed and perhaps even angry Earl Leopold must be now that the alliance would not be made. She knew that the Earl needed money for his kingdom and that it was highly beneficial for his daughter to marry up. Perhaps her father would offer to pay the Earl off as compensation for the now-defunct marriage and alliance?

When Anton entered her father's chambers, he was seated in his usual chair with her mother present as well. They both managed to smile weakly at her as she walked toward them.

"Anton," her father greeted, "have you taken care of the funeral details with the chaplain?"

"Yes, father. Everything's arranged."

The Marquess sighed, "Thank you... I can always count on you, Anton," he said, looking up at his daughter with sad gray eyes, "That is a great relief to me." Anton merely nodded in deference. Edgar pursed his lips, nearly afraid to ask the questions and broach the subjects that filled and plagued his mind. "Have you learned anything else about... the incident?" He began with trepidation.

Anton shook her head, "No. The woman maintains her story, and the doctor can only confirm that," she hesitated, darting her eyes to her mother, who sat with her eyes closed while twisting a handkerchief in her hands, "...the neck was indeed broken."

The Marchioness made an audible whimpering sound, and Edgar drew a deep sigh, bringing his hand up to rub at his graying temples. "Very well then. We shall rule the death 'accidental' and proceed with the burial."

Anton gave a sigh and walked over toward one of the windows. "I suppose we must... although the whole thing still doesn't sit well with me."

"What do you mean? Have you heard something?" Edgar asked.

"No, it's not that. It's just that the whole thing seems odd. Aldred never went riding, and he certainly wouldn't go at sunrise. It arouses my suspicions, that's all."

"You suspect foul play?" The Marchioness spoke up, her voice fearful.

"I don't know, Mother," Anton said. "I can't be sure. I don't think anyone can. We have only the words of that wench to go by since there were no other witnesses, so what else can we do?"

"You speak the truth, daughter. We must bury Aldred and move on." Edgar's voice was tired and strained.

"Yes, father." Anton nodded.

"And see that the wench - whomever she is - is removed from the manor grounds." The Marquess said, his voice suddenly harsh. "Regardless of whether or not she had anything to do with Aldred's death, I want her sent away so that I don't have to look upon her."

Anton nodded again, "Yes, sir; I'll take care of it."

Sensing that the meeting was over, Anton nodded and turned to start heading for the door. The Marquess and Marchioness looked at each other and exchanged quiet, knowing glances. They dreaded this moment.

"Anton, wait." Edgar called out to his daughter.

Anton stopped at the door and turned back, "Yes, sir?"

Edgar was silent for a moment, and he ventured another glance over to his wife, who clutched her kerchief and brought a nervous hand up to her mouth. "Anton... we need to talk about the alliance with the Earl of Clarendon."

Anton's stomach leapt into her throat and she swallowed hard. "What alliance? The agreement is null and void now that Aldred is gone."

"But it doesn't have to be." Edgar said somewhat cryptically.

Anton could feel her heart rate increasing as her eyes grew wide with fear of what her father

might be intending.

"Come and sit down... we need to discuss the future of Weldon, my child."

Hesitating for a moment, Anton slowly walked to the chair that sat opposite her father. Her heart pounded against her ribcage as she sat down and her ears were ringing, making her feel lightheaded.

"Anton... you know what needs to be done now," Edgar began, "You know what you must do." Anton cringed and closed her eyes. "You are the sole heir to Weldon now... you must take Aldred's place."

Anton opened her eyes and stared at the floor, her ears refusing to hear her father's words.

All her life she had pretended to be someone and something she wasn't. It may not have been her choice at first, but as she grew older and began voicing concerns and misgivings to her father, he told her not to worry. He assured her that Aldred would be the one to take over and rule Weldon. She would not have to marry, nor would she have to produce heirs; all that responsibility would fall on Aldred's shoulders. So she agreed to continue with the deception, and luckily, she'd gotten away with it for all these years. She served in her role as her father's second son, and she managed to fashion a comfortable life for herself at the same time. Now her father was asking her to change yet again. He was asking her to give up her life and serve him once more, and she didn't know if she could do it this time. She didn't think she could give up her freedom and pretend to be, yet again, something and someone she was not.

Edgar was watching his daughter's face carefully. He knew she did not want to be Marquess. He knew that she was happy with her life at Wextony, and he was loathe to take that from her. He already felt like he had taken some of her happiness away by asking her to live as she had for the past twenty-one years. But surely she understood the need for their nobility to live on. Surely she understood the importance of preserving her own legacy.

Edgar cleared his throat and began slowly, "Anton... I've spoken to Lord Leopold... he has agreed to keep our alliance if you consent to marrying his-

"NO!" Anton interrupted loudly, springing up from her chair. "*No*, father!"

"Anton! Listen to me!" The Marquess said.

"*No*!" Anton fumed. "I will *not* marry that girl!" she shouted. "How could you even ask that of me!?" Anton turned and began to pace back and forth.

"Anton! You *must*! You must marry Lady Gwynneth! It is the proper thing to do, and we *must* keep our word to Lord Leopold! You must take your brother's place, Anton!" Edgar insisted.

Anton slowly shook her head and glared at her father. "I have done everything you have always asked of me, father - *everything*!" she shouted, her voice angry and hurt. "I have played the part

of your son... I have kept the secret that you forced on me... I have fought your wars and fulfilled my duties as you have asked me... but I will *NOT* do this!" her voice reverberated off the stone walls, "I will not marry some poor, unsuspecting girl and pretend to be a husband to her! I *cannot* and I *will not*!"

Edgar knew of his daughter's proclivities toward women; Aldred had always taken great pleasure in relaying to him tales of Anton's same-sex dalliances. The Marquess had always wondered if she favored them because she played the role of a man, or if it was something she would have preferred anyway. Regardless, it didn't really bother Edgar. He might not understand Anton's desires, exactly, but he didn't expect her to be celibate either. He never discussed it with her, nor reprimanded her about it. It was her private affairs, after all, and he saw no harm in it, so long as she stayed out of trouble, which certainly wasn't a problem with Anton. So, if Anton's being with a woman wasn't the problem, then it must be something else. And Edgar felt that he knew what it was.

"Anton...", Edgar began again, his voice pleading but calm against his daughter's fury, "I know that you have served me over and over, and you know that I am grateful for that, child. This duty I ask of you now is not merely as a favor to me. I ask this of you because it is absolutely *necessary*! What will Lord Clarendon think if you do not take Aldred's place? What will become of the alliance between our houses?"

"I don't know, and I don't care!" Anton shouted. "Tell him that I am not fit to marry his daughter... tell him I am already married or engaged to another! Tell him *anything*! I don't care!" she yelled.

"I cannot tell him these things! He knows that you are betrothed to no one!" Edgar argued. "And he has met you already - he thinks you're a fine young man -"

Anton interrupted again, "Yes, father, he *thinks* I'm a fine young man. Everyone *thinks* I'm a young man. But I am *not*... I am no man at all! What I am is a *fraud*!"

"Anton, don't say that," Edgar scolded. "You are a finer man than most men in this realm. You are smarter, stronger, and more brave than any man I know. Lord Leopold thinks very highly of you. He would be pleased to have you wed his daughter."

"It would please him, and it would please you," Anton said, her voice now subdued. She turned around to face her father, tears of frustration welling in her eyes. "And what of my pleasure, father? What of the life and freedom you promised me once Aldred had taken over Weldon? Are you going to turn your back on those promises?"

Edgar hated himself for the hurt he saw in his daughter's eyes, "I'm sorry, Anton, but I'm afraid I must." Edgar said gently, looking directly into angry, anguished blue depths. "Aldred is dead. You are the only one who can replace him. You *must* marry this girl and unify our houses."

Anton shook her head and closed her eyes again, "I cannot father... I cannot bring myself to do it."

With that, the Marchioness spoke, "Anton, none of us ever thought that something like this would happen, but it has." She said, her voice soft and surprisingly calm, "Your father needs you to step up and take control; the kingdom cannot rule itself. Surely you realize how important it is for you to marry and continue our family ownership of Weldon?"

"Why must I marry at all? What *good* will it do for me to marry a *woman*?" She said, looking first at her mother, then her father. "A marriage to a woman would be pointless and unproductive! I cannot make children with a woman, or has that not occurred to you?" she snapped, the blue fire returning to her eyes. "What will Lady Gwynneth think when she does not become pregnant? What will everyone say when we fail to produce an heir, month after month and year after year?!" Anton's voice grew louder as she continued to vent her frustration.

"You could find some children to adopt," the Marquess interjected hopefully, "It's been done before. Not everyone is able to have children."

"Adopt? That's ridiculous!" Anton sniffed.

"It isn't ridiculous - you need to have heirs to take over when you pass on, Anton. Weldon *must* have heirs!" Edgar was becoming annoyed with his daughter's reticence. "If you can't adopt, then *buy* some children - convince Gwynneth to take a lover and hope that she falls pregnant, for godssake! Anything! Just *get* yourself some heirs!"

Anton opened her mouth in horror, "*What!?* Are you mad!?"

Edgar lumbered out of his chair and came to stand in front of his daughter, placing his meaty hands on her shoulders. "Anton, listen to me," he began again, his voice softening. "I know that I ask for you to bear a great burden, but you *must* secure Weldon's future. There is no one besides you, except for my brother's children, and I'll not hand my kingdom over to them... they are no more fit to rule here than Aldred was!"

Anton scowled and stared into her father's eyes in challenge.

"Weldon belongs to *you*... it is *your* future. You are the only one I have left, Anton... you are my legacy. Do what you must to make your marriage with Lady Gwynneth bearable, but above all else, *secure your future* with children in any way that you can." He spoke gravely and stared hard at Anton.

"It won't work, father," Anton insisted, her voice still hard and unwavering. "How long before Lady Gwynneth begins to suspect that I am not what I say I am? How long until she discovers the truth about me? What of your precious alliance then?!"

"It *will* work, Anton. It has to work, for your sake... for all of Weldon's sake." He looked deeply into his daughter's eyes. "I am trusting you to make it work."

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Chapter Three

Lady Gwynneth was fairly certain that she would be violently ill before the day was over. Never before in her young life had she been through such a whirlwind within the space of a few weeks. And now, on this day, she was expected to stand up in front of dozens of people and marry a man she'd never even spoken to, who was from a noble family that she now detested.

After Aldred's death, Gwynneth thought that the wedding, obviously, and the alliance between her father's house and the house of Weldon would be called off. She was astounded to hear that this was not the case. When her father informed her that she would simply marry Marquess Edgar's second son, she screamed at him in outrage. A firm slap to her face brought her back under control, and she sat and wept quietly as her father laid out his plans for her to instead marry Anton of Weldon.

Gwynneth had never told a soul about what Aldred had done to her, not even her trusted ladies maid, Alice. Aldred had forcibly taken her six times over the course of three nights. He'd snuck into her chambers late at night, preying upon her like a hungry wolf and forcing himself on her and in her repeatedly. Six times he ravaged her against her will, striking her across the face when she tried to resist and threatening her viciously. Six times she endured the horror and held her tongue when all she wanted to do was scream aloud from the pain, anguish and humiliation. Six times she prayed that the hand of God would reach out and strike her down so that she would not have to go through the torture the next night. But rather than strike her down, it seemed that God instead decided to strike down her husband-to-be.

When she heard the news that Aldred had been killed, Gwynneth secretly rejoiced. Aldred was the most loathsome, vile man she'd ever known, and she hated him for what he'd done to her. When he died, she thought she'd be free, but again, she was mistaken.

Although never married, Gwynneth had been betrothed to another man before Aldred. She was just fourteen years old when her father arranged her betrothal to the middle-aged Harold of Lansing, in order to save her from being snatched away by the cruel King Wesley. When Harold was killed a year later in the War of Insurrection, Gwynneth was thrilled to be blissfully free again. But of course, it didn't last. Her father had no rest until he found someone to ally with and successfully marry Gwynneth off to. After the war, finding an eligible suitor proved difficult, especially one that was somewhat youthful. It seemed that most of the younger men perished in the war, leaving only the widowed - but wealthy - old codgers. When Aldred of Weldon was finally decided upon, Gwynneth was glad to hear that he at least was young. She had no idea how misplaced her priorities would end up being.

And now she was to be married to the monster's brother, a man she knew absolutely nothing about. He was the second son, and everyone knew that the second sons were the frivolous, careless ones... the ones who had no idea what responsibility and duty was all about, because they had virtually none. For all Gwynneth knew, the entire manor could be full of rich snobs who treated women and wives as though they were mere play-things that could be bought and then cast away like daily garbage. Anton of Weldon could be ten times worse than Aldred. Thoughts

and images of more torturous bodily plundering and abuse raced through the young woman's mind, and her stomach churned and twisted itself into knots.

"Milady, ye tremble," Alice whispered in her ear, drawing Gwynneth out of her deep reverie. "Are ye so very frightened?" the ladies maid queried as she brushed Gwynneth's long hair and finished up her preparations for the day's ceremony.

Gwynneth swallowed hard, her throat dry and thick, "I'm...", she hesitated, not wanting to reveal too much, "...I'm certainly very apprehensive, Alice." She admitted in a quiet voice.

Alice felt for her mistress. Indeed, Lady Gwynneth had been very subdued since arriving at Weldon, and she'd been downright withdrawn for several days now. The maid knew that pre-marital stresses would be enough to jangle one's nerves, let alone having one's husband-to-be suddenly die. Combine that with the hasty installation of a new, unknown suitor, and you have a good recipe for a very upset bride. Alice knew that her Lady did not care for Lord Aldred. Lady Gwynneth never gave specifics on why she loathed the man, exactly, but Alice could tell, after only a few days, that there was animosity between them. In a way, she thought that her Lady's marriage to Lord Anton may prove to be a better match. She had spoken to some of the staff and subtly inquired about the only surviving son of Marquess Edgar, and the replies she received were generally favorable. Still, she understood her Lady's misgivings.

"Milady, I feel certain that Lord Anton will be much better for ye than Aldred." Alice said, wanting to comfort her mistress.

Gwynneth sighed, her eyes threatening to fill with tears, "I certainly hope so, Alice. I don't believe I'll survive if he is cruel."

"I don't think he's cruel, Milady. I've heard that he treats his servants well... and he's also very young and handsome." She added with a wink and a smirk.

"Yes, and Gerrod told me before that he was stern and didn't talk very much." Gwynneth reminded the older woman.

"Well," Alice hesitated, "Yes, but he's a warrior, Milady. Warriors would naturally be that way, would they not?"

"I don't know, Alice." Gwynneth said, her voice sounding tired and utterly resigned to her fate. "Honestly, I don't really care if he talks or not. I just don't want him to be heartless or... forceful."

Alice suddenly had the distinct impression that what troubled her mistress the most was this evening, when the marriage would need to be consummated. Again, she couldn't blame her Lady for being fearful, but she wasn't sure what she could say to ease her dread.

"Milady, forgive me for being so forward, but," Alice began, "I believe if ye remain submissive and obedient to yer new husband, he shant have any reason to be harsh with ye."

Gwynneth huffed, "I'm beginning to believe that *all* men are horrible, vile creatures, Alice, regardless of whether or not their wives bend to their will." The words were surprisingly venomous, coming from someone who was normally so pleasant, as was the Lady.

"Aye," Alice nodded. "I'm afraid that may be true, Milady. I suppose one can only hope that Lord Anton will be different. Hope and perhaps pray that he'll be gentle and careful with ye." The maid said, looking into her mistress' worried face and giving her a knowing look.

"Is that wrong Alice?"

"To hope for a docile husband? No, of course not, Milady."

"No, to...," Gwynneth paused, embarrassed to be talking about intimate matters, even in a roundabout way. "To pray for kindness and delicacy in ... a union?"

Blue-green eyes that were once bright and shining were now dulled with worry. Bow-shaped lips that had always held a smile now held doubt and uncertainty. If this marriage turned out to be nightmarish for her young charge, Alice didn't know what she'd do. To see the light inside her Lady's heart extinguish any further would be agonizing, for both of them.

Alice reached out and cupped Gwynneth's cheek, "No, Milady," she whispered. "Tisn't wrong to pray for that either. I believe all women pray for that."

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The chapel was full of people who came to see the wedding of Anton of Weldon to Lady Gwynneth of Clarendon. Despite being rearranged and thrown together in the space of little more than a fortnight, the wedding was proving to be a lavish and well-attended affair. The music, entertainment, and day-long feasting was mostly responsible for that, as was Anton's reputation and the high level of respect she commanded with the people.

As she stood near the church doors awaiting her bride, Anton's thoughts ran amuck. Everything from how her stiff, unfamiliar wedding clothes itched her to how she was going to successfully consummate her marriage tonight without her new bride figuring out her deep, dark secret. Beads of sweat dotted Anton's hairline and she wished again that she could have convinced her father to let her wed outside in the manor's courtyard where it would have been cool and breezy. Bending to the ailing man's desire for tradition, however, Anton conceded to have it in the chapel. She quickly swiped her fingers across her forehead as she thought back to the other conversations she'd had earlier with her father.

He had told her that he was proud of her, and that he thought she would be 'pleased' with the young, pretty Lady Gwynneth. Anton really didn't care one way or another. She didn't plan on being with her 'wife' any more than she absolutely had to be. Remembering more of the conversation, she recalled how she nearly laughed when her father awkwardly reminded her that she would have to 'somehow consummate the union'. At the time, it struck her that her father probably had no idea about her sexual experiences, and so he might have feared that she, too,

was a virgin and therefore had no idea what to do with a wife on her wedding night. The Marquess had no need to worry, but of course, he didn't know this. Anton had to admit that it was probably a good thing she had experience. Although she'd never been with a virgin, she at least knew what to do and how to 'function' as a man.

Realizing that she was attracted to women rather than men had been perplexing for the young Lord. She hid the fact for many years, thinking that it was just a misplaced sense of her 'manly' duties. But when she befriended and eventually became intimate with a young servant girl, she realized that she was not the only woman to appreciate and prefer the tenderness of a woman over a man. Being that everyone saw her as a man, Anton soon realized that she was free to pursue relationships with all kinds of women. She was careful, however, keeping her escapades to a minimum and eventually, keeping company primarily with one 'favorite' woman at her home in Wextony - the young servant girl who'd befriended her so long ago.

Genevieve had become one of Anton's personal attendants, and she served as a lover and playmate as well as Anton's only real friend. She was the only one who knew the truth about the young Lord, and she earned Anton's trust by keeping her secret. In return, Anton protected her and kept the girl employed in her own personal service. The two spent time together both as lovers and friends, but neither one called their relationship 'love'. Anton knew that Genevieve felt no true passion for her, and the servant girl knew that her relationship with Anton was forbidden to be anything other than Lord and servant. They mostly served as each other's friends and confidantes. Still, Anton was grateful for all the intimate lessons they'd shared together. They would come in handy now that she had to put them to use on a 'wife'.

The changing musical tunes turned Anton's attention toward the processional where her new bride suddenly appeared, wearing a bright purple dress, and clinging to the arm of Earl Leopold. Anton swallowed against the lump in her throat as they began their approach.

A wave of nausea rippled Gwynneth's stomach and she drew a deep breath as she scanned the crowd that had gathered at the church. When her eyes landed on the tall, dark visage of her groom, she felt her knees buckle.

Earl Leopold felt his daughter's hand tighten on his arm. He glanced down at the young woman, noticing how pale her face was. He knew she was terrified, but alas, it was her duty to marry into the House of Weldon for him. She understood this, and she would do as he commanded. She was an obedient daughter, despite her occasional moments of outspokenness.

When the chaplain signaled for them to begin their forward march, Gwynneth felt her body sway and threaten to swoon. She clutched her father's arm fiercely, praying that she didn't faint dead away. Once they reached the altar, the Earl took his daughter's hand and placed it in Anton's. It was only then that Gwynneth ventured a glance up.

Anton of Weldon was not what she'd been expecting. Widened, blue-green eyes darted all over the countenance of the man who would be her husband in a matter of minutes.

Gwynneth first took in the expensive clothing and jewelry that Anton wore. Richly colored

clothes embroidered in gold thread adorned her husband-to-be, and he cut a dashing figure in his finery. Shifting upwards, Gwynneth's eyes raced over Anton's dark, shoulder-length, blunt-cut hair, his slightly pronounced jaw and strong cheekbones, his straight, unblemished nose, smooth, tanned skin, and lastly, his eyes. They were piercing - the color of the summer sky on a clear day - and they watched her with an intensity that, while not frightening like Aldred's dark orbs had been, unnerved her nonetheless. Gwynneth was just taking note of two scars that marred her husband-to-be's left eyebrow and chin when her stomach surged again and she had to swallow quickly against strange sensation that threatened to race up her throat.

Anton, too, was shocked by her bride's delicate beauty and grace. She had been so busy convincing herself that the girl would be nothing more than an annoying, teenaged twit, she hadn't paid attention to any of the gossip surrounding the future Lady of the House. The girl, though she was a teenager, was quite lovely. Petite in stature, her face was gently rounded and gave an innocent appearance. Fine, fair skin was highlighted by heart-shaped lips, a small nose, and deep-set eyes that were the same shade as the ocean. Long, flaxen-colored hair was brushed out and cascaded loosely down her back, and she had a halo of fresh flowers woven into a dainty crown that was worn upon her head. The girl didn't wear much jewelry, and Anton figured it was because of Clarendon's lack of wealth. She did wear perfume, however, and the light, flowery scent tickled Anton's nose. As she glanced down at the girl's soft face again, she couldn't believe that she was actually being married to a woman. She just didn't see how it would all work out.

The chaplain's words interrupted both of their thoughts, and before they knew it, they were being asked to repeat vows. Gwynneth was ordered to be obedient and submissive to her husband, and Anton was charged with honoring and protecting her. The time then came for Anton to give her bride a ring, and the young Lord cursed inwardly as her hands trembled while she slipped the gold band onto Gwynneth's slender finger.

When blue eyes sheepishly darted up to meet hers and Anton quirked his mouth in a tiny, self-conscious gesture, Gwynneth felt a rush of relief flow through her. The small concession of nervousness from the young Lord somehow eased her mind, and she suddenly felt her anxiety diminish slightly, if only for a brief moment.

As the chaplain proceeded to read the dowries and gifts that were given, Anton wished that she could wipe at her forehead again. It was stuffy inside the church, and she was tired of standing. Her nerves were shot, her patience was ebbing, and she was ready for the whole show to be overwith. Anton already knew that Lady Gwynneth's dowry to her was a wide assortment of household goods and several personal servants, which she brought from Clarendon, as well as a fair amount of gold and silver coins. Lord Leopold was not a wealthy man, so for him to offer a sizable dowry was generous and respectable. Either that or he was more desperate for a son-in-law than he let on.

The chaplain read Anton's gift aloud, announcing that the groom was gifting a gilded chest full of precious jewels and family heirlooms, as well as a considerable amount of money, to his bride. Anton shifted her feet nervously, wondering what Lady Gwynneth would think of the gift. She knew that her father had already discussed it with Lord Leopold, but would her new wife like it?

Actually, Gwynneth was thinking that perhaps her father would be embarrassed that Anton's gift was probably worth more than hers. Her family was supposed to be offering the dowry for the honor of marrying up and into the House of Weldon, not the other way around. She knew that wealthy nobles like the Marquess of Weldon and his son could buy or sell nearly anyone they wanted, so a hefty gift such as this was a surprising and unexpected statement of Gwynneth's perceived value. She just hoped that her new husband found her worth her price when all was said and done.

As the chaplain droned on, Gwynneth wished that she could look at Anton again, but she wasn't sure if it was permitted. She hadn't had enough of an opportunity to digest his handsome, youthful face, so she tentatively shifted her eyes up to look at him again.

Anton remained motionless as the chaplain continued to read aloud. She stared silently, her head tipped downward so that her face could not easily be seen. Keeping her eyes fixed on the long skirt of her bride's dress, she listened to the monotonous words. Suddenly sensing eyes upon her, Anton raised her head slightly. Lady Gwynneth's green-blue orbs widened as their gazes met, then she dropped her eyes abruptly. It seemed that obedience and subservience would not be an issue with this new wife.

Finally joining the bride and groom together in a hand-fasting, the chaplain wrapped his stole around the couple's hands and gave a final blessing. Gwynneth's nerves returned full force as she listened and then watched the chaplain bestow the kiss of peace upon Anton. As Anton turned to her and bent down, her stomach flip-flopped. The kiss was soft and chaste, and Gwynneth felt her cheeks flush uncontrollably. Turning the couple to face the congregation, the chaplain announced them to be officially united in wedlock as husband and wife.

Gwynneth nearly fainted.

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[...Continued in Part 2...](#)

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~ Second Son ~

by [A. K. Naten](#)

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**** NC-17 WARNING ****

PART TWO

Chapter Four

Night had finally fallen when at last Anton and her new bride were escorted to their chambers for the evening. The chaplain led the ritualistic procession through the Manor, up to the newlywed's chambers where he 'witnessed' the consummation of their joining by having them lay down, still clothed, in their marital bed while blessing them and praying that their union be fertile and prosperous. Of course, it was all in vain, but no one would ever know that.

Anton fairly jumped out of the bed once the chaplain and his small entourage left the chambers. She closed the heavy wooden door and breathed a deep sigh of relief. The most arduous part of the day was finished. She could at last relax, if only a little.

Hearing the rustling of covers behind her, she remembered that she wasn't alone. Not only that, she remembered that she still had one final duty to fulfill. She turned around and her eyes immediately found the startled ones of her new wife.

My wife... I'm married, she thought incredulously. Perhaps, instead, the most arduous part was just beginning?

Gwynneth quickly dropped her eyes, and Anton's heart plummeted to her stomach. What was she to do now? Just leap into bed and take the girl? She wasn't quite ready for that, and she was fairly certain that her wife wasn't either. Her new bride had no experience with bedding rituals, and Anton dreaded having to make all the decisions. Nevertheless, she pushed herself to say something.

"Shall I summon your maid to help you change into your night clothes, my Lady?" Anton said, her voice echoing softly off the chamber's stone walls.

Gwynneth absorbed the sound of her husband's raspy, but surprisingly soft voice. Again, it was not what she'd expected. She was slowly starting to think that Anton may not be a carbon copy of Aldred, as she had feared. Of course, the night wasn't over yet.

"Whatever you wish, my Lord." Gwynneth repeated, mindful of her duty to submit to her husband's every desire and command, whether it be directly given or not.

Anton merely nodded in return. She wanted to say that she didn't 'wish' it at all, but she knew that this was what Gwynneth was supposed to say. The girl seemed to have been trained well, at least. Curiously though, Anton found that she didn't really care. The Lady was inexperienced and obviously scared, and Anton wanted to make sure that she was gentle with her, lest she frighten the girl and start their relationship off on the wrong foot.

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After deeming that a reasonable amount of time had passed for her new wife to prepare for their first night together, Anton slowly made her way back to the chambers where Gwynneth was surely waiting for her with much dread. Anton had to admit that the feeling was mutual. It wasn't that her new wife was unattractive - on the contrary, Gwynneth was positively lovely - it was that being forced to join with someone tended to dampen any kind of natural sexual attraction one might feel. Anton couldn't imagine what Gwynneth was thinking. Not only had the young woman been practically sold off and betrothed to Aldred, but after his surprising death, she was then unceremoniously passed on to Anton, and the two of them were rushed into a hasty marriage purely to save the alliance between their fathers. Anton at least had some experience in the bedroom; she couldn't fathom what her young wife must be feeling at the moment.

In fact, Gwynneth was pacing back and forth in her chambers, worried sick about anything and everything. Would Anton be as gentle as his voice seemed to indicate? Or would he be like Aldred? Docile in appearance but cruel and hurtful in actuality? Although Anton's looks were similar to Aldred's, their physical stature was very different. Where Aldred had been moderate in height and slender as a whippet, Anton was quite tall and seemed to be a bit more muscular. Gwynneth remembered the feeling when she touched his rough, callused hands. They were swordsman's hands... Anton was a warrior - a revered knight. The young Lady didn't know if this would prove beneficial or detrimental for her.

Mostly what she worried about was what her new husband would be like with her, physically. How would he join himself with her? Would their sexual coupling be quick and abrupt? Or long and painfully drawn out? Would Anton be harsh, cruel and abusive with her, as Aldred had been? Would he laugh at her, curse at her, and call her hideous names? Would he hold her down and brutally thrust himself into her so that she'd have to bite down on her lip to keep from crying out in pain? And what would he say if she did not cry out? What would her husband think when there was no blood or evidence of her deflowering? Would he realize that she was not a virgin? Would he sense that she had been despoiled by another - by his own brother? Just as Gwynneth's eyes began to fill with fretful tears, a soft knocking sounded at the door.

She jumped, knowing who it was... knowing that the time had come. Her stomach surged and she placed a hand over it, forcing herself to calm down. She swiped at her eyes quickly, "Come in," she called out, her voice cracking under the strain of the moment.

Anton opened the door, peering inside. The room was dark, save for a few candles that provided a scant bit of light, and a small fire which burned in the hearth on the far side of the room. Seeing her bride standing there in her sleeping robe looking wild-eyed and panic-stricken made Anton's stomach lurch.

"My Lord," Gwynneth said quickly, her nervousness glaring.

"My Lady," Anton said, her voice calm and quiet as she gave a slight nod. "Are you ready?"

No! No! Gwynneth screamed inside her head. Instead she dropped her eyes and answered with a dutiful nod and a tremulous, "Yes, My Lord."

Anton approached the bed as her wife climbed in and settled herself down on the plush bedding. Having already ridded herself of her heavy wedding tunic, Anton wore only a silk blouse and her trousers. She sat down on the edge of the bed, stripping off her long leather boots and loosening the buttons of her pants. The leather phallus that she'd equipped herself with felt uncomfortable within the confines of her tight pants, and she couldn't wait to get rid of it. First, however, she had to put it to use.

Oh God, she thought to herself.

Turning around and lying next to her wife, Anton propped herself on her side and observed Gwynneth's position. The young woman lay on her back, her posture absolutely rigid, hands clenched tightly at her sides, wide eyes staring up at the ceiling. The fear that must be going through her had to be tremendous. Anton wished that she could ease it somehow, but doubted that she could. Perhaps the best thing was to just hurry up and get it over and done with. She let her eyes wander over her wife's supine figure before returning them to her face. The young woman looked strained and her features were taut. Her cheeks were slightly flushed and her lips were parted slightly as she breathed in an erratic rhythm.

Seeing the obvious tenseness, Anton reached out and touched the tips of her fingers to her wife's cheek and chin. Gwynneth flinched in surprise as Anton's touch wandered along the delicate, supple skin. Looking up at the widened aqua eyes that now blinked rapidly, Anton whispered, "You are very beautiful, My Lady."

Gwynneth wasn't sure what to say; she hadn't expected Anton to touch her face or talk to her. Still, she managed to whisper in return, "T-Thank you, My Lord."

Scooting closer, Anton reached down to grasp Gwynneth's long nightgown and slide it upward, exposing her lower body. Gwynneth immediately tensed, and she closed her eyes, cursing herself inwardly. She did not want her husband to think her a skittish, terrified colt, yet she could not show that she was accustomed to coupling either. It was a fine line she had to walk.

Anton placed a hand on her wife's exposed thigh, feeling the warm skin and the subtle trembling within the small body. She moved her hand around, stroking and admiring the soft, satiny feel of the young woman's flesh. She was indeed lovely. Lovely, but still scared. Anton wracked her brain to think of a way to calm the blonde.

Finally, leaning in close again, Anton dipped her head and gently pressed her lips to Gwynneth's. "I shall try not to hurt you," she whispered, surprising herself with the sincerity of the statement.

Gwynneth opened her eyes and stared at Anton, taken aback by the softly-spoken sentiment. "Thank you, My Lord." She said, not really knowing how else to respond.

Anton dipped again and kissed her wife's rosebud mouth slowly, tenderly, hoping to convey as much reassurance as she possibly could. When they broke, Anton saw that Gwynneth's eyes had filled with tears before they quickly closed tight. She felt like an animal for doing this. Closing

her own eyes, Anton told herself just to get it overwith, and quickly. Taking a deep breath, Anton slipped her fingers into the warm spot between her wife's legs, making Gwynneth jump and gasp aloud.

Cursing herself again, Gwynneth clenched her jaw tight and gripped at the bed clothes, willing herself to just lie still and say nothing. Realizing what was to come next, she began to tense with anxious, wretched memories. When Anton's warm hand touched her knees and urged them apart, she held her breath. When fingers again slipped down in-between her thighs and slid through her womanhood, she inhaled sharply. And when one of the fingers first pressed against her opening and then slowly pushed inside, Gwynneth finally whimpered softly.

Anton immediately paused her motions and looked up at her wife's closed eyes and contorted face. "Are you alright?" she whispered, worried that she'd hurt the girl already.

Gwynneth's eyes opened and she locked onto her husband's piercing blue, "Y-Yes," she stammered, again surprised by his concern.

"Do you want me to stop?" Anton asked.

Gwynneth hesitated, "N-No, My Lord," she stuttered, shaking her head.

"Are you certain?"

Gwynneth faltered again. *Is he really asking me this?* She wondered incredulously. "...Yes." she said, taking a deep breath and fighting against the tears that now screamed for release behind her eyes.

The answer didn't sound very certain to Anton, but she knew that it didn't matter anyway; this was just another 'duty' that they had to fulfill. Anton ran her eyes over Gwynneth again, noticing the rapid rising and falling of the girl's chest and the throbbing pulsation of the artery in the crook of her neck. She was more than uncertain; the poor thing was terrified.

Deciding not to prolong the agony any further, Anton maneuvered herself in-between Gwynneth's legs, nudging her thighs open with her knees. Reaching down into her trousers, she grasped the phallus and withdrew it, quickly guiding it to Gwynneth's sex. Holding her breath, Anton pushed inside as gently as she could.

The younger woman released a soft sound that was a cross between a whimper and a grunt. Anton paused for a moment but then forged ahead, placing her hands on either side of her wife's shoulders as she moved her hips and pressed in further. Gwynneth was so completely distraught that she almost didn't feel the tight, burning sensation that filled her as Anton pushed deeper. She knew that she should relax and not fight it, but instead, her body tensed and constricted around the intrusion.

Anton could feel the tautness of Gwynneth's small body as everything clenched tight. As she drew her hips back and pushed in again, the younger woman released another quiet, whimpering

groan. Anton stopped her movements and shifted her eyes to look at her wife's face. Gwynneth's cheeks were flushed bright red and her eyes were squeezed shut as she breathed in short, shallow bursts. When she sensed Anton's face hovering above her, she opened her eyes, realizing, shamefully, that she was involuntarily fighting him.

"Am I hurting you?" Anton whispered, holding her face close to Gwynneth's.

Gwynneth faltered again, unsure of what she should admit or say, exactly. "N-No," she whispered, averting her eyes and feeling her face flush further as tears continued to well and burn in her eyes.

"Do you want me to stop?" Anton again asked, unconvinced that her wife was not in pain. She had never caused a lover pain, and she certainly didn't want to start now.

"No... no, My Lord," Gwynneth said, knowing of course that she *did* want to stop, but also knowing that she could not. "...I'm alright."

She looked up and again felt consumed by Anton's intense eyes. They were watching her, looking for any signs that she wasn't telling the truth. Gwynneth felt herself pale under the scrutiny, and a shiver ran through her body. She knew they had to do this, so she willed her body to relax. Keeping her gaze locked with her husband's, Gwynneth felt as though a strange communication passed between the two of them as Anton again began moving slowly in and out of her.

Feeling her wife relax a bit beneath her, Anton leaned her head down and kissed Gwynneth again, softly, sensually, hoping to calm the younger woman and reassure her in whatever way possible.

The young bride closed her eyes and tried not to think about what Anton was doing to her, but the soft kisses that he was bestowing on her lips made it nearly impossible. A strange warmth flowed through her body and her heart began to pound erratically as Anton's tongue swept across her lower lip. She found herself fiercely clutching the bed clothes to keep from making any noise.

Anton began to increase her thrusts, making them longer and deeper as her body began to heat up and become stimulated. A deep, pulsing sensation began to consume her lower regions as the harnessed end of the phallus rubbed against her repeatedly, and her eyes soon slid shut. Her breathing became more labored, and she could feel a sheen of sweat dampening the back of her shirt.

Gwynneth felt the fiery heat radiating from her husband's body as he moved above her. When his warm lips began gently kissing and suckling under her chin and along the length of her neck, her eyes flew open and she wondered what in the world he was doing. Before she could worry too much, however, Anton groaned and his body went completely rigid. It only lasted for a moment before Gwynneth felt him relax and withdraw himself from her depths.

Releasing a deep breath, Anton let her forehead fall down to rest on the pillow beside Gwynneth's head while she continued to suspend her body weight by resting on her elbows.

It was over. She was done. *Thank God*, Anton thought with relief.

After a few moments of heavy breathing, Anton finally pushed herself up and away from her wife, breaking their contact and ending the encounter that was a strange mixture of torture and pleasure.

Gwynneth's sex pulsed in an odd way, and she could feel her muscles throbbing and convulsing. Her heart thudded so loudly, she was sure Anton would hear it. The reverberations sounded in her ears and her head suddenly swam in blackness.

Without saying a word, Anton scooted herself over to sit on the edge of the bed, her secret carefully hidden from the younger woman. For a moment, she wasn't sure what she should do. She looked back over her shoulder, venturing a brief glance at her wife. Gwynneth had pulled the covers up over herself and lay there clutching them tightly, her eyes closed again.

"Are you alright, My Lady?" Anton asked as she re-buttoned her pants.

Gwynneth opened her eyes and shifted them to her husband's, "Yes, My Lord." She whispered in a strained voice before dropping her gaze self-consciously.

Anton paused and drew a deep breath. She wanted to say something else, but had no idea what. "I shall return to my own chambers for the night." She finally said as she stood up. Gwynneth didn't answer, but she was quite relieved.

Anton turned and looked down at the small figure lying motionless on the bed, "Goodnight, wife," she whispered, bending down to place a gentle kiss on Gwynneth's lips before turning away.

"Goodnight, husband." Gwynneth replied shakily. The emotions that had been building inside her suddenly flared to life, and Gwynneth felt tears instantly spring to her eyes. As soon as Anton left the room, the dam burst and the tears spilled out, flooding rapidly down her fair cheeks.

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The newlywed Lady lay awake for hours, reliving what she'd just shared with her new husband and comparing them to the horrors of Aldred. She was overwhelmed by all kinds of thoughts, emotions and worries. Even though she knew Anton had to do what he did, and she really could not blame him, she still felt violated. Violated and used. She wondered if her husband had enjoyed himself at all, or was he as relieved about completing the dreaded task as she was?

Gwynneth wished that they did not have to have intercourse at all. Why couldn't they just marry and be friends with one another? Why did it all have to boil down to emotionless sex strictly for reproductive purposes? It seemed so barbaric. But then again, that was supposedly all men

wanted... what did they care about emotions and love? They only wanted an heir; having any kind of feelings for their spouses did not matter. Gwynneth could only hope and pray that she became pregnant soon, for then she wouldn't have to put up with continually satisfying her husband in such carnal ways.

As she thought those words, an image of Anton's piercing light blue gaze popped into her mind. The way he looked at her gave her gooseflesh. It wasn't a sinister or evil look, and it wasn't frightening either; it was just... disquieting. It was as though those eyes could see right into her soul, their eerie luminescence unsettling yet soothing somehow. As she thought about Anton, she invariably began to think about Aldred. She shuddered and closed her eyes, trying to stop the memories of the sadistic former Lord from invading her mind. Instead she tried to focus on Anton. She thought about the way he smelled - clean and pleasant, with a subtle scent of perfumed soap, as compared to Aldred's stale perspiration and sour wine. She then thought about the way Anton's body felt as it laid atop hers - warm and somehow protective, rather than harsh and threatening. And his lips, as they touched hers - soft and gently coaxing instead of rough and bruising. She rolled onto her back and stared up into the darkness of the room.

Anton was so different from what she'd anticipated, but more than that, he was different from any man she'd ever met. Gerrod had told her that Anton wasn't talkative, yet he repeatedly inquired about her well-being during their coupling. How unusual for a man to be so careful and considerate; it was unheard of... she would have never expected such a thing. All she'd ever heard was that husbands cared little for their wives and released all their abusive frustrations on them. Indeed, the rumors surrounding her own mother's death pointed to her father and his foul temper as the cause.

But Anton didn't seem to be like that. Not only was he not harsh nor violent with her, but he touched her and kissed her repeatedly. She wasn't so surprised that he kissed her, actually, but she was surprised at how tenderly he went about it. His lips and face were so soft. Even though he lacked facial hair, she still expected that at least the area around his mouth and chin would be somewhat rough. Aldred had no facial hair either, but she remembered how his rough chin had scratched against her sensitive skin. She shuddered again, wondering if and when those horrific memories would ever leave her.

She thought that perhaps, once she was with Anton a few more times, the memory of Aldred would hopefully fade away. Not that she was eager to couple with Anton again, but it was infinitely better than coupling with Aldred had been. She found herself realizing that, while she did not look forward to serving her husband again, she did not hatefully detest the idea as much as she had earlier. Tonight's experience with him had not been pleasant, but it wasn't dreadfully unpleasant either. It simply left her with a strange feeling. A feeling of what, exactly, she didn't know. She only knew that she was not afraid of him, as she had anticipated.

Perhaps her life would not be entirely wretched at the hands of Lord Anton of Weldon.

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Anton couldn't sleep, so she ventured up to her favorite stone tower to take in some fresh air and clear her muddled mind.

All she could think about as she laid in bed tossing and turning was Gwynneth... her *wife*. The way she looked, smelled, felt, tasted... the pleasant memories both surprised and confused her. She had begun thinking that she might actually be smitten with the girl. It was ridiculous; they'd just met... she'd been with her only once. Anton had not expected to be able to perform at all tonight. She feared that the girl would not excite her, and she would have to feign pleasure in order to 'complete' the task that both of them were expected to carry out. But instead, she found herself captivated by the young woman's delicate beauty and overwhelmed by the effect it had on her.

Anton had never been with a woman like Gwynneth before. She'd never lain with someone so innocent and inexperienced, and the only time she'd been with a very young woman was when she herself had been young as well. Anton was troubled by the thought that she'd been the one to spoil Gwynneth's precious innocence, even though it was 'required'.

The soft noises of discomfort that Gwynneth had made worried Anton at first, and she feared that it was all too much for the girl. But when those blue-green depths looked into her, there was something in them that told Anton that the young blonde understood that they had to do what they were doing. She saw no blame in her eyes, but she saw no sign of arousal either... not that Anton expected that. Wives were forbidden from showing any kind of lust or passion, and although she'd heard that sometimes harmonious, loving relationships did occur between spouses, Anton certainly didn't expect to find herself in a situation such as that. She would consider herself fortunate if she and Gwynneth could simply be civil with one another.

So, Anton wondered, did Gwynneth hate her now? Would she detest her and avoid her whenever possible? Anton remembered the rumors that her staff had passed on to her earlier, when Aldred had still been alive. They had told Anton that it was obvious that Lady Gwynneth loathed her brother. Several servants reported seeing Aldred speaking sharply to the young woman, and others said that Gwynneth often glared at him with poisonous eyes. Anton had told her father that she thought it a bad idea to allow Aldred to be anywhere near the Lady before they were wed. She was surprised that the young woman hadn't fled Weldon Manor altogether. Still, she was left wondering if the Lady abhorred her entire family, or just Aldred.

As Anton looked out at the blackened night sky, she contemplated her future with Gwynneth. She was a fairly good judge of overall character, and after this evening, she had the impression that Gwynneth was an obedient, pleasant girl who would do as she asked and not give her any problems. However, that was only an impression; she really knew nothing about her young wife.

Tilting her head back, Anton stared up at the bright stars overhead, wondering how she and Gwynneth would interact with one another. Most of all, she wondered what the morrow would bring.

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Chapter Five

Anton arose early in the morning. Truth be known, she had wished she could sneak a bit of

breakfast and then disappear for awhile before having to face anyone... but that wouldn't be possible. She had to first give Gwynneth her morning gift - a 'thank you' offering for the gift of her innocence that would fully seal their union - before sitting down with her family and eating breakfast together. Anton thought the whole idea was ridiculous. To her, it was insulting to offer a woman a 'present' for allowing someone to defile her. But then again, it was a custom, and Anton was learning that customs were always upheld, no matter how absurd.

Anton hadn't revealed her gift to her father or mother, having come to a decision only this morning. She'd come to the conclusion that she owned just one thing that could adequately support Gwynneth should she pass away before the younger woman. Realizing that she would have to live exclusively at Weldon one day soon, Anton finally decided, after lying awake most of the night, that it would make the most sense to bequeath her tiny, but beloved kingdom of Wextony. If she were to die unexpectedly, Anton had no heirs nor family to pass Wextony on to, and she wanted it to be taken over by someone who would care for it as she had. She surprised herself by already feeling a need to protect Gwynneth, and she thought that the young Lady somehow deserved the security that Wextony would provide. She felt a responsibility for her wife; whether or not it was just her husbandly sense of duty kicking in or something else, she didn't know. She only knew that, despite her misgivings about the marriage, something about Gwynneth called out to her, and she wanted to take care of the young woman. Anton just hoped that her wife appreciated and understood what the gift meant.

The doors to the grand hall suddenly opened and the Marquess and Marchioness entered, immediately pulling Anton out of her thoughts.

"Anton," Lord Edgar greeted cheerfully.

"Father... Mother," Anton said as she rose to greet her parents and kiss her mother's cheek.

"How are you this fine morning?" Edgar asked. "And did you have a pleasant *evening*?" He said, lowering his voice and giving Anton an expectant look.

Anton blushed immediately. "Yes, Father, it was fine." She said, darting her eyes away.

"Yes?" Edgar continued, "Did everything work out to your... *satisfaction* then?"

"Yes, Father. Everything was and is *fine*." Anton replied somewhat tersely, closing her eyes and wishing her father would cease his line of personal questioning.

"Very good then. You have your gift for the Lady Gwynneth then, yes?"

"Yes, Father."

"Very good," Edgar said, patting Anton on the shoulder.

Just then, Earl Leopold and his son entered the grand hall and everyone began making conversation. Edgar soon called out to his servant, ordering him to go and fetch the Lady

Gwynneth and to retrieve the court clerk as well. As the servant skittered off, Edgar looked at Anton and smiled, pleased that all was going well. Anton wished that she could return his happy sentiment.

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Gwynneth had arisen feeling as though she hadn't slept at all. In reality, she'd slept only a few hours, having much trouble falling unconscious after her stressful wedding day and even more stressful nighttime activities. Her ladies maid came and helped her dress, outfitting her in a blue gown that accented her eyes beautifully. The older woman pinned her Lady's hair up behind her head and dabbed on a bit of makeup to help conceal the dark circles under her eyes. Looking into the mirror, Gwynneth felt every bit the grown up, married woman that she now was.

Heeding the call to appear in the grand hall at once, Gwynneth nervously entered the room to find the Marquess and Marchioness seated in two formal, high-backed chairs, and her father and brother sitting off to the side. Her husband was standing in one of the far corners and turned around to look at her as soon as her entrance was announced. His presence gave her chills, though not unpleasant ones.

"Good morning to you, Lady Gwynneth," Edgar called out.

"Good morning, My Lord," Gwynneth bowed slightly to the Marquess and then the Marchioness, "My Lady."

As Gwynneth turned to greet her father and brother, Edgar caught Anton's eye and gave her an expectant look, nodding toward Gwynneth. He hoped that Anton didn't intend on ignoring the girl now that the wedding was overwith. He supposed it was understandable that Anton would be apprehensive about being married, but still, she needed to play the role of husband and play it properly.

Acknowledging her father's silent instruction, Anton pushed aside her ambivalence and approached her wife slowly. When she reached Gwynneth's side, the young blonde turned to bow to her slightly.

"Good morning, My Lord," Gwynneth said softly, her cheeks blushing a light pink as memories of last night's intimate coupling flashed through her mind.

"Good morning, Wife," Anton replied, reaching out to take Gwynneth's hand and placing a soft kiss on her knuckles. Gwynneth immediately blushed harder and Anton felt pleased with herself.

Edgar instructed everyone to come to attention, then called for the court clerk to officiate over the reading of the morning gift. As the clerk began to drone, Gwynneth held her gaze down to the floor. Soon, however, it began to wander over to where her husband stood across from her. She lifted her eyes and immediately found them locked with pale blue. Anton pursed his lips in a tiny smile, and Gwynneth dropped her gaze instantly, embarrassed to have been caught.

As her senses returned to her, Gwynneth heard the clerk's words and was suddenly struck dumb.

He couldn't possibly be saying what she thought he was saying. She looked up at the clerk with a frown, unable to believe her ears. Anton, it seemed, was gifting the fiefdom of Wextony to his new bride; one-third ownership now, and full ownership should Anton pass away. Gwynneth was shocked, but the only reaction she gave away was to part her mouth slightly and blink her eyes repeatedly. She could hardly believe it. Wextony was Anton's home... it was his own fiefdom. Though small, it had a fortified manor house and servants and a hearty population of farmers and craftsmen and workers. It even had its own collection of vassals and knights sworn to fealty. This was more than just a small gift of 'thanks' to Gwynneth; this was an assurance of security and support for a future that was often woefully rocky and uncertain.

Gwynneth had expected jewelry, perhaps money, even furniture, but not an entire fiefdom, no matter how little. The morning gift was meant to reflect the support and means of income a husband wished to bequeath to his wife. In reality, everyone knew that it also reflected what the husband thought of his wife the morning after he'd had a chance to sample her. An unremarkable gift would mean an unremarkable woman. Gwynneth, therefore, never fathomed that Anton would think enough of her to bequeath her his own personal kingdom. Her father would be thrilled; it seemed that his political wrangling was paying off splendidly.

When she peeked a look at the Earl, he was grinning ear to ear. Gwynneth closed her eyes and let her face fall down toward the floor again. She couldn't help but wonder if some of the gift's lavishness was due to the untimely death of Aldred and the fact that the alliance had nearly been destroyed because of it. Was it given out of a sense of guilt or the need to make amends? She also wondered whose idea it was to give Wextony as a gift; The Marquess', or Anton's? Was Anton a puppet who performed his father's every wish? Or was her husband as strong with his will as he was with his warrior ways? She really had no way of knowing.

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Breakfast was a loud, lavish affair, and Gwynneth was awed by the sumptuous foods, fine utensils and beautiful glassware that Weldon Manor possessed. Edgar chatted endlessly with Earl Leopold, Gerrod, and Anton while the Marchioness spoke with Gwynneth about women's things. Conversations ranged from reports of raids and rebellious internal strife at other fiefdoms to the planning of the meals and events for the coming week.

All through the chatting, Anton repeatedly stole little glances at her wife. The young woman was exquisite with her spun strands of gold pinned up on her head and her beautiful dress of shimmering blue. She still looked overwhelmed and unsure of herself, but Anton found her positively radiant and lovely, nonetheless.

Gwynneth was dimly aware of eyes watching her while the Lady Marina engaged her in polite conversation. She knew that it was her husband, but she wasn't sure if it bothered her, or excited her. She dared to dart her gaze over toward him a few times, but each time he seemed to be looking away. Gazing at his boyishly handsome face, Gwynneth observed that he wore his hair pulled back into a short ponytail today, making his facial features even more pronounced and striking. She wondered what he was thinking. She wondered what he would do with himself the rest of the day. She wondered when he would require them to be together again. No one had told her how to behave once the marriage was over, so she had to assume that Anton would tell her

what to do, and when to do it. Glancing back over toward the Marchioness, Gwynneth wondered if her husband's mother would be someone she could speak with about such things, if she needed to. She needed some kind of mother-figure to confide in besides Alice, especially since her own mother had died years ago. Until then, she supposed she would just have to learn things along the way.

As the breakfast meal began to break up, Earl Leopold and Gerrod announced that they would be departing shortly. A small shiver of dread raced down Gwynneth's spine at the news. Having her father and brother depart meant that she'd be totally alone at Weldon with only a few servants to remind her of home. She would be completely dependent on the stranger who was now her husband.

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It was still morning when Earl Leopold and Gerrod left for their home in Clarendon. Gwynneth fought back tears as she bade them farewell, and Anton watched with regret. She hated that her wife seemed to be unhappy, but she didn't know what to do about it.

The Marchioness was leading her daughter-in-law away for a tour of the manor's kitchen when she turned back to Anton, who was intent on sneaking outside to get away for awhile.

"Anton," The Lady Marina called out, stopping Anton's escape.

"Yes, Mother?"

"How long will you be staying at Weldon? A few weeks, perhaps?"

"I'm afraid only for a few days longer." Anton said.

"A few days! Why only a few days?" Marina protested.

"I need to return to Wextony, Mother."

"But you are needed here! Your father needs you!"

"I am needed at Wextony as well. I have matters that must be attended to; I cannot stay away any longer." Anton insisted firmly, her brows furrowing in slight anger. She wasn't happy that her Mother would argue about this in front of Gwynneth.

Lady Marina read the firm tone in her daughter's voice. She wouldn't push the issue in front of the young Lady Gwynneth, but she would speak to Anton later, in private. "Very well. Leave if you must, but your father will be expecting you to return shortly. You must start fulfilling your role as heir to Weldon." The older woman chastised.

Anton's face darkened, "Yes, Mother... I know full well about the *roles* I must fulfill." Her voice was low and bitter, and the message she spat was clear. The two Weldon women stared at each other for a moment as the room became full of tension. Gwynneth was keenly aware that

unspoken words of anger were being exchanged between her husband and the Marchioness and it made her dreadfully uncomfortable. She was shocked that Lady Marina would even dare to speak to Anton in such a way, and her eyes darted nervously back and forth between the two of them as silence reigned.

Having had enough of her mother's verbal assault, Anton broke the stare. "I'm going hunting," she announced. "I shan't return until nightfall."

Lady Marina clenched her jaw tight, wanting to give her impetuous daughter a piece of her mind, but knowing that she shouldn't do such a thing in Gwynneth's presence. Anton was being rude, and she intended to let her daughter know it sooner or later.

Seeing that her mother's only response was to glare at her, Anton turned on her heel and abruptly walked out. She didn't really feel like hunting, but it was as good an excuse as any to get out of the manor for awhile.

As she watched the disappearing figure of her daughter, Lady Marina sighed aloud. Turning to look at her daughter-in-law's perplexed face, she smiled, "Gwynneth, my dear, let us go outside in the gardens. I believe you and I have some things to discuss."

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It had been four days since her father and brother left, and four days since she'd spoken to her husband. Gwynneth interacted with her mother- and father-in-law every day, taking all her meals with them while Anton remained curiously absent.

Lady Marina had tried to enlighten Gwynneth as much as she could. They had taken several pleasant walks around the manor grounds as the Marchioness casually offered tidbits and advice about Anton and his disposition. Lady Marina told her that, although Anton had a tendency to be moody and aloof, he really was a kind, considerate soul underneath it all. Gwynneth wanted to believe her, of course, but she didn't see how a warrior - a slayer of men on the battlefield - could be kindly. The Marchioness also gave her subtle suggestions as to how she could best serve Anton, and she outlined both Gwynneth's and Anton's expected responsibilities now that he was the heir to Weldon.

Despite her lingering feeling of bewilderment, Gwynneth was grateful for her mother-in-law's informative words. It was obvious to her that Lady Marina, though obediently subservient to her husband, was a learned woman who knew a thing or two about running a kingdom. Gwynneth felt like the older woman provided at least a little insight and background about her husband, and it helped her feel a bit more comfortable about what her role was to be. Still, the fact that Anton stayed away from her continued to make her anxious and insecure. She caught only fleeting glimpses of him here and there as he came and went, hunting, or riding, or whatever it was he did when he disappeared day after day. They exchanged nods and very small, polite smiles, but that was it. Gwynneth thought that she longed for her husband's presence and attention, but she couldn't be sure. She only knew that she didn't understand the feelings she was experiencing.

As each night passed without a visit from her husband, Gwynneth wondered how long Anton

would stay away, and why? Was he bored with her already, after only a week of marriage? Was she so displeasing that he simply couldn't bear to be with her again? Or did he have another mistress on the side whose company he preferred? Anton had been very civil toward her, and Gwynneth thought that things had gone reasonably well between them the night of their wedding and the morning after, but perhaps she was wrong?

She confided in her ladies maid one evening, spilling her concerns and woes to the older woman when she could no longer stand it.

"I don't think ye should worry, Milady," Alice said in her pleasant lilt. "Everyone knows tisn't a pleasant ordeal for a woman; perhaps ye should even be thankful that ye don't have to submit to his urges every night."

Had it been unpleasant? The young Lady had to think for a moment. "It's not the... unpleasantness that worries me, Alice," Gwynneth began, "it's the fact that he seems to intentionally stay away from me. If he avoids me during the day, he shall never come to me at night."

"Tisn't yer fault, Milady," Alice said, "Tisn't unusual for a husband and wife to come together only once or twice per fortnight. If it's more than that, the wife should be happy to know that she pleased her husband enough to garner his repeated attentions." The maid explained with a small smile. "And if the husband wants to sleep in the same bed with her all night, why, the wife should consider herself held in very high esteem indeed."

The small blonde considered the older woman's words. "But what if he doesn't come to me again within a fortnight... what does that mean then?" Gwynneth fretted.

Alice pursed her lips, contemplating her words carefully before she spoke. Her young mistress was vulnerable and confused, and she didn't want to hurt her in any way. "I think, Milady, that Milord is... preoccupied, with other matters," she began. "I believe that ye haven't done anything wrong; I believe he is just overwhelmed at the moment and has many things on his mind. Perhaps once ye both return to Wextony and he is surrounded by his home comforts, he'll come to ye again."

Gwynneth sighed, seemingly satisfied with her maid's answer. "I suppose you're right, Alice, although I don't quite understand it. If the point of taking a wife is to produce an heir, I don't see how I'm going to do that all by myself." The young Lady sniffed.

Alice hid her smile. She wondered if perhaps her Lady found that coupling with her handsome young husband was more of a pleasant venture than she cared to admit.

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Gwynneth was sitting up in her bed, reading and writing by candlelight, when a knock sounded at her door. Her heart immediately leapt into her throat and she hesitantly called out for the person to enter. As Anton entered her chambers, her heart began to pound mercilessly. Her husband was dressed in a black shirt and black pants and his hair was damp and loose. Gwynneth

swallowed against the lump in her throat.

"Good evening My Lady," Anton said quietly, smiling at the younger woman.

"And to you, My Lord," Gwynneth responded, her voice tinged with nervousness.

Anton stared at her wife for a moment, absorbing her soft, serene beauty and telling herself that she had been a fool to stay away for so long.

The truth was, she wanted to be with Gwynneth, but not for purely carnal reasons; she was genuinely drawn to her. She would catch glimpses of the blonde here and there, each time feeling a sense of longing grip her heart, as well as an urge of lust tighten her loins. She wanted to go to the young woman; she wanted to seduce her and take her, every night if she could. Not only was it surprising that she harbored such lustful intent and thoughts about someone she'd just met, it was almost unheard of to feel that way. Anton knew that wanting someone in such an intensely sexual way was frowned upon, and indeed, the church forbid couples from having relations purely for the sake of desire. And besides all of that, she still felt ashamed to be duping the poor girl about her true identity.

So Anton had convinced herself that she should stay away. After receiving a chastising from both her mother and father, however, she was reminded that it would hurt Weldon's relationship with the House of Clarendon if Gwynneth was to send word to her father that she was neglected and unhappy. Although Anton argued that Gwynneth would not do such a thing, Edgar nevertheless insisted that she spend more time with the young woman and 'take better care of her'. So here she was, attempting to be 'better' and join with Gwynneth again without making a fool of herself.

"I plan to leave for Wextony tomorrow," Anton said suddenly, wishing to avoid the issue of coupling for a moment. "You may go with me, or, if you prefer, you may stay here and await my eventual return."

Gwynneth looked at Anton for a moment. This was the most he'd ever said to her at one time, and she wanted to make sure she gave the correct answer. "I-I will do as you wish, My Lord." She said with some hesitation.

Anton pursed her lips and withheld a sigh. She'd been afraid that Gwynneth would say this. She didn't really want to take the young woman with her to Wextony, but she knew that she couldn't very well leave her here either; her parents would be furious. As much as she was attracted to the young woman, Anton still felt uneasy being around her and carrying on with the farce that was their marriage. The thought of the two of them being all alone at Wextony quite frankly, filled her with dread. She knew that her mother, and even her father, had been coaching Gwynneth about her duties and expected roles, and she wasn't overly eager to break away from the diversion that her parents had been providing for her. Still, she had to return home.

"Well then, you should have your attendants pack your things at the first light of the morrow so that we may leave on time." Anton quipped, perhaps a little too sharply, as she returned her

attention to her wife.

"Yes, of course, My Lord," Gwynneth said, bowing her head slightly. Anton seemed upset, and she feared she'd said the wrong thing, though she couldn't imagine why.

Seeing her wife's bowed head, Anton felt bad for being cross. Gwynneth was her *wife*; she was *supposed* to spend time with her. The young woman had done nothing wrong, and Anton suddenly felt disgusted with herself for treating her as though she had. She needed to correct that.

Anton approached Gwynneth's bed and reached out for the book that the younger woman held in her hands. "What are you reading?" She asked, watching as her wife's blue-green depths slowly lifted to look up at her.

Gwynneth's eyes met her husband's vivid blue, and she faltered at the intense look she found there. "It-It's... my journal." She answered meekly.

"A journal?" Anton said, quirking a brow upward. "You write in it?"

Again Gwynneth hesitated, "Yes, My Lord."

Anton wiggled the book a little, "Whatever do you write about?" she asked, smirking slightly as she regarded the blonde.

Gwynneth was so taken aback by the question that she couldn't answer. Her mouth opened, but nothing came out.

"Do you write about *me*, dear wife?" Anton teased.

But Gwynneth didn't realize her husband was teasing. The tone of Anton's voice suddenly reminded her of Aldred, and she nearly froze in fear, thinking that, at last, Anton was going to turn cruel and torment her as Aldred did.

Seeing the look of fear on her wife's face, Anton again felt bad for frightening the poor girl. She seemed to be doing everything wrong and nothing right. She reached out and touched Gwynneth's arm, noticing the way the young woman flinched beneath her fingers.

"I ask you this only in jest, My Lady," Anton said in a low, hushed voice. Gwynneth looked at her, her expression still fearful. "Your journal is personal, and for your eyes only; I respect that." Anton added sincerely.

Gwynneth managed a nod and swallowed nervously, "T-Thank you, My Lord," she said, still regarding her husband warily. She wasn't sure what to make of the exchange; had her husband been teasing her?

Anton mentally kicked herself. She knew that Gwynneth was already feeling unsure and overwhelmed; now she seemed to be terrified. She sat down on the edge of the bed, very close to

the blonde. As Gwynneth looked up at her again, their eyes locked and Anton sensed a spark of the connection they'd shared once before.

She reached out and grasped a small hand, "Do not be fearful, Wife," Anton whispered. "I shan't harm you... I swear it."

Gwynneth's eyes were blurred with tears when she felt the pressure of her husband's lips upon hers. Anton kissed her gently at first, then deeper and more passionately as he buried his fingers in her long hair and pulled her into an embrace before slowly laying her down onto the bed.

As Anton quickly discarded her boots, Gwynneth's heart began to race in fearful anticipation of what they were going to do. She began to chant inside her head, trying to ease her panic and calm her racing nerves, *this is Anton... this isn't Aldred... this is Anton*. When her husband returned to her side, she felt his hands slide underneath her nightgown and trail gently up her legs, making her inhale sharply.

"Shh," Anton soothed, "It's all right... I shan't hurt you," she repeated softly as she lifted Gwynneth's gown up to her stomach, exposing the lower half of her body to the cool night air. Shifting herself for better access, Anton continued to run her fingers all over the warm, inviting flesh of her wife's stomach, hips, and thighs.

Gwynneth's heart hammered madly inside her chest. The butterfly caresses that her husband was bestowing on her threw her into a tailspin. Panic mingled with arousal, and she couldn't get a grip on the overpowering sensations that flowed through her sensitized body.

Seeing the rapid rising and falling of her wife's chest, Anton stilled her movements for a moment and looked down at the younger woman's flushed face. *So vulnerable... so lovely*, she thought.

She dipped her head and kissed Gwynneth deeply. "You are truly beautiful, My Lady," Anton rasped against her wife's parted lips.

Gwynneth could scarcely believe her ears. She was stunned but managed to whisper back, "Thank you, My Lord."

Anton kissed Gwynneth again and trailed her fingers down to carefully delve into her wife's sex. Finding a slight wetness, she was pleased that the blonde was at least somewhat aroused. Looking into oceanic eyes, Anton smiled and kissed Gwynneth deeply again, wishing to reassure her and silently convey how much she wanted her.

Gwynneth obediently went along with the kissing, not knowing exactly how to respond, but feeling encouraged that Anton was smiling at her. She was very aware of a sudden need she had to touch her husband. It was a distinct urge that begged her to wrap her arms around him and feel his gentle strength as he hovered over her. Gwynneth had the feeling that instead of using his size and strength against her, as Aldred did, Anton would use it to protect her. She was beginning to think that, rather than feel afraid of her husband's quiet power and dominance, she should welcome it. It was a strangely reassuring sensation, and Gwynneth felt her panic level drop ever

so slightly.

Unable to wait any longer, Anton persuaded her wife's thighs apart and situated herself between them. Reaching down to untie her pants, she quickly withdrew her leather phallus and brought it to Gwynneth's wetness. Looking into jade eyes, Anton pushed inside slowly.

Gwynneth bit her bottom lip, fighting to prevent the escape of a groan as Anton entered her. The tight, full sensation took her breath away until Anton stopped for a moment and came to rest on top of her. Leaning down to place soft kisses on her lips, he slowly began moving his hips back and forth, pulling himself out then pushing back in again. Realizing that there was no discomfort this time, Gwynneth was able to change her focus and concentrate on the strange feelings her husband was arousing in her.

Anton pumped her hips carefully, wanting the small blonde to get used to the feeling. She had forgotten how wonderful it felt to be connected to her beautiful wife like this. It was incredible. She could feel, hear, and smell everything, and her own sex began to pulse with desire as it received stimulation from the thrusting motions. Aroused but needing to feel more, Anton reached down and urged Gwynneth's thighs further apart, opening her up so she could get as close to the younger woman as possible.

Feeling her husband sink deeper into her finally made Gwynneth gasp aloud. She gripped the bed coverings and squeezed her eyes shut as Anton released a soft moan and pushed his hips firmly against her. He was fully inside her, she realized in amazement. Her heart pounded erratically as her body began throbbing like never before. She felt flushed as the warmth of her husband's body melded with her own and her heavy nightgown suddenly felt suffocating. Her sex throbbed and her body pulsed and seemed to cry out for something, but she didn't know what. She only knew that she wanted desperately to grab ahold of Anton and pull him against her. She wanted him to shield her and protect her and keep her safe from everyone and everything. Tears began to sting her eyes and Gwynneth scolded herself internally for thinking such thoughts.

Anton placed her hands on either side of Gwynneth's shoulders and began thrusting in short, swift strokes, each one bringing her closer to the edge. A fire started deep in the pit of her belly, and soon it swelled and burst into flames, engulfing her as she gritted her teeth and released a strangled groan of relief.

Her body collapsed downward, but Anton tried not to lay her full weight upon her wife. Instead she dropped to her forearms and nestled her face alongside Gwynneth's head. The smell of jasmine and flowers filled her senses as she listened to the young woman's labored breathing. Gwynneth's heart still pounded harshly, and Anton could feel it thumping against her.

Gwynneth lay very still as her husband remained above her, resting himself as he panted warm and heavy against her neck. Again she felt the urge to wrap her arms around him, but again she made her hands remain motionless upon the bed. She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling her body ache as it continued to thrum insistently. Anton's damp hair brushed against her cheeks and she caught another whiff of his familiar clean scent as he shifted and withdrew from her. Her sex convulsed from the movement, and she flinched noticeably.

Anton halted her movements, "Are you alright?" she whispered, looking intently at her wife's slightly furrowed brows.

"Yes," Gwynneth rasped in return, nodding but not opening her eyes.

Anton wasn't sure that her wife was being completely honest, and, she wasn't sure that the young woman had experienced any kind of pleasure at all. Her youthful body seemed to indicate that she was aroused, but the expression on her face said that she was uncomfortable and tense. Perhaps it was just Gwynneth's inexperience... perhaps it would just take time for the enjoyment and pleasure to come... or, perhaps Gwynneth just didn't like it? Anton didn't want to think about that. She thought, instead, that it would best to just leave the poor girl alone, so she moved away, sitting herself on the edge of the bed and quickly tying up her pants.

Gwynneth briefly wondered what Anton would say if she asked if she could touch him. *By now he must think me as exciting as a wooden board*, she fretted inwardly. Then again, she wasn't expected to do anything more than this, was she? Her role was just to lie still and let her husband take his pleasure, and that's what she was doing. She wasn't supposed to do anything else... it wasn't proper for her to want anything more... was it? Her worrisome thoughts were interrupted by the feel of Anton's hand.

He had turned back to her and grasped her nightgown, pulling it back down to cover her again. As she opened her eyes, Gwynneth locked onto her husband's gentle, light blue hue. They looked at her kindly, seeming to understand her distress rather than use it against her. Gwynneth's heart skipped a beat as Anton leaned toward her and lowered his face to hers. Warm, pliant lips pressed against hers, and Gwynneth could not help it when her hand lifted and tentatively touched her husband's face. She was just about to withdraw the mutinous appendage when Anton suddenly brought his own hands up to cup her face and kiss her deeper.

For several minutes they simply kissed and allowed their hands to linger and learn one another. Gwynneth was amazed at the softness of her husband's cheeks, and Anton reveled in being able to connect with the beautiful blonde in such a sweetly intimate way.

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For many hours after her husband left her room, Gwynneth remained wide awake. She marveled at the many unfamiliar sensations Anton had elicited in her tonight. The unexpected response of her body when he touched her... the smooth texture of his youthful face... the strange feeling of excitement that coursed through her when they kissed... and the odd way in which her body seemed to feel stimulated, yet unfulfilled at the same time.

As she stared into the dark void of her room, the young Lady touched her fingers to her lips, remembering the way in which her husband had tenderly tasted and caressed them.

She was falling for him. A man she barely even talked to, let alone knew, and she was becoming completely enthralled with him.

How could it be?

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Chapter Six

The next morning, as Alice helped Lady Gwynneth pack up her things, she couldn't help but notice that the young woman seemed to be in a more pleasant mood. She wondered if the young newlywed was excited for the change of pace that heading to Wextony would provide, or if perhaps she'd been visited last night. The older woman smiled at the thought as she looked around her Lady's chambers and gathered up a few remaining things.

Just then, Gwynneth entered the room. "Alice, would you mind leaving me for a few moments. I need to lie down for a bit." The younger woman said as she walked over to her bed and laid down.

Immediately concerned, the maid rushed over to her Lady's side, "Does something ail ye, Milady?" she asked, noting Gwynneth's pale face.

"My stomach feels a bit upset," Gwynneth said, "I'm sure it'll settle down in a minute or two."

Alice frowned, "Did this just come upon ye, Milady, or have ye felt ill for sometime?"

Gwynneth closed her eyes as her stomach churned again, "Mm, I don't recall, really. It's probably just nerves."

The ladies maid thought differently, however. "Shall I fetch the physician, Milady?"

"No, no. I'll be fine, Alice." Gwynneth insisted, her eyes still closed.

"Perhaps I should fetch Lord Anton and advise him that you're feeling poorly?" Alice suggested.

Gwynneth's eyes flew open, "No!" she said quickly, "...No, thank you, Alice," she amended, regaining her composure. "I'll be fine in a few moments. It's just the excitement of going to Wextony. I'll be good as new once I rest, I'm sure."

Alice's mouth twisted in unspoken disagreement. "Very well, Milady." She said, turning and leaving the young woman alone to rest. As she closed the door, the maid paused, thinking that even though Gwynneth was certain it was nothing more than nerves, she suspected it could be something much larger indeed.

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The trip to Wextony was lengthy, dull and cold. To make matters worse, Gwynneth felt terribly nauseous nearly the entire time. The carriage she rode in bounced and vibrated, and her stomach seemed to rise and fall with every jolt. The only bright spots of the trip were the times when

they'd stop and Anton would fetch her out of the carriage so she could take a stroll and stretch her legs. She enjoyed the way her husband would link his arm with hers and walk around, chatting and pointing out something on the horizon or in the surrounding lands. He was very knowledgeable about the countryside, and the fact that he talked and shared things with her made her feel as though he was opening up to her at last. Whenever they stopped to eat or drink, Anton always saw that Gwynneth was taken care of first and foremost, even serving her himself several times. He almost seemed to dote on her, and it thrilled the young Lady to no end.

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The first day and night at Wextony passed rather quickly, although for Gwynneth, it was filled with continued nausea and exhaustion. Wextony was small, but beautiful, and as much as Gwynneth wanted to wander around and familiarize herself with everything, she could only manage to spend an hour or two away from her bedroom before she needed to lie down again.

The second morning after her arrival, Gwynneth's illness escalated from feeling nauseous to full-fledged retching. All morning and afternoon she stayed in her chambers, alternating between lying curled up in a ball in her bed and emptying the contents of her stomach into the nearest waste receptacle. She began to worry that whatever she was suffering from was only getting worse.

Alice was concerned about her Lady's illness, but Gwynneth instructed her not to say anything to anyone. She didn't want to notify Anton, even though she hadn't seen much of him since their arrival. He was quite busy catching up with his staff and attending to the affairs of his household with his steward, and Gwynneth didn't want to disturb him. Besides, she feared that he would be displeased to find that she was lounging about instead of fulfilling her role as Lady of the Manor.

It wasn't until the fourth morning after their arrival that Anton realized something was amiss. As she sat at the head of the breakfast table, the young Lord wondered where her wife had been hiding the past few days. Granted, she had been distracted with trying to catch up on everything that had happened since she'd been gone, but Anton was sure that Gwynneth would be out and about, getting acquainted with the manor staff and learning the routines of Wextony. However, after several staff members commented that they had not even seen the new Lady of the House, Anton began to wonder if something was wrong.

As she continued to eat her morning meal alone, Anton caught sight of her wife's attendant, "Alice," Anton called out, startling the older woman.

The maid scurried over to the table, "Yes Milord?"

"Where is Lady Gwynneth?"

"She's, uh," the maid hesitated for a second, "She's in her chambers, Milord."

Anton's brows rose, "Well is she planning on *leaving* her chambers anytime soon? Perhaps to join me for a meal?"

Anton's indignant tone made Alice flush with fear. She didn't want to disobey her Lady, but she could not deceive her Lord either. "Sh-She," the maid stammered, acutely feeling the demanding glare emanating from Anton's eyes. "She hasn't been feeling well, Milord." Alice bowed her head slightly, feeling that she was betraying her Lady, somehow.

Anton was immediately concerned. "She's not well?" Anton said. Alice only nodded in reply. "How long has this been going on?" Anton demanded.

"Since before we arrived, Milord." The maid confessed.

"Bloody hell," Anton cursed, tossing her napkin on the table as she pushed her chair back and stood abruptly. "I don't suppose it occurred to her, or you, to inform *me* of this?" She spat, now perturbed and incensed.

"I-I'm sorry, Milord, but the Lady didn't want me to say anything. She felt that it wasn't necessary to disturb ye with it." Alice stammered rapidly, fearing her Lord's wrath.

"Disturb me? I am her *husband!*" Anton shouted, not understanding why Gwynneth would keep this from her.

"Yes, Milord." Alice said helplessly, bowing her head and praying that she wouldn't be punished for this later.

Anton looked at the maid's semi-covering form and felt bad for being angry with her. She would probably need to apologize to the woman later, but right now, she only wanted to speak with her wife.

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Gwynneth was floating in and out of sleep, her stomach still roiling and rebelling against her. Alice had been hounding her about seeing the physician, and after a bout of violent retching this morning, the young Lady was beginning to give the idea some serious consideration. A soft knock at the door pulled out of her sleepy ruminations. "Come in," she rasped.

Anton walked into the room to find Gwynneth lying on her bed, still wearing her night clothes. Her feelings of indignation from being excluded from her wife's welfare had dissipated on the short journey to Gwynneth's chambers. If she was honest, Anton had to admit that it was partly her fault that she hadn't checked up on the young woman for herself. Now that she was face to face with her wife's pale face and hollow eyes, she knew that what Gwynneth needed was her concern, rather than her aggravation.

Surprised to see her husband and embarrassed at being caught lying down, literally, Gwynneth bolted upright on the bed quickly. Too quickly, in fact, for the motion made her head spin and she felt instantly sick from the dizziness.

"My Lord," she croaked, holding her hand to her churning stomach and praying that she wouldn't retch.

"My Lady," Anton replied as she closed the door. "I'm told you're not feeling well," she said as she walked up to stand beside Gwynneth's bed, "and you haven't left your chambers nor have you been taking meals."

The tone of Anton's voice was neither scolding nor mild, and Gwynneth couldn't tell what her husband was feeling. His face was blank but he stared at her intensely, making her blush with a feeling of guilt.

"Yes, I," she hesitated, darting her eyes away, "I'm afraid I haven't been sleeping very well, and I've had an upset stomach these past few days." She said, venturing a tentative look up to see if Anton was displeased. "I'm sorry for failing in my duties, husband. I shall try to be present at the noontime meal today."

Anton sat down on the side of the bed, much to Gwynneth's surprise. "You needn't come down if you truly aren't feeling well," she said gently as jade eyes slowly raised again to look at her. "Why haven't you been sleeping? Is there something keeping you awake or bothering you?" Anton inquired softly, peering pointedly at her wife, who again dropped her eyes.

Gwynneth shook her head slightly, "Nothing is wrong, My Lord," she lied. "Perhaps it was just the journey from Weldon and the adjustment of coming to live here at Wextony. These past few fortnights have been quite a whirlwind of change for me, that's all." she said, her eyes darting up again to gauge her husband's reaction.

"Yes, of course it's a change. It's a change for both of us." Anton replied, her voice gentle and low. She paused for a moment, contemplating her next question. "Tell me, Gwynneth," she began, "if you were unhappy, about anything, you would inform me of this... would you not?" Anton queried, carefully watching her wife's face for the response.

Gwynneth stared at Anton uncertainly. It was the first time he had ever addressed her informally, by her name, and she had to consider what it meant for a moment. Realizing she was still staring, Gwynneth quickly dropped her eyes again, "Yes, I... I would inform you," she answered, her face flushing slightly. "But I assure you... I am not unhappy." She wanted to be personal and add 'Anton', but she wasn't sure if her husband would welcome it or not.

Anton nodded, appearing satisfied with the answer. "Very well then. I shall have a tonic sent up to ease your sick stomach." she said as she slid off the side of the bed and stood to leave. Pausing for a moment, Anton stepped toward Gwynneth, who held her breath as he neared. Leaning down, Anton placed a delicate kiss on Gwynneth's lips, then turned and began to walk away.

Gwynneth's eyes quickly and inexplicably filled with tears at the tender gesture. Just as Anton reached the door, the younger woman impulsively called out, "Husband?"

Anton turned back to her, "Yes?"

Gwynneth paused nervously for a second, wondering if it was wise to be speaking to her

husband like this, "Are you... are you unhappy at all?"

The question was quiet and tentative, and Anton realized that it must have taken Gwynneth a lot of nerve to ask it. She paused for a moment before answering. "I suppose... I am as happy as I'm able to be." Anton finally answered.

The Lord and Lady stared at each other for a moment, then Anton finally bid the younger woman goodnight and left.

Gwynneth contemplated her husband's cryptic answer all night long.

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...[Continued in Part 3](#)...

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~ Second Son ~

by [A. K. Naten](#)

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**** MORE NC-17 WARNING ****

PART THREE

Chapter Seven

With the help of tonics and plenty of rest, Gwynneth began to feel a bit better over the course of the next week. She still felt ill some mornings but figured it was just a nagging influenza that would eventually go away. She made her rounds and met with the steward and all the staff and servants, gradually acclimating herself to the routines of the Manor and its people. Wextony was proving to have a more casual, laid-back atmosphere as compared to Weldon, and Gwynneth envisioned herself being happy there.

She had not been intimate with Anton since they'd arrived. This was mainly due to their move, his busy schedule, and her illness, but Gwynneth was beginning to miss the little private

moments that they had shared. Although they spoke with each other and ate most meals together, she longed for something more than just her husband's physical presence. Anton was kind and attentive toward her whenever he was around, but mere words didn't seem to be enough to satisfy whatever it was the young Lady unwittingly craved.

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Gwynneth was seated on her bed brushing her long hair as night fell. She'd dismissed Alice hours ago, wanting some time alone to read before retiring for the night. A knock sounded at her door and she bade the visitor entrance. She was a little surprised to see her husband's dark form enter the room, and a tiny tingle of anticipation coursed through her as she watched him walk toward her.

"Good evening, My Lady," Anton greeted softly.

"Good evening to you, sir," Gwynneth smiled, her nervousness escalating.

Anton came to stand in front of the blonde, "I didn't have an opportunity to speak with you this evening," she began, "I wanted to inquire as to how you've been feeling?"

Gwynneth looked up at her husband, feeling a surge of energy race through her as her eyes took in his tall, strong countenance and uniquely handsome face. "I'm feeling better, thank you." She wondered if he was genuinely concerned, or if he was asking her because he wished to be intimate with her. The thought suddenly filled her with an unexpected sense of excitement.

"Very good," Anton said, her voice nearly a whisper. Standing so close to the beautiful blonde was wreaking havoc on her self-control. The room smelled of lavender and herbs, and the burning candles cast a soft, yellow glow on everything. Anton wanted Gwynneth desperately, but she wanted to be sure her advances would be welcomed, particularly since she hadn't been able to spend much time with her new wife.

The journey from Weldon had been especially arduous for Gwynneth, and once they'd arrived at Wextony, Anton had been overwhelmed with tasks and matters that needed immediate attention. She didn't like being so out of touch with Gwynneth, especially while she was feeling poorly. Anton very much wanted to rekindle the gentle flames of attraction she'd sensed blossoming between the two of them while at Weldon; she'd missed their private moments together. Blue-green depths studied her intently, and she reached a hand out to touch her wife's angelic face.

Gwynneth's eyes fluttered shut at the sensation and her stomach lurched suddenly. *Oh please, not now!* She thought in panic.

Anton leaned down and touched her lips to Gwynneth's, kissing her softly. "I wish to be with you, my wife... if you will have me." she whispered against the younger woman's lips.

Gwynneth's heart began to pound as a blast of confusion fought with the arousal that filled her. *Why is he asking me this?* She worried.

"Yes, of course," Gwynneth managed to reply, reaching out to take hold of Anton's hand. "I am here to serve you, husband." she added dutifully, wondering why he would not realize this already, and thinking that it was a bit late to be asking any kind of permission.

Anton sat down on the bed beside her, shaking her head slightly, "No," she began, looking earnestly into the beautiful, oceanic eyes. "I do not wish for you to think that way. You are not my servant; you are a Lady, and you are my *wife*."

Gwynneth's brows drew together as she stared in disbelief.

Anton subtly squeezed the hand that still held hers, "If you do not desire to be together, I want you to say so, Gwynneth. I don't intend to be the kind of husband who simply takes what he wants, regardless of his wife's wishes."

Gwynneth stared, dumbfounded, her husband's respectful words and intentions rendering her momentarily speechless. When she regained her senses at last, she was tentative, but assured, "I-I do wish to be with you... Anton." She whispered her husband's name aloud, and it felt good. ...It felt right. He answered her with a smile and a long, tender kiss.

They laid back against the bed and kissed slowly at first, then more deeply as their desire quickly escalated. For the first time, Gwynneth returned her husband's kisses with enthusiasm, which delighted Anton. She pressed further, devouring Gwynneth's perfect lips and invading the recesses of her mouth with an eager tongue. When the blonde released a whimper, Anton pulled back, thinking that it was too much for the younger woman.

Looking into her wife's eyes, Anton leaned down and placed a delicate kiss on slightly swollen lips. "Don't be afraid of this, love," she whispered before kissing her again.

Gwynneth nearly swooned at the term of endearment, and her heart thundered so loudly in her ears that she thought she'd mistaken the words. Perhaps that was why she said what she said next - perhaps she thought that Anton couldn't hear either.

"I'm not afraid of this, husband," she whispered back to Anton, "...not anymore."

Anton stopped abruptly and opened her eyes wide to stare at Gwynneth. For a split second, Gwynneth thought he was going to chastise her. But when his mouth slowly curled into a small smile, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Having received the reassurance that the young Lady was not afraid, Anton seduced her wife with abandon. They kissed lasciviously as she slipped her hands beneath Gwynneth's nightgown, letting them roam over the luscious, nubile landscape that was her wife's body. She pushed the boundaries, raising Gwynneth's gown up high and sliding her hands up past the younger woman's stomach to feel the satiny softness of her full breasts. Gwynneth gasped aloud at the overwhelming sensation, and Anton enjoyed her look of wide-eyed shock. She wanted to shock her. She wanted to push the dainty beauty over the edge and make her cry out in unbridled

pleasure. It was not what they were supposed to do, but Anton no longer cared.

Wanting to go where she hadn't dared to go before, Anton turned her full attention to her wife's breasts, moving her head down to place soft kisses between them before taking one of the hardened nipples into her mouth. Another sharp gasp filled the air and Anton grinned against Gwynneth's pale, velvety skin. Pushing further, she let her lips slide over to taste the other breast, reveling in its supple warmth and silky texture.

Gwynneth's heart was hammering so harshly in her chest that she thought she might faint. What in the world was Anton doing to her? He was touching her everywhere, and placing his lips upon her! It was unheard of! It was forbidden! It was... lustful... and sensual... and... it thrilled her to no end. Her breasts seemed to be especially sensitive and tender, and with every flick of Anton's tongue, she could feel her sex convulse and her body respond.

Encouraged by Gwynneth's soft, breathy panting and squirming motions, Anton settled herself between her wife's legs and quickly reached down to undo her pants and withdraw her phallus. Gwynneth released a long, lingering sigh as Anton pushed inside her and immediately began a slow, steady rhythm.

The young Lady clutched at the bedsheets as Anton moved above her. She felt her pleasure climb higher and higher until it seemed that her body hovered again on that unknown precipice. She also felt the return of the urge to grasp her husband and cling to him. How terribly inappropriate and wanton would it be for her to do that? She wondered as she fought to restrain her desires.

Feeling a primal need to be closer and deeper, Anton reached down to grasp one of Gwynneth's knees, and then the other, encouraging her to bend and raise them up. Anton braced her arms wide and began to move her hips again, using longer, deeper strokes as she pushed with her whole body.

Gwynneth's mouth opened and she gasped aloud at the feeling, realizing how this action increased the contact and heightened the sensations even more.

Anton bent down and kissed Gwynneth hungrily, holding her face close, "Does it feel good to you, love?" she asked, her raspy voice hitching from her erratic breathing.

Gwynneth hesitated, unsure what she should admit, if anything. "I-I...", she looked into her husband's smoldering eyes, "Yes, husband... it does," she said, inhaling and exhaling raggedly.

Anton smiled and kissed her again. "Put your arms around me," she instructed the younger woman, "pull yourself to me so that we might feel one another completely."

Gwynneth was relieved that she was being given permission to hold on to Anton as she'd been desiring. Still, she raised her hands slowly, uncertainty plaguing her mind.

Anton sensed her wife's hesitation. "Touch me, Gwynneth... I want you to," she encouraged, "I

want you to feel me."

Gwynneth obeyed and looped her arms around her husband's neck and shoulders, resting her hands upon his taut back. Anton smiled and kissed her as she increased her thrusts, eager now to reach the pinnacle of their journey.

Gwynneth began to breathe in short, jagged bursts as she gripped Anton's shirt tightly and closed her eyes, absorbing the multitude of feelings that filled her body and soul. She found that she had a natural instinct to lift her hips upward to meet his, and she was amazed at the sensations that flowed through her... her husband's hardness gliding in and out of her... his soft lips upon hers... the tickling of his hair as it brushed against her face... the maddening jolt that shot through her body when her sensitive nipples scraped against his shirt... the relentless throbbing that filled her sex. The young Lady was overwhelmed.

Anton loved the feeling of Gwynneth's arms around her as the petite body pressed against hers. She could feel herself surging with desire as they moved in tandem and crept closer to the height of their pleasure. Feeling the beginning stirrings of her release, Anton reached down with one hand to touch Gwynneth intimately and bring her to climax as well. She wanted them to share it, and she wanted to show her wife just how wonderful it could be.

Shocked to feel Anton's fingers stroking her at the same time he plundered her, Gwynneth struggled to keep from shrieking out loud. She was overcome by powerful, sweeping feelings, and soon, quite unexpectedly, her back began to involuntarily arch up off the bed as her body was seized by a series of explosive spasms. Unable to contain herself, she released a short, strangled cry of surrender, her fingernails unconsciously digging into Anton's back as her very first orgasm tore through her young body, shattering her swiftly and thoroughly.

Hearing and feeling her wife's release, Anton gladly let hers come as well. Gritting her teeth and jerking her hips, she let the waves crash over her again and again as her hands clutched and held Gwynneth's body tight. She finally collapsed, barely able to keep her full weight off the smaller woman.

They both laid there, panting, exhausted, and unable to speak. Gwynneth's arms remained wrapped around Anton's shoulders; she wanted to hold on to the feeling of warmth and security that the closeness provided.

The young Lady was overcome with a multitude of feelings, but what gripped her immediately was the fear that they'd done something terribly wrong. Granted, she didn't know much about having sexual relations, but she was fairly certain that they'd broken quite a lot of rules by kissing, touching, and having relations the way they just did. Her husband had touched her for reasons of sheer pleasure, and she had responded in a blatantly lustful manner. Moreover, she had enjoyed it immensely. In addition, Gwynneth feared that Anton would be unhappy about her involuntary reaction of clawing at his back like an animal.

As though reading her mind, Anton lifted his head up. They locked eyes, blue on jade, unspoken words hanging between them. When Anton gently smiled at her, Gwynneth couldn't help but

smile back in relief. As a gesture of additional reassurance, Anton leaned in and tenderly touched his lips to Gwynneth's, calming her further and binding their hearts closer together.

How was it, Gwynneth wondered, that she was able to trust Anton and feel safe with him already? How was it that she actually enjoyed coupling with him when she really knew so little about him? They were still strangers in so many ways, and yet when they came together, Gwynneth could feel the undeniable connection. It amazed and perplexed her, to say the very least.

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Chapter Eight

As the days passed, Gwynneth and Anton grew more comfortable with each other, both in and out of the bedroom. The young Lord came calling to his Lady's chambers nearly every night now, and Gwynneth not only welcomed his visits, she looked forward to them.

To Gwynneth, Anton was turning out to be a wonderful, attentive husband who respected her and never made her feel inadequate or unimportant. He was gentle and reverent when it came to their coupling, and he never failed to take her breath away with his intensity and passion. Life with him was turning out to be nothing like she'd expected, and almost everything she'd ever hoped for.

In her wildest dreams, Gwynneth would never have suspected that the intense, aloof stranger she married would turn out to be such a tender, devoted partner. Even though Anton always seemed to keep a careful reign on his emotions, he never lost his temper nor showed great anger toward anyone. The young Lord talked easily with his Lady whenever they took leisurely walks around the manor grounds together, and meal times became favorite moments to openly share thoughts and catch up on the happenings of the day.

Gwynneth felt like Anton treated her more like a friend and lover rather than a mere token wife, and she adored him for it. Anton even touched her affectionately in public, often bestowing small kisses on her cheeks or forehead. In fact, neither of them seemed to be able to stand near each other without physically connecting in some way. A hand placed on an arm, a gentle caress along a back; both made subtle overtures that showed they had genuine feelings for one another.

Anton noticed the changes in her wife and marveled at how the youthful, naive girl she'd married had quickly blossomed into the woman of her dreams. Gwynneth was still somewhat shy and unsure of herself, but she was turning out to be a very capable Lady of the House as well as a most passionate and eager lover.

With only a little encouragement from her husband, Gwynneth was able to throw caution to the wind and let herself go to experience everything Anton offered her. She trusted him and let him guide her however he desired, in whatever way he wanted. She gladly followed his leads, being rewarded with incredulous ecstasy time and time again.

It was a whole new way of life for her, in more ways than one.

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Gwynneth moped around the manor one evening, missing her husband and feeling lonely without his presence and companionship. Anton had been gone for a few days while he made a required appearance at the King's court, on behalf of his ailing father, and visited the small vassal towns that surrounded Wextony. It was the first time they'd been apart, and Gwynneth was surprised that she longed for Anton as much as she did.

She had just decided to turn in for the evening when Charles, the manor steward, came to tell her that a messenger had just arrived from Weldon. It seemed that Lady Marina was sending urgent word to Anton requesting him to come to Weldon immediately. Marquess Edgar's health had apparently taken a turn for the worse and things looked grim.

Charles suggested that a small party be sent to intercept Anton and inform him of the situation. Gwynneth agreed, even though she wished that she could somehow go along. If Anton went immediately to Weldon, there was no telling when she'd see him again, and it pained her to think of it. Nevertheless, she gave Charles her approval, and the messenger was dispatched again with word that Lord Anton was being summoned and would arrive at Weldon as soon as possible. The only thing Gwynneth could do now was to sit back and wait to receive some kind of message from her husband.

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Gwynneth waited four days before receiving any news. When a courier at last arrived at Wextony, it was to inform her that Marquess Edgar of Weldon was dead.

Anton had sent word requesting that Gwynneth join him at Weldon immediately. Everything and everyone at Wextony was in an uproar as Gwynneth frantically packed to go and be at her husband's side. She couldn't imagine what Anton must be going through at Weldon, and she was eager to see him and offer whatever assistance she could. She only hoped that she would survive the journey without becoming terribly ill again.

Gwynneth still was not feeling well, and after Anton had left the manor, she had finally relented to the pleas of her ladies maid and had summoned the physician to help her find relief. Victor Bergen, an older gentleman who had been Anton's personal physician since childhood, gave the young Lady a thorough examination, probing her, testing her, and asking her all sorts of highly personal questions. He didn't tell her anything specific about her mysterious illness, just that it would pass eventually, and that she needed plenty of rest and nourishing food.

To Gwynneth's surprise, Victor informed her that he would be traveling to Weldon with her. The Lady politely informed him that this wasn't necessary, but Victor insisted that it was. Gwynneth wasn't entirely certain that she trusted the elderly man, and she wondered if perhaps there was

another physician she could see once she reached Weldon. However, she couldn't be bothered with that at the moment; right now, her only concern was her husband.

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As they neared Weldon, Gwynneth felt nervous about seeing Anton. She'd never really dealt with a family death, having lost her mother when she was just a small child. There would be a large, public funeral and burial, and afterwards, Anton would officially take over as Marquess. Gwynneth's stomach flip-flopped as she realized, quite suddenly, that they would be the new Marquess and Marchioness of Weldon. It would also mean that they would have to move and permanently reside at Weldon. All the casual comfort that she'd begun to enjoy at Wextony would vanish. She was being thrust into yet another role that she was inadequately prepared for.

When at last they reached Weldon Manor, Gwynneth was all too glad to escape the carriage and go in search of her husband. She didn't find him, however. Instead, she found the manor's steward who told her that Anton was in a closed-door meeting with the Marquess Dowager and the manor's chaplain. Needing desperately to first relieve her bladder and then lie down and rest, Gwynneth decided to retire to her chambers, requesting that her things be brought up to her later.

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Night had fallen when Gwynneth was awakened by a knock at her door. Figuring it was the servants bringing her personal items to her, she walked to the door and opened it up. She was pleasantly surprised to find her husband instead. Anton looked exhausted and thoroughly washed-out. His hair was disheveled and his shirt was untucked, but he was a most welcome sight to the Lady.

"Oh, Anton," Gwynneth said with quiet intensity, wanting to throw her arms around him but hesitating because of the look on his face. It was a look of weariness, anguish, desolation, and something else she didn't recognize... it was something she'd never seen on her husband's handsome features before.

Gwynneth opened the door wider and Anton entered the room, saying nothing. The younger woman closed the door and turned around to find herself instantly enveloped by her husband's strong arms. Gwynneth gasped at the sudden motion, but before she could say anything, Anton's lips were upon hers, kissing her hard and deep. He seemed desperate to possess her as he backed her against the door and pressed the length of his body against hers.

"Gwynneth... dear Gwynneth," Anton rasped in-between kisses, "I've missed you, my love... I've needed you so." She panted the words, her voice tremulous and strained with a mixture of despair and want. She could not contain the powerful, unfamiliar emotions that flowed through her, and tears began to fill her eyes.

Gwynneth was shocked to see her normally stoic husband losing his ever-present control, but she quickly realized that what he needed was her comfort and reassurance.

"I'm here, my beloved," Gwynneth soothed, using the term of affection for the first time, "I'm here for you." She wrapped her arms around Anton's shoulders and they kissed with great emotion and passion as Gwynneth tried to ease her husband's cold misery and replace it with warmth and affection.

Anton's emotional breakdown and desperation soon turned from devouring her wife's lips to devouring her body. Without any preamble, Anton reached down and grabbed the hem of Gwynneth's nightgown, yanking it up as she pushed her knee between the young woman's legs. Sealing their mouths together in a deep kiss, Anton reached down to hastily unbutton her pants and withdraw her phallus. She quickly maneuvered between Gwynneth's thighs, planting her feet wide so that she could plunge herself deep within and join them together.

Gwynneth was flabbergasted that Anton would take her like this so unexpectedly, standing up against the door, but she soon forgot about the impropriety as her husband began to thrust into her hard and fast. Anton moved his hands down to grasp her bottom tightly, and within minutes, he was climaxing tearfully in her arms. Gwynneth continued to hold onto him as he relaxed against her, pinning her against the door. Several minutes passed until Anton seemed to regain control of himself.

"I-I'm sorry... forgive me, my love," Anton said, her voice muffled in Gwynneth's hair. "I couldn't... I-I didn't...," she drew back and looked at her wife shamefully, trying to explain her rash actions, but Gwynneth cut her off.

"Shh," the blonde shushed, placing a finger against her husband's lips and wiping the remnant tears from his red-rimmed eyes. "...It's alright."

Anton leaned forward and kissed Gwynneth tenderly. "I didn't mean to frighten you," she whispered with remorse.

"I'm not frightened," Gwynneth said, shaking her head slightly.

Anton stared at her wife, wondering when she'd evolved into such a beautiful, secure woman. Not caring to find the answer at that time, Anton quickly readjusted her pants then abruptly bent down and scooped the small blonde up into her arms, ignoring Gwynneth's surprised squeak as she walked over to deposit her onto the bed. Placing a reassuring kiss on the bow-shaped lips, Anton carefully slid her body between her wife's shapely legs and pushed the puffy nightgown out of the way again. One of these times, she vowed to remove the garment altogether.

Her hunger still unfulfilled, Anton broke the kiss and began to move down Gwynneth's body, trailing her lips along the silky flesh of Gwynneth's stomach and eliciting shaky sighs from the blonde. Continuing on, Anton let her lips graze over Gwynneth's hips and wander down to her thighs. Using her hands, she urged her wife's legs further apart and leaned down to place a kiss at the damp juncture of her inner thighs.

Gwynneth's whole body jumped at the sensation, "Anton!" she gasped, her hands flying down to

grab fistfuls of dark hair.

Anton raised her head, "Shh," she shushed, quickly reaching up to cover her wife's shock by placing a deep kiss on her parted lips before returning to the feast at hand.

It wasn't until some time later that Gwynneth realized that the strange wetness on her husband's lips came not from him, but from her. Had she not been lying down on the bed at that time, she would have surely fainted dead away.

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Gwynneth wondered what the hour was as she lay on her back watching the shadows flicker and dance along the ceiling of her bedroom chambers. Anton's body rested partly on top of hers and they both were very still, completely spent from their latest love-making exertion. Two times they had joined their bodies together and held each other tightly as they reached the heights of ecstasy in unison; all other time was spent just kissing and touching and reveling in each other's presence.

The young Lady had begun to think there was something dreadfully wrong with her as she laid there and quietly contemplated, her body still thrumming with aftershocks. Was it normal to feel so ravenous and enjoy coupling so thoroughly? Was it unheard of to fantasize about wanting your husband the way she always seemed to want Anton? Was it blasphemous to desire him every single night, and more? Was she nothing but a shameless trollop? Or did other women experience this kind of sexual hunger and neediness too?

She turned her head to look at her husband's face. Anton was relaxed and peaceful as he dozed beside her, his arm stretched casually across her mid-section, seeming to want to hold her and keep her close, even in a state of rest. Gwynneth wondered what he must have been feeling to cause him to come to her the way he had tonight.

She could tell that there was something very different about her husband as soon as he'd walked in the door. He had obviously been under a great deal of stress and was terribly upset, of course, but it was more than that. There was an intense aura of need and desperation that seemed to flow from him, and it resonated between them the whole time they'd made love together. Was it just because he was emotionally overwhelmed and needed an outlet? Or perhaps, Gwynneth secretly hoped, Anton just missed her and longed for her so very terribly? She really didn't know; she acknowledged that there were many things she still did not know about her husband.

Quietly reaching up with her hand, Gwynneth fingered a stray lock of hair that fell across Anton's forehead. He was an unusual, but beautiful combination of a man. It sounded strange, but it was the best way of describing him, in Gwynneth's mind. His cheeks held a slight tint of rosiness, and she quirked a small smile as she recalled the expressions on his face while in the throws of passion. Sometimes Anton smiled and kissed her tenderly; sometimes he closed his eyes and furrowed his brows in concentration; and sometimes he watched her and stared at her the whole time. Those times unnerved Gwynneth; the burning intensity of Anton's pale eyes was almost too much to bear.

She looked at his flushed cheeks again, recalling their softness. Gwynneth moved her hand to Anton's face, lightly brushing a finger along his jaw and marveling at the smooth, hairless texture. It was so... different. Some said that a lack of facial hair indicated effeminacy in a man, but Gwynneth could personally attest to the fact that this was *not* the case with her husband. Granted, the young Lady didn't mind the lack of hair and scratchiness, but it did make her wonder... just how old was her husband? Perhaps Anton lacked facial hair because he was much younger than she first thought? Gwynneth had assumed that he was a few years older than she was, but now, looking at him close up and unguarded, she wasn't so sure.

It didn't really matter anyway, and it wouldn't change anything if it were true. Even if Anton was just a mere teen, he was still the most kind, considerate man Gwynneth had ever known. He was beautiful, and he made her feel beautiful. The only way their love-making could be any better would be if she had the pleasure of feeling and touching Anton's flesh the way he felt hers. It was something she'd been thinking about more and more, but she knew that it would be exceedingly inappropriate to ask her husband to doff his clothing. The thought of their naked bodies merging together filled Gwynneth with incredible lust, but she forced the thoughts from her mind, lest Anton figure out what a wicked, insatiable wench she was.

Gwynneth grinned to herself, knowing that Anton would most likely not think such a thing at all. If anything, he seemed to enjoy and welcome her ever-emerging enthusiasm, which wasn't exactly what the young Lady had been expecting. Then again, nothing about her marriage or her husband had been as expected.

Anton had been so good to her, when he could have easily been so wretched. A strange twist of fate had caused her to be forced onto him, but instead of taking out any frustrations he might have felt on her, Anton had taken care of her and treated her with kindness and respect. He was never forceful with her, and he always made sure that her needs were met, as well as his. Her life with the young Lord was turning out so much better than she'd ever imagined.

Gwynneth wondered if Anton felt any kind of love for her; he had spoken love-like words to her, but was there any real meaning behind them? She was beginning to think that she felt love for him. The concept of loving someone was terribly foreign to her, but she was fairly certain that it was, indeed, what she was feeling.

The young Lady released a satisfied sigh and glanced again at her husband's face. He was completely still now, his breathing slow and deep. She figured that he'd fallen totally asleep, and as much as that surprised her, it pleased her too. She remembered Alice's comment about how most husbands did not wish to spend the entire night in their wife's bed. She smiled as she considered that her husband didn't seem to be like most others.

Gwynneth did wonder, though, if Anton had any mistresses. Even though it was a common practice and she had no right to feel jealous or demand anything, Gwynneth knew she would be terribly upset if Anton made a habit of keeping company with any other woman besides her. She'd never heard anything nor had seen any indications, and she hoped, quite selfishly, that her husband was too young to have a large repertoire of other lovers. Regardless of Anton's status

with other women, Gwynneth felt honored that her husband apparently preferred to stay by her side, and she was happy that he seemed relaxed enough to sleep so peacefully.

Reaching her hand up again, Gwynneth lightly ran a finger over her husband's left eyebrow, tracing the small white scar that bisected it. The hand on her waist twitched and Anton sighed contentedly as he snuggled a little closer to her. Gwynneth smiled again and closed her eyes, grateful for her life, love, and strange twists of fate.

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Chapter Nine

A strange noise greeted Anton's ears as she was pulled into consciousness the next morning. It sounded like someone coughing and gagging. As awareness dawned on her, Anton sat up in bed and looked around the room - which was not her room, she quickly realized - and saw Gwynneth bent over a small pot, holding her stomach and retching.

"Gwyn," Anton called out as she jumped off the bed, panicked by the sight and sounds. She hurried to her wife's side, slipping an arm around her waist and steadying the young woman. Gwynneth ceased retching and stood on shaky legs, allowing Anton to help her sit down on a nearby chair. Her face was dreadfully pale, and Anton immediately began to worry. Looking around the room, Anton spotted a pitcher of water.

"Are you still so ill, my love?" Anton asked as she wetted a rag and began to dab at the blonde's damp forehead.

"I'm afraid so," Gwynneth said, her voice hoarse and scratchy.

"I heard that Victor came along on your journey; has he been doctoring to you?" Anton asked as she poured a cup of water and guided it to Gwynneth's lips.

The younger woman held the water with trembling hands and sipped carefully. "He's given me some herbs and teas to help my sick stomach, but he says that what I need most is rest."

"Hmm," Anton pursed her lips together and darted her eyes away, "I suppose an 'overactive' night like last night isn't the best thing for you then... I apologize."

"No," Gwynneth frowned, suddenly fearful that Anton might stay away from her if she appeared sick and weak, "aside from the occasional fits of nausea, I-I feel perfectly fine." She insisted, shaking her head.

Anton made one more wipe across Gwynneth's forehead before kneeling down in front of her and fixing her with a knowing look. "You should listen to Victor. He's a wise man and a skilled physician. If he says you need to rest, then you shall."

Gwynneth dropped her eyes, "Yes, husband."

Anton smiled and ran a hand down the side of her wife's face. Even when deathly pale and sick, Gwynneth remained beautiful. "Come then," Anton said, standing and taking her wife's hand, "come and lie down in bed again."

The small blonde obeyed and climbed into the bed, allowing Anton to cover her with the blanket.

Anton leaned down to place a kiss on the younger woman's lips, "You need to rest... and I must go and continue to prepare for the funeral." Anton said, her demeanor abruptly becoming somber. Gwynneth almost felt ashamed that her illness made her momentarily forget the reason they were at Weldon in the first place. "I'll have a light breakfast sent up for you, and I'll come to check on you later."

Gwynneth watched as her husband turned and headed for the door. Her heart was suddenly full; full, but jumbled with mixed feelings of gratitude, sadness, happiness, uncertainty... and love. She felt like she would burst from the feelings bubbling up inside her.

"Husband?" she called out impulsively. Anton turned back to her. "...Thank you," Gwynneth said softly.

Anton's brows quirked in question, "What for?"

Gwynneth shook her head slightly, feeling embarrassed. "For... being so good to me... for taking such good care of me."

Anton walked back to her bedside and bent down to place a gentle, lingering kiss on her lips again. "I will always take good care of you, Gwynneth," she said with quiet sincerity as she held her face close and looked deeply into her wife's eyes. They kissed once again before Anton turned and left the room.

Gwynneth pulled the covers up to her chin and sighed out loud, grateful again for the good fortune of having such a loving, understanding husband.

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As Anton descended the stairway from the second floor, she came upon her doctor, Victor Bergen. "Victor!" Anton called out in greeting, "I was surprised to hear that you'd made the journey to Weldon, but I'm glad you're here, old friend." Anton said, patting the elderly physician on the back.

Indeed Victor Bergen was an old friend. He had helped to bring both Aldred and Anton into the world, and had remained Anton's personal physician ever since, moving with the young Lord when she acquired Wextony Manor. Anton considered Victor a personal friend and confidante, and he was one of only three remaining people who knew the truth and the real life story of the second son of the former Marquess and Marchioness of Weldon.

"Your father was a wise ruler and a good friend, my Lord... he will be missed." Victor squeezed Anton's forearm, and the young Lord could feel tears prick at her eyes. "I'm afraid, however, that my journey to Weldon was two-fold," Victor added, "I need to speak with you... about your wife."

Anton nodded, "Yes, Gwynneth's been ever so ill. She said you've been treating her; what do you make of it? Is it anything dreadful or serious?"

"Well, no..." Victor paused; he really had no earthly idea how to tell Anton about his findings. "It isn't anything *dreadful*, but-" he began to attempt an explanation but was interrupted by a servant.

"Beg pardon, Milord, but the Marchioness is requesting yer immediate presence in the great hall." The young man said, bowing slightly before turning to leave.

"Thank you," Anton replied with a sigh before turning back to Victor. "I'll find you later and we can talk then, hmm?" She clapped the older man on the shoulder and began to walk away.

"Yes, please do... it's rather *important*, My Lord." Victor called emphatically after Anton's retreating form, and the young Lord waved her acknowledgement before disappearing into another room.

Victor stared at the now-empty corridor. "...It's rather *extremely* important, my Lord." He whispered aloud to no one.

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The funeral of Edgar of Weldon was lavish and well attended, and the great feasting period that followed seemed to drag on forever as people came from all over to both mourn and celebrate a man who was admired and respected by many.

Anton thought she would go mad. Her beloved father was dead, and the expectation that she control her emotions and appear stoic and strong was incredibly difficult for her. The realization that her father was truly gone pierced her heart like an arrow, and she found herself fighting back tears often. She suddenly felt very alone and uncharacteristically unsure of herself and her future.

The only thing she could really count on was that her beautiful wife was always there for her. Every night the blonde held Anton in her arms, using both words and actions to ease the young Lord's tension and soothe her troubled soul. Gwynneth's soft whispers and gentle caresses seemed to be the only thing that calmed and reassured Anton at all.

Once again, an enormous amount of pressure and responsibility was now heaped onto Anton's shoulders. She was now the Marquess of Weldon, and as her wife, Gwynneth was the new Marchioness. Lady Marina, emotionally bereft and completely shattered from first, the loss of her son, and now the loss of her husband, stepped back and assumed the title and role of

Marchioness Dowager. She would now live her life in the background of Weldon as Anton fully took control of the affairs and management of the kingdom.

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The days immediately following the funeral passed in a whirlwind of activity. Anton and Gwynneth's belongings had to be permanently moved from Wextony, and they spent a lot of time familiarizing themselves with the new routines and duties they were assuming. Anton was overwhelmed by the 'official' tasks that suddenly inundated her, and the stress quickly began to eat away at the little bit of sanity she had left. It felt like she rarely had a calm, quiet moment for herself, or her wife, anymore, and she despised that. In fact, it wasn't until several days after the funeral that Victor Bergen finally got to speak privately with the new Marquess of Weldon.

Anton was making her way out of the study room late one evening when Victor spotted her. "My Lord," the physician called out, waving to additionally catch the attention of the Marquess.

Anton sighed inwardly. It had been a long, exhaustive day. She wanted to spend some time with Victor, but she was so tired. Still, she turned and headed down the hallway in his direction. "Victor," Anton greeted when they finally met up and faced one another, "I haven't been avoiding you, my friend; I've just been so insanely busy."

Victor noted the washed-out countenance of the young Lord; it would make it all the more difficult for him to say what he needed to say. "Yes, I'm quite sure you have; I understand."

Anton smiled weakly and ran a hand through her hair. "I truly have been wanting to speak with you... my wife is still very sick. Whatever her ailment, the herbs you've given her don't seem to be working any more."

Victor pursed his lips grimly, "Well, no, they wouldn't."

Anton frowned and shook her head in confusion, "Whatever do you mean?"

The physician drew a deep breath and girded himself, "This is what I've been wanting to consult with you about, My Lord," he began, staring pointedly into Anton's eyes. "Your wife is not suffering from an 'ailment', Anton," Victor grasped Anton's upper arm firmly, "...Your wife is with child."

Anton just stared back at Victor. She'd heard his words, but her mind was unable to comprehend. "...*What?*" she finally whispered, her tone incredulous.

The physician nodded slowly, fully expecting an angry explosion from the young Marquess. "Lady Gwynneth is with child," he said again.

Anton still stared, her mouth opened, her eyes widened in disbelief. Her heart began pounding in her chest and her throat constricted painfully as her head began to spin with a hundred different thoughts and emotions.

Victor cleared his throat uncomfortably, "By my estimations, she could be anywhere from two to three months along."

Anton still didn't react; her eyes merely glazed over and drifted away as the words continued to assault her ears and penetrate her mind.

"I examined her thoroughly while you were away... I couldn't believe it at first, but all the examinations kept returning the same results," Victor continued carefully, uncertain just how much to say. "She said she'd been feeling poorly for some time... even before your marriage, My Lord." The physician cringed as he spoke the last statement. It would surely enrage the young Marquess.

"*What?!*" Anton said again, her head snapping back to glare at the doctor.

Victor nodded, "Yes, My Lord... she says she began to feel poorly a few days before you were wed. And when you made the journey to Wextony right after the wedding, she was quite sick, as you know."

Anton stared again; the shock was beginning to give way to hurt... to anger. If what Victor was saying was true, then Gwynneth - her wife - had been with someone else. ...Another man. Anton turned away from the doctor, unable to face him as the realization slapped her in the face and her world came crashing down around her.

Victor felt for Anton. He couldn't imagine what the young Lord was feeling, but he was certain of his diagnosis.

"By my estimations, the babe should be born sometime near the start of the Fall harvest season." Victor added solemnly.

"Your 'estimations'?!" Anton hissed as she turned back around. "You and your *estimations* presume to tell me that my wife has been *unfaithful* to me! That she has lain with someone besides *me!*" Anton yelled, lashing out at her old friend as her anger began to erupt and spill forth.

Victor understood her anger, but it still made him cringe. "T-That would seem to be the case, My Lord, yes," Victor answered meekly.

"No!" Anton began shaking her head, "I don't believe it... she would never do such a thing... you must be mistaken!" she shouted, her voice echoing off the stone walls of the hallway as her temper escalated and her hurt deepened. "She's just been feeling poorly because of all the strain she's been under! First Aldred was killed, and then she and I had to marry unexpectedly, and all the moving and shuffling between homes... that's all! That's *all* it is!"

The elderly doctor took a deep breath. He'd expected Anton to be shocked and angry, but the hurt and betrayal in her voice was a surprise to him. He knew that, despite the unusual circumstances,

the young Marquess had come to care for the beautiful little blonde. However, he had no idea just how deep the feelings and devotion apparently ran.

"I might agree with you, My Lord, however," Victor began tentatively, "according to Lady Gwynneth, she has not had her courses for several fortnights. Combined with the exams, the repeated retching, and the other physical changes she's been exhibiting..." the physician trailed off, hoping that Anton would see the truth and accept it, no matter how painful.

Anton collapsed against the cool stone of the corridor wall. She simply could not believe what she was being told. Her wife - no matter how much of a sham their marriage was - *her wife* had joined with another man. And, if that weren't bad enough, it may have occurred *before* their marriage. Her beloved Gwynneth had not been innocent... she had not been pure and chaste. Anton didn't know what infuriated her or hurt her more.

"I don't understand," Anton said, her voice low and somber as the pain and reality finally pushed through her anger. "How could she? How could she have done such a thing?" Anton questioned more to herself than Victor. "Who could she have been with before our wedding? Someone here? ...Someone from her home?" Anton voiced her thoughts aloud as her mind raced and she began adding up the facts and circumstances.

Victor had already added up the facts and solved the puzzle, however... or at least he thought he had. The question was, how to tell Anton?

"My Lord," Victor began tentatively, "Lady Gwynneth first arrived at Weldon more than two fortnights before your eventual marriage, correct?"

Anton frowned at the older man, "Yes, that sounds about right."

"During that time period, were there any men who might have had private access to her?"

Victor was certain that Aldred was the culprit. He was well aware of the former Lord's despicable reputation for womanizing, and he also knew that Gwynneth had been alone with him. It only took the questioning of a few servants to discover the disturbing facts.

"No man would have touched her! No man would have *dared* to be alone with her!" Anton instantly snapped, but then she stopped short as she began to think. "...Except possibly a servant, or perhaps... Aldred." As she spoke the words, her heart sank. She turned and looked at Victor, who was looking back at her with an expression that clearly stated his agreement. "You don't think...?" Anton began. Victor nodded his head slowly and continued to stare. "No... *no!* You're out of your *mind*, old man!" Anton shouted vehemently.

"My Lord, it's the only answer that makes any sense." Victor said, keeping his calm.

Anton shook her head, "Aldred would never do such a thing! He was disrespectful with his women, yes, but...", Anton paused, struggling with her own words and beliefs, "He would never take his own fiancée before their wedding!"

"Wouldn't he, Anton?" Victor asked quietly.

"No! No, he *would not!*" Anton felt her throat constrict and she turned around to face the wall, pounding her fists against it and leaning her forehead against the hard stone. She couldn't believe all this. It was like a nightmare. Everything just seemed to keep collapsing all around her, from every angle.

Victor felt for the young Lord, but she had to know the truth. He stepped toward Anton and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, "Anton," he began softly, "I've talked to some of the servants, and I spoke with Lady Gwynneth's handmaid, Alice." The elderly man paused, not wanting to deliver the crushing blow, but knowing that he had to lay out all the evidence. "They've all confirmed that Aldred *was* alone with Lady Gwynneth... several times, in fact."

Anton squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head, refusing to break down and lose control. The feelings of anger, hurt, betrayal and fury warred for dominance inside her head, and she thought she'd explode from the lethal combination.

The feeling of fury finally won out, and Anton spun back around to face her once-trusted friend. "There's only one way to discover the truth," she said, her voice low and ominous. "I'll go directly to the source... I'll ask the only person who knows for certain."

Victor stared back at her, knowing full well what she would do and fearing for the person upon whom she would take out her frustration and anger.

Anton began to walk away but suddenly turned back to Victor, "Is Gwynneth aware of your suspicions?"

Victor shook his head, "No."

"Good. Don't tell her anything. Don't tell *anyone* anything."

Anton began to turn away again, but Victor called to her, "Anton..." The Marquess turned back to look at him darkly. "...I don't believe that Lady Gwynneth is to blame for any of this, My Lord... I believe she is innocent."

Anton stared at him with such cold, unfeeling eyes that Victor nearly shivered.

"I shall be the judge of that." Anton snapped, turning on her heel and walking away, leaving Victor standing in the hallway alone.

The old man sighed aloud, "Yes, I know... this is what I'm afraid of."

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[Continued in Part 4...](#)

Feedback? a_k_naten@yahoo.com

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~ **Second Son** ~

by [A. K. Naten](#)

**** This is a sort-of 'XMas present' for all the readers out there who've been enjoying this story and asking me for more - thanks for the feedback ****

For disclaimers, etc., see [Part One](#).

**** *Violence warning* ****

PART FOUR

CHAPTER TEN

Alice chatted merrily about the tasks of the day as she helped her Lady undress and prepare to bathe. Gwynneth sat down on the ledge beside the large tub and released a sigh. She still felt tired and queasy, and her handmaid's suggestion of a nice, warm bath sounded like the most wonderful thing in the world.

Alice was carefully unbraiding her hair when the bath chamber doors suddenly flew open without preamble. Both women gasped loudly, shocked at the intrusion, and Alice spun around and stood in front of her Lady, protecting her as always.

When Gwynneth realized that it was her husband who stood in the doorway, she felt somewhat relieved, and yet still, surprised. Granted, Anton was unconventional in many ways, but to intrude upon the privacy of her bath was highly inappropriate. She was completely nude, for heavens sake, and she could feel her body flush violently with embarrassment.

When Anton didn't say anything to explain his appearance, Gwynneth spoke up, peeking her head around Alice's body. "Husband?" she queried tentatively, "Do you require me for something?"

Anton stared at the source of her pain and ire with darkened eyes and a burning heart. Her

temper had been steadily rising as she searched the manor for her wayward wife. When at last someone directed her to the bathing chambers, her fury was ready to boil over. Standing now and looking at her wife face to face, she acutely felt the stinging pain and blinding agony of what she perceived to be the blonde's betrayal.

Gwynneth immediately felt ill at ease as she observed the dark, foreboding look on her husband's face while he began walking toward her silently. She knew him well enough by now to recognize when he was angry, but this was more than anger. This was nothing she'd ever seen before, and it filled her with a sense of dread. His unblinking eyes never left hers as he finally came to stand before her, staring speechless and unflinching.

Finally breaking the unsettling contact, Anton flashed a warning look at Alice, "Leave us," she snapped.

Alice nodded and immediately scurried away, fearful of the hateful vibrations that seemed to roll off the Marquess in waves.

"And close the door," Anton called out just before the handmaid disappeared.

"Y-Yes, Milord," Alice stammered, closing the door behind her. She rested her forehead on the outside surface of the heavy wood door, wondering what in the world the Marquess could be so furious about. Obviously something was very wrong, and obviously his displeasure was being directed at Gwynneth. Alice's stomach churned with worry and a sinking feeling. The maid strained her ears for a moment, hoping to hear if anything was happening behind the thick door. She didn't want to think about the possibilities of what might be unfolding.

Alice had been harboring a suspicion about her Lady for quite some time, even though she'd tried her best to put it out of her mind. She'd been a ladies maid for many years, having much experience to draw upon. So when her young charge had begun feeling ill and missing her monthly courses, she suspected right away that the young woman was with child. During her short time at Weldon Manor, Alice had made fast friends with some of the staff, and those friends had wagging tongues and flapping ears that picked up on every little snippet of gossip - especially gossip surrounding the noble family. After processing all the gossip and hearsay and mentally calculating dates and events, Alice was left with a sense of dread and uncertainty about her Lady's predicament rather than elation. She now feared, based on the expression Lord Anton was wearing when he'd walked into the bath chambers, that the Marquess had figured out the same thing she had: Lady Gwynneth's pregnancy was a bit ahead of schedule.

Hearing no noises, Alice straightened herself up and turned away uneasily, walking down the long corridor. There was nothing she could do for Gwynneth; she could only hope that the young Lady had the answers Lord Anton might be seeking.

Meanwhile, inside the bathing chambers, Anton's fury somehow remained in check as she looked down at her seated wife. Gwynneth had demurely tried to cover her exposed private areas with her arms and hands, but her cheeks were still splotched red with the evidence of her embarrassment. A good portion of her body was exposed to Anton's burning stare, and the

Marquess took the opportunity to run her pale eyes all over the alabaster, supple-looking flesh. Anton's gaze narrowed in on her wife's abdomen, and she studied it hard, trying to discern if the pregnancy was noticeable... trying to see if she'd just been stupidly blind to the fact that her wife's body had been changing right in front of her eyes... trying to see if there was a readily-apparent difference that she had somehow naively overlooked... trying to discover and prove her wife's deception while not giving away her own.

Unable to stand the silent scrutiny, Gwynneth tentatively peered upward. Blue-green eyes blinked rapidly and scanned her husband's tense face as she searched for some kind of sign or signal as to what was going on. She quirked the corners of her mouth in a tiny half-smile, hoping to evoke some sort of reaction from Anton. But still, he stood motionless and glaring before her.

Anton determined that there was no obvious swell to her wife's abdomen, nor any other part of her body, for that matter; it appeared to have the same soft, gentle curves that she had become accustomed to. Gwynneth was still so incredibly beautiful in Anton's eyes; the Marquess didn't know if she wanted to scream or cry.

To think that Gwynneth had been touched by someone other than her, before her... to realize that someone else had been the first to discover the blonde's body and soul and enjoy the gift of her many treasures... to consider that her lovely wife could have hidden such a thing from her and deceived her so... the thoughts drove Anton mad. And now, knowing she'd been deceptive, Gwynneth had the audacity to sit there and smile at her so sweetly...

Anton's upper lip curled into a sneer and she reached out to place her hands on Gwynneth's shoulders. Still saying nothing, Anton pushed on her wife's shoulders, turning her around so that she was sitting on the ledge of the tub with her back against the front of Anton's thighs.

Gwynneth's eyes darted to her side and she tracked her husband's movements as he bent down and picked up one of the sponges and wetted it. Keeping one hand on her shoulder, Anton slowly and wordlessly began to rub the sponge over her back.

The stilted quiet was killing Gwynneth. Something was obviously troubling Anton, but she didn't know if he was angry about something, or if he'd come to seduce her in some new and unusual way. No longer able to stand the torturous silence, Gwynneth reached up with her hand and covered the larger one that rested on her shoulder.

"Husband," Gwynneth began in a whisper as she carefully twisted herself and looked up at Anton, his eyes still dark and clouded with some unspoken emotion, "...is something wrong?"

A hundred different responses flooded Anton's head, but she didn't give voice to any of them. Instead, she dropped the sponge and removed her hands from Gwynneth's body, turning around and taking a step away. She could not look into her wife's eyes; she could not stand to feel the touch of the one who'd betrayed her.

Anton stood with her back to Gwynneth for just a minute before finally speaking. "Are you....," her voice cracked and she paused, "are you happy here, Gwynneth?" she finally asked.

The young Lady smiled gently, even though it wasn't seen, "Yes... I'm quite happy." She answered honestly.

Anton continued, "And what about with me? ...Are you happy with me?"

Gwynneth frowned in confusion, "Yes, of course. I'm very happy with you, Anton." She answered, using her husband's name to emphasize her sincerity.

It was true, she was happy, but perhaps Anton doubted it for some reason. Had he heard something to the contrary? Is that why he was acting so strangely? Before she had time to further contemplate, Anton turned around to face her again, and she nearly gasped aloud. Her husband's face was a darkened mask of barely controlled rage. His eyes seemed to glow and his lips twitched as they fought to contain what could only be angry, caustic words.

"Then, why?" Anton whispered through gritted teeth.

Gwynneth shook her head, not understanding, "Why what?"

Anton stepped closer, "Why would you be *unfaithful* to me?" Anton ground out harshly, her voice low and seething.

Gwynneth was stunned into absolute stillness. She wasn't sure she heard him properly, and she stared for a moment before breathlessly stammering, "W-What?"

Anton took another step and now stood towering over the blonde. "You have *lain* with another man!" she said slowly, her voice full of disdain and disgust.

Gwynneth's mouth fell open and her eyes dropped away, her heart pounding and her head immediately filling with horrid recollections of Aldred - the only other man who'd ever touched her. She had successfully pushed the memory of the evil former Lord out of her mind, but now, those memories were suddenly and dreadfully reawakening.

Had Anton discovered her secret? Gwynneth wondered in panic, but outwardly, she forced her eyes to return to her husband's and shook her head, "N-No, husband..."

Anton saw the hesitation, "*LIAR!*" she shouted suddenly, making Gwynneth jump. The Marquess leaned in closer, bringing their faces just an inch apart, "Tell me whom you laid with before me... or *since* me even!" she demanded.

Gwynneth's mind spun out of control. *How could he know? ...How could he know about Aldred?* she thought frantically. Still, she stammered aloud, "I-I have been completely faithful to you, my husband-"

The sudden slap caught Gwynneth off guard, knocking her off the side of the tub ledge and onto the stone floor.

"DON'T LIE TO ME!" Anton screamed, nearly out of her head and blind with rage. She did not see a helpless woman before her, she did not see her devoted wife and lover; she saw only lying, cheating, and betrayal.

Gwynneth was shocked... flabbergasted. She couldn't believe what was happening. Somehow Anton had figured out that she had not been pure, and now he was accusing her of a mortal sin. The husband who had been so good and so kind to her now thought she was a liar and an adulteress. Her happy world was crumbling and disintegrating into nothingness. Holding a trembling hand up to her stinging cheek, Gwynneth felt tears begin to trickle down her cheeks.

Anton knelt down and leaned in close again so that their noses nearly touched, "You are a faithless *harlot!*" She hissed, "You *whored* yourself with someone before me! Who *WAS* it!?" She screamed again in demand, her fury unchecked and unstoppable.

Gwynneth flinched and whimpered aloud, frightened beyond belief at her husband's rabid violence. But no, the man in front of her was not her loving husband; this man was a wild-eyed, out-of-control beast.

Gwynneth shook her head, "N-No, my Lord, I-I," she stammered unsteadily, her body quaking in fear.

Anton interrupted her by reaching out and grabbing her by the arms, squeezing them and shaking her while practically lifting her off the floor. She roared again, "*Tell me* who you allowed to defile you, or by *God* I'll beat you within an inch of your *life!*" Anton drew her hand back again, preparing to deliver another blow to the mortified young woman.

Gwynneth cried out, "No! *Please!*" Her voice was pleading and panic-stricken as she raised her hands to shield her face, her eyes wide and terror-filled.

With those words and actions, Anton stopped dead, seeing the absolute fright and desperation in astonished blue-green eyes and realizing in horror what she was doing to her vulnerable, defenseless - and pregnant - wife. She released Gwynneth immediately and the younger woman quickly scrambled back away, curling up in a corner of the room. Wrapping her arms around herself, Gwynneth began to shake and sob uncontrollably.

Anton got up and turned away from the cowering blonde. She was suddenly overcome with a multitude of surging feelings. Shame... anger... regret... hurt... frustration. She began to walk around, clenching and unclenching her fists as she fought to contain her warring emotions. Her mind was in a whirlwind when she came to stand in front of a small table where some bottles of perfume, soap and scented oils sat beside the bathing tub. Unable to contain her out-of-control feelings, Anton lashed out, swinging her arm across the table and sending the glass bottles crashing to the ground as she released a loud, rage-filled roar.

"*Damn you! Damn it all!*" Anton cursed aloud.

Gwynneth jumped fearfully and clapped her hands over her ears, squeezing her eyes shut and trying to block out the sounds of her husband's aggressive rampage. Tears streamed down her face as she pressed herself tighter against the cold stone wall, petrified that Anton would again come after her and hurt her.

Anton brought her hands up to her head and squeezed tight. She was losing her mind. She couldn't control herself and she couldn't control what was happening. Everything was exploding all around her. She was surely going insane.

All was quiet in the bathing chamber room for a few moments as Anton fought to reign in her raging fury and Gwynneth continued to cower fearfully in the corner. After several minutes, Anton finally calmed herself enough to speak.

With her back to Gwynneth, she began the conversation that she knew they had to have. "I spoke with Victor about your *illness*," she said, her voice low and hoarse and her tone sarcastic as she finally turned around to face the trembling blonde. "...He informed me that you are with child."

Gwynneth's mouth slowly dropped open and her heart immediately leapt into her throat.

With child? She was going to have a baby?

Her first reaction was shock, quickly followed by a feeling of relief. However, the vivid memory of her husband's violent anger invaded her fleeting happiness, and her thoughts immediately turned to question and worry. If she was pregnant, why was Anton so upset? Shouldn't he be pleased that she was going to give him a child? He should be thrilled. And how would he conclude, out of the pregnancy, that she'd been with another man?

Unless... *unless*...

Gwynneth's mind spun quickly, putting two and two together and retracing times and reliving circumstances. Almost instantly, she knew what was going on. The deep-seated terror and fearful thoughts that she had fought so hard to push aside and forget had apparently come to fruition... with a vengeance. The horrific evil she'd suffered at the hands of Aldred had not only come back to haunt her, it had planted itself inside her.

She was pregnant with *his* child.

Gwynneth's stomach suddenly surged and she thought she might be sick.

But how? How could it be? And how could anyone know? The fates would not do such a cruel and wretched thing to her! The child *must* be Anton's! It *had* to be Anton's! She could not accept anything else! Gwynneth placed a hand over her roiling stomach, feeling certain that she was going to either throw up or pass out.

Anton could see all the thoughts and emotions racing across Gwynneth's face. She could tell that the small blonde was trying to figure it all out.

"You have nothing to say about it?" Anton spat sharply, bringing her wife's attention back.

Not looking up at her husband, Gwynneth hesitated for a moment before answering with what she hoped Anton wanted to hear, "The child is yours, husband." she said meekly.

Anton released a cynical laugh. She knew, of course, that it wasn't possible for the child to be hers, but Gwynneth didn't know that. ...And she couldn't let her know that. She had to think of a reasonable way to explain the impossibility. Luckily, Victor had helped her somewhat.

"It *isn't* mine," Anton snapped, "Victor examined you; he said that the pregnancy - or at least the *evidence* of the pregnancy - has occurred much too *early* in our joining for it to be my child." It was true, but Anton had to hope that Gwynneth accepted the weak explanation.

Gwynneth's mind swirled at the implications. How could Victor possibly know such things? She desperately thought back to her examinations and discussions with the physician but came up with nothing out of the ordinary. She wasn't a doctor, after all, and she didn't have the slightest idea how Victor could know that she'd been with anyone except her husband. Anton had not mentioned Aldred, so Gwynneth had to hope that she could reason with her incensed husband and convince him that he was the father, lest he beat her mercilessly.

Gwynneth's chin trembled with fear as she tried to speak again, her voice cracking under the stress, "B-But, Victor must be wrong-"

Anton cut her off, "He's *not* wrong!" she shouted, making Gwynneth flinch again. "You told him when you had your last courses! You told him you first began to feel ill *before* we were even married! You were ill the entire journey to Wextony, only days after our wedding! Or have you conveniently *forgotten* all this?!"

Gwynneth's mind desperately tried to follow what Anton said, calculating times and recalling the cycle of her courses. It was true that she hadn't had her courses for a few months, but she hadn't been overly concerned about it - or rather, she'd forced herself not to dwell upon it. Instead, she had convinced herself that her cycle had always been rather fitful and irregular, and that her illness, combined with all the recent stresses, was simply throwing her body off-course.

In reality, Gwynneth had absolutely refused to consider the possibility that she could actually be pregnant, and she refused to think about the fact that she did not know whose child it might be. She was young and innocent, but she wasn't so foolish that she naively thought it could only belong to her husband.

When Aldred first violated her, Gwynneth did indeed worry that she could become pregnant, but she reasoned that since they would be married soon, it wouldn't matter anyway. After Aldred's death, however, she forced herself to forget about everything; she had to in order to survive. She had been living in a state of denial, blocking out the wretched hell Aldred had put her through, as well as the lingering fear of a pregnancy. But now that fear had been reawakened.

Gwynneth felt panic grip her again. If Anton knew the truth about Aldred, what would happen to her? What would happen to the child she was now carrying? She licked her lips and ventured a glance up at her husband. He was staring at her, his eyes still fiery and demanding. She swallowed and opened her mouth to speak, but Anton quickly walked over to her and crouched down on the floor, leaning in close to her face again, making her draw away fearfully.

"We've been married barely three fortnights, Gwynneth! And you've been 'ill' for more than four fortnights! *Think* about it!" Anton yelled, her breath hot and angry against Gwynneth's face. "This child cannot *possibly* be mine! Whose *bastard* is it!?" she demanded sharply, causing Gwynneth to flinch. "Whose *bed* did you lie in?! Who took your purity and *spoiled* you!?" Anton shouted again, and again Gwynneth cringed, turning her cheek and anticipating another blow. "*TELL ME!*" Anton roared loudly.

"*Aldred!*" Gwynneth finally cried out, no longer able to suppress it. "...It was Aldred, My Lord!" she sobbed wretchedly, bringing her hands up to cover her face and her shame.

Anton pulled back quickly, shocked to hear the words fall from her wife's lips. She could feel the blood drain from her face as she tried to stand, her legs faltering and stumbling. She backed away from the small, crumbling form on the floor, wanting to disbelieve what she'd heard, even though Victor had already warned her. Now, as the truth and crushing reality slowly began to sink in, she felt like a fool... and a heartless brute.

Anton's thoughts were interrupted by a soft, quavering voice. "H-He came to my room, s-several times," Gwynneth started confessing tearfully, "He *made* me do it... I couldn't stop it... I couldn't stop *him!*" she cried, her shoulders shaking from the force of her sobs. "I'm sorry, My Lord," she begged pathetically, subserviently, "...*Forgive* me!"

Anton squeezed her eyes shut and turned away. She was dying inside.

She couldn't believe it. She couldn't believe that her beautiful, precious wife - a woman she'd come to care for so much - had been violated and despoiled by her own brother. And, to add salt to the wound, the despicable union had been fruitful. Her wife would bear her dead brother's bastard. Anton almost felt like she wanted to cry herself, but anger won out instead.

But the anger had her in a quandary... it would do no good to be angry with Aldred - he was dead - but the fury was built-up inside her and she needed to direct at something, or someone. In Anton's rage-clouded mind, someone had to pay for the injustice. She wanted to be angry with Gwynneth, but she also knew the young woman wasn't to blame. As usual, Victor's words had been true - Gwynneth was innocent in all of this. Fearing that she wouldn't be able to keep her raging thoughts and feelings inside, however, Anton knew she had to run and get away from her wife, and everyone else. She turned on her heel suddenly and stormed from the room without another word.

Gwynneth warily watched her husband go; as soon as the sound of his footsteps disappeared, she uncurled herself and stood on shaky legs. Spotting her robe nearby, Gwynneth grabbed it and wrapped it tightly around herself, trying to warm her chilled body and numbed mind.

Sitting back down on the tub ledge, the young Lady rehashed the words again... *with child... with child*. She was going to have a baby... she was going to be a mother. What should have been a joyous moment was instead clouded with dread, worry and fear.

Gwynneth began to contemplate what would happen now that Anton knew what had taken place between her and Aldred. What should she do about it? More importantly, what was Anton going to do to her? Would he denounce her and divorce her? Would he throw her out into the streets? Would he have her locked up in the dungeons or - she shuddered to even think it - would he have her put to death? She knew he could if he really wanted to - the sin was that great.

He said he'd always take care of me, Gwynneth thought as her eyes began to well with tears again. She didn't think she would be able to stand it. A future that had looked so bright and happy was now blackened with shame and disgrace... and the product of that shame and disgrace was growing inside her. She still couldn't believe it - didn't want to believe it. How could the doctor be certain it was Aldred's child when even she wasn't certain? She had no idea what to do or where to turn from here.

Letting her face fall into her hands again, the young Marchioness did the only thing she could think to do... she broke down and wept piteously.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Anton stayed away from the manor the rest of the day, as well as all night, the following day, and the following night.

She traveled the countryside, hunting and living off the land like some kind of ruffian and resting and sleeping in any empty cottage or shack she found along the way. She had so many thoughts and emotions to sort out, it didn't really occur to her that everyone back at the castle might be going insane with worry. For those two days and nights, she didn't care or think about anything besides the child that dwelled inside her wife and what its existence meant.

Hateful thoughts and unanswered questions plagued Anton night and day. All she could think was that, even in death, Aldred had bested her again. Anton was still, and would always be, second in line... even when it came to her own spouse. She was consumed by anger, jealousy, and impure thoughts of her brother and her wife. What had Aldred done with Gwynneth? How many times had he taken her? How had he touched her, and where? Did he hurt her at all? Did Gwynneth enjoy it in any way, shape or form, or was she scared out of her mind? It drove Anton insane to think of Aldred being with Gwynneth... to think of him touching her, plundering her, filling her with his rotten seed and making her pregnant. It absolutely sickened Anton beyond belief.

In reality, Anton knew that, somehow, she was going to have to accept the child. If she didn't,

she would have to reveal the truth, and the truth would damn Gwynneth to hell. No matter that the young Lady was the victim; she would still be ostracized and banished from society for good. Despite the anger and hurt that she felt inside, Anton knew she could never let that happen. Gwynneth was still a kind-hearted soul who didn't deserve to be criticized or judged by anyone.

But, to accept the child meant that she would have to pretend that it was hers. While this would mean another lie, it would protect everyone and everything - her family's name and reputation, as well as her wife's. If everyone thought the child was hers, everyone's dirty little secrets would remain successfully hidden away, and life would go on. The whole thing was a double-edged sword that seemed to cut Anton in every way possible.

Anton knew that even though the child wasn't hers, it did represent an heir to Weldon... a true, noble-blooded heir - the only one there would ever be, in fact. The child would provide both a solution and a thorn in her side. Anton didn't know if she would be able to pass the child off as her own, however, knowing that it was her brother's bastard spawn... knowing how it had been conceived... knowing that it was not and would never truly be a part of her. She was torn with indecision.

And how was she to interact with Gwynneth now? Knowing that her wife was pregnant with Aldred's abomination... knowing what he had done to her... and then, knowing that she had unjustly accused Gwynneth and blamed her... knowing that she had lashed out and struck the younger woman out of reckless anger and frustration. Anton felt like the biggest disgrace and failure in the entire world... and the biggest hypocrite.

But she knew what she had to do. She knew that she had to return home and once again face new responsibilities and duties. She knew that she had to accept the pregnancy and deal with it, and she knew that she had to somehow face her wife.

Everything had changed, yet again. And Anton wasn't quite sure how she was going to handle these changes; for they may prove to be the most difficult yet.

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When Anton finally returned home the next day, she was met by a very angry, very exasperated Marchioness Dowager as she climbed the stairs to her sleeping chambers, hoping to escape detection.

Lady Marina was shocked by her daughter's haggard appearance. It wasn't unusual for Anton to disappear and engage in an all-day hunt, but for her to go missing for two nights and days was outrageous.

She knew something terrible had happened between her only child and Lady Gwynneth. When Anton didn't return home the first night, Marina began questioning the staff as to her whereabouts. One of the servants mentioned that Lady Gwynneth's maid said that there had been a disagreement between the Marquess and the young Lady, causing Marina to promptly seek out Gwynneth's handmaid, Alice. A brief grilling of the handmaid yielded the truth: that Anton and

Gwynneth had a terrible, heated argument and the Marquess had stormed away in fury, leaving her wife in tears. When Marina finally went to Gwynneth for specific answers, however, the young woman only broke down and cried wretchedly.

Now that Anton was finally standing before her, looking exhausted but defiant, Marina wasn't sure what to do or say first. She opted for scolding.

"Where in the name of *God* have you *been* for the past two days and nights?!" Marina hissed at her wayward daughter. Anton only shifted her jaw and glared silently at her mother. "Do you have *any* idea how many people have been searching for you and going mad with worry over your whereabouts? How could you be so irresponsible and inconsiderate?!"

Anton audibly sighed and ran a hand through her unkempt hair, "With all due respect, Mother *dearest*," she said snidely, "I don't especially care to listen to your tongue-lashing at this particular moment. I'm tired, I'm filthy, and I wish only to take a long, hot bath."

Anton turned away and started back up the stairs again, but Marina would have none of it. The Marchioness Dowager reached out and grabbed her daughter by the arm, forcing her to halt her movement. "Anton... don't you *dare* turn away from me," she said, her voice low and warning.

Anton swung around, her eyes meeting her mother's and providing a warning of her own.

But Marina was undaunted, "I demand an explanation!" she insisted, her voice a cross between indignance and anger.

A hundred caustic replies flitted through Anton's mind, but she was just too exhausted to get into a battle at the moment. Instead, she sighed again and closed her eyes, shaking her head. "Alright, we shall talk... but first I *must* have a bath."

Marina pursed her lips and gave a stiff nod, wanting to say much more but knowing it would be best not to. She knew her daughter well enough to realize that she should accept any victory when battling with the hard-headed girl... even if they were only small ones.

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Marina waited as patiently as she could, but after enough time had passed, she decided to go in search of Anton. She dreaded having a confrontation, but at the same time, she desperately needed answers to the numerous questions that now plagued her. Arriving at her daughter's chamber door, she took a deep breath before knocking.

Anton had been lounging by the fireplace, staring vacantly into the flickering orange flames as her body warmed and her mind wandered. She held a small snifter of brandy in her hands and sipped absently at the strong liqueur while she stared, wondering yet again what she would say to Gwynneth when she saw her again. Even though it had only been a few days, it felt like months had passed since she'd seen her wife.

Anton had been haunted by the memories of their altercation in the bathing chambers - especially the look of shock and fear on Gwynneth's face when she had lashed out and struck her. Those memories shamed her the most. Anton was so disgusted with herself. Yes, she had been very angry and upset at the time - and she still was - but she'd never struck another woman the way she had Gwynneth. She knew that she couldn't take her actions back, but she wished she could.

The knocking sound at the door interrupted Anton's thoughts, and she knew that it was her mother, come to give her the third degree. She dreaded having this confrontation and could only imagine what the older woman would say.

Marina had always played the role of Marchioness and Lady of the Manor perfectly. She stayed in the background supporting her husband, always deferring to him and behaving in the proper, demure way that a noble Lady should. But everyone knew that Edgar depended on Marina a great deal, and that she was a force to be reckoned with in her own right. No one knew this more than Anton. She'd had more than her share of arguments with her mother, and when the two of them clashed, it usually ended up being a hard-fought battle of iron-clad wills.

Anton opened the door and silently invited her mother in, then turned to find steely eyes on her as soon as the door was closed.

"Well you certainly look far more presentable than you did earlier... I trust you won't partake in such a folly again, hmm?" Marina said, her voice only mildly scolding. She had told herself earlier that she would do her best to contain her own temper. It would do no good to shout and chastise Anton. They needed to talk and discuss things civilly, not fight and throw angry words around.

Anton still made an irritated face at her mother's comment, "It wasn't *folly*, I was upset and angry and...", she paused for a moment, not wanting to describe what she had been feeling, "I just needed to get away." The words were spoken softly and Anton quickly turned away, walking toward the fireplace.

Marina could sense that her daughter still felt some lingering distress over this mysterious, troubling matter. She still didn't know exactly what had happened between Anton and Gwynneth; she only knew that they'd had a disagreement so terrible, it left Gwynneth shattered to the point where she refused to leave her chambers. The tongues of the staff and servants were wagging furiously, and rumors abounded.

Marina walked up to her only child and placed a hand on her back. "What is it, Anton? What has happened between you and Gwynneth that would push you to such extreme behavior and cause her to stay cooped up in her room for days and nights?"

Anton turned around, immediately concerned, "Gwynneth hasn't left her room?"

"No, not since you disappeared."

Anton's eyes slid shut and she sighed aloud as her head fell downward. Pausing for a long

moment, she took a deep breath before responding. "She's pregnant."

It took Marina a moment to process the words of the simple statement, and when she did, she wasn't sure she'd heard correctly, "What?"

Anton lifted her eyes to look at her mother, "Gwynneth is with child." she said, her voice firmer this time.

Marina's mouth fell open and her eyes held Anton's. A hundred thoughts instantly filled her mind, a hundred comments danced upon her tongue, a hundred worries filled her heart. "I don't understand," Marina said, shaking her head in disbelief. "How can that be? ...There must be some mistake."

"There's no mistake. She's been ill for some time... Victor examined her at Wextony and discovered it."

Marina didn't understand her daughter's calm demeanor and resolve. "Well perhaps Victor is wrong?"

"He *isn't* wrong. He gave her a thorough examination and performed several tried and true tests," Anton said more emphatically. "She's *pregnant*."

The Marchioness Dowager made an indignant noise, "But *how*, Anton?! How could she be? And *who*?! Who could have-"

Anton cut her off, "Now you know why I reacted the way I did." She said, her voice carrying an edge of resentment.

Marina stopped abruptly, realizing that indeed, Anton must have been flabbergasted and rightfully upset. The older woman sighed and turned away from her daughter, walking a few steps away before turning back. "Do you know who the father is?" she asked.

"Yes." Anton answered quietly before turning around to face her mother. She wanted to see her reaction when she told her.

Marina gave an impatient, expectant look, but Anton hesitated, allowing the tip of her tongue to play upon her lower lip for a second while she prepared herself for her own reaction, as well as her mother's. "Aldred." she finally said, the name sour and distasteful in her mouth.

Marina's eyes bulged in astonishment. "*What!?*" the older woman exclaimed, bringing a hand up to her chest.

"*Aldred* is the father." Anton repeated, locking her eyes with her mother's and daring her to refute the truth that she now knew.

Marina shook her head, "That... that can't be! They weren't married! They weren't *together!*" she

argued. "Who told you it's Aldred?!"

"Gwynneth," Anton answered flatly.

"She lies!" Marina spat angrily.

"She *isn't* lying!" Anton snapped back forcefully as she stepped toward her mother, bringing them face to face.

"How do you know?!" Marina fought back.

"She confessed to me!"

"And you're just going to take her word for it?!"

"Yes, Mother, I *am*!" Anton shouted vehemently, tired of her mother's reticence and agitation. Marina flinched slightly at her daughter's angry outburst, and Anton's fury relented when she saw the reaction. She drew a deep breath and prepared to try to explain.

"Victor had already figured it out when he first told me of the pregnancy," Anton began. "Like you, I refused to believe him. But then, he explained that he had questioned a few of the servants here at Weldon... one of them said that she overheard Aldred speaking harshly to Gwynneth and using threatening words, and that Gwynneth was often in tears." Anton swallowed hard against the lump in her throat. "Gwynneth's handmaid, Alice, told Victor that she feared the worst when Aldred came calling to Gwynneth's room late at night." Anton's voice quavered as she spoke the words and her heart felt like it was breaking all over again.

"When I confronted Gwynneth, she tried to lie to me. She denied that she'd been with anyone, and..." Anton hesitated as she remembered lashing out at her wife. "I... I became very *angry*, and she finally broke down and confessed. She told me that... Aldred did come to her room and forced himself upon her... several times." Anton's teeth gritted together as she struggled to speak the words. She felt her hackles rise again at the thought of what her brother had done to her wife.

Marina shook her head and closed her eyes, "Dear God," she whispered, breaking the silence she'd kept the whole time Anton spoke.

The Marchioness Dowager walked to one of the large chairs and sat down, her eyes unblinking as she stared into the fire and contemplated what to do and say and think and feel. This was a situation that could not be easily remedied or swept under the rug. It had far-reaching consequences and a multitude of implications; some being good, some being bad. Most of all, it would mean more lies and more deception. She hated that thought, and she knew that Anton would too, but what else were they to do?

The silence stretched for several long moments until Marina finally spoke. "You must accept the child as yours and raise it as your own," she said, her voice stilted and emotionless. "You must announce the pregnancy and welcome it."

"It's all so simple to you, isn't it?" Anton said, feeling a hot burst of anger. "Just pretend that everything's fine and good and move on... do you have any *idea* how this feels?" she said, walking to stand in front of her mother. "Do you know what it shall be like for me to do this? To raise a child that isn't mine? To pretend? To lie - *again!*?" she shouted.

"What other choice do we *have*, Anton?!" Marina yelled back. "If you won't accept the child as yours, then you must either get rid of it, or get rid of Gwynneth! Which shall it be?!"

Anton's eyes flashed dangerously, but she didn't say anything. She didn't have to; her mother knew she would never choose either of those options.

The older woman drew a deep breath and began more softly, "You must find the positive in this, Anton. There *is* some good to come of it." Marina said. "It shall provide you with an heir, first and foremost; it will forever cement our relationship with the House of Clarendon, second; and... it shall further bolster your identity as a man as well."

Anton made a noise of disgust, "How can you even say such things? Have you *listened* to what I've just told you?!" she decried, giving her mother an incredulous look.

"Of course I have! But *you* must listen to *me*! You must see the positives in this Anton, or else you will never feel anything but anger and resentment toward the child!" Marina scolded.

"Oh I *already* feel resentment, Mother!" Anton spat back. "Mostly what I resent is my *disgusting* brother for what he visited upon my *wife*! He took her innocence and left her with nothing but fear, shame, and his bastard spawn!"

"Anton!" Marina gasped in shock.

"And now I'm expected to rear that bastard? That's just so *fitting!*" Anton gritted her teeth as she spoke. "What if I can't raise this child as mine, Mother? What if I do resent it, and Gwynneth, and *you* for making me do this! What then?!" she decried, throwing her hands out. "What happens if I can't even stand the *sight* of this child? This child who is nothing to me? Who is not my flesh and blood!?" Anton shouted, placing a hand against her chest.

Marina jumped out of her chair and came to stand in front of her daughter, "This child *is* your flesh and blood, Anton! Just as you and Aldred shared the same blood, so will this child share in that blood. This is not just any child, Anton... this is your *brother's* child!"

Anton's eyes darkened and she glared at her mother, "Yes, my *brother...*," she ground out through clenched teeth, "my honorable, wonderful, predatory, vile, *black-hearted* brother, who terrorized and ruined my wife! *MY wife!*" she pounded her hand against her chest emphatically.

Marina's eyes flashed with anger, "You will *not* speak of your brother like that!" she snapped. "What he did was deplorable, yes, but Gwynneth was not your wife at the time!"

"He *RAPED* her!" Anton finally shouted into her mother's face. "She was a young, innocent *girl*, and he forced her and *hurt* her! She did not yet belong to him, and he *took* her! How can you stand there and defend him, Mother?! *How?!*" Anton waved her arms wildly, nearly shaking with the force of her rage. The feeling of losing control began to overtake her and she turned away from her mother and stalked over toward the door, ready to yank it open and run away again.

Marina couldn't think of anything to say. She'd never seen Anton as furious and upset as she was now. She was certain that whatever she said would be misinterpreted and thrown back into her face.

Long, agonizing moments passed in silence as both Weldon women tried to calm themselves and regain their composure.

Finally, Marina spoke up, her voice quiet and resigned, "Anton... I know that you didn't expect to have a child, let alone in this way... but the fact of the matter is... you have to accept this and deal with it."

Anton hesitated for a moment before turning around again, "Yes, I know full well what I must *accept* and *deal* with," she said, her voice laced with hard sarcasm, "And I will *accept* and *deal* with my brother's bastard, just as I *accepted* and *dealt* with his wife."

The Marchioness Dowager frowned at her daughter, "Anton, you cannot stand there and tell me that your marriage to Gwynneth has been entirely unpleasant."

Anton averted her eyes, refusing to look at her mother.

"I've seen the way the two of you interact... I've seen the way she looks at you and the way you look at her. I know that you have come to care for her very much."

Anton dropped her head but still ignored the older woman. Marina could tell that she'd struck upon a nerve just from the expression on her daughter's face and the set of her shoulders. The beautifully handsome features softened and the broad shoulders sagged slightly when Gwynneth was mentioned.

Marina walked up to Anton and reached out to grasp her arm, "Perhaps this child will be a blessing in disguise for you, just as Gwynneth was...?"

Anton quickly looked up at her, confusion and incredulity in her eyes. "A *blessing?*" she said, "Is that what all this has been? A *blessing?*" she bit the word off sharply. "My life has been *completely* uprooted and turned upside down!" Anton stressed, her voice growing louder, "I never wanted to marry *anyone*, let alone my dead brother's despoiled fiancée! I never wanted to rule my father's house nor govern his lands!" she said, waving her hands in gesture as she began to pace back and forth. "And yet, here I am, put upon and expected to perform all these feats and duties for which I am *grossly* ill-prepared!" she ranted and raved in exasperation. "And now, in addition to all these things, I must play the impossible role of *father* and feign happiness over a child that isn't even mine!? It's *insanity!*"

"It isn't!" Marina snapped. "You must do this, Anton - you *will* do it! All of it! Whether you *want* the responsibilities or not, they're yours now!"

"I *don't* want them, Mother! I don't want *any* of them!" Anton shouted, shaking her head and throwing her arms out. "This is not the way I planned my life to be! So you'll forgive me if I do *not* feel that it's a *blessing*... rather, I feel that it's just another unexpected, unwelcomed, *pervverted* twist of fate!"

The harsh words echoed loudly off the room's stone walls, and mother and daughter stared at each other for a moment before Anton turned away again. This time she headed over to the small serving table that held her brandy. She downed the remainder of liqueur in the glass and immediately poured herself another.

Marina could only stand and watch as her daughter proceeded to self-destruct. She wracked her brain furiously, wondering what she could do and say next to bring things back under control and make Anton see reason. She brought a hand up to her head, pressing on her temple as she fought to calm herself and gather her wits at the same time.

Anton was just polishing off the second brandy when the Marchioness Dowager came to stand in back of her. "Anton," Marina started, her voice soft and calm, "we cannot always *plan* everything in our lives... it doesn't work that way... you know this." She stepped closer to Anton. "I don't believe that life is meant to be *planned*... I think it is just meant to *occur*...,to *happen*. And whatever happens, we must try to make the best of it." Marina watched her daughter's body language as she continued, speaking solemnly and praying that Anton understood.

"No one *planned* for Aldred's death; it just happened... we didn't *plan* for your father to pass away so soon; but he did." Marina placed her hands on Anton's shoulders and turned her, forcing a meeting of their identical blue depths, "And all those years ago, I never *planned* on having a daughter instead of a second son... but I did." She stared long and hard into her daughter's darkened eyes, "...And I'm *so* glad I did." She said, her voice low, her face absolutely serious.

Anton said nothing. She wasn't sure where her mother was trying to go with this exactly, and she wanted to see what parallels she might draw before tearing it all to shreds and insisting that she was still insane.

Marina dropped her hands and looked away for a moment, her face wistful, "When you were first born, before we...", she hesitated, "before we knew how we were going to raise you... I gave you a name." She said, turning back to face Anton, "I named you after your grandmother - my mother... I named you 'Antonia'," Marina said, a tone of pride in her voice. "She was a very strong, very capable woman, and I knew, somehow, that you would be as well. Then, when we decided that... it would be best to... raise you as a male," she struggled with the explanation, even after all these years, "I insisted that your name just be shortened to 'Anton'." She turned back and gave a small smile, "Most of the time though, in my mind, you are still my *querida*... my *bonita bebe*', Antonia." Marina spoke the words of her native Spanish tongue and her eyes began to fill with tears. She stepped closer to Anton, "You have no idea what a blessing you were to your

father... what a blessing you are to me." Placing her palms on Anton's chest, she stared up at her daughter, "I never *planned* to have a child like you... but I thank God every day for giving you to me."

Anton stared dumbfounded at her mother. She'd never heard such words come from the woman's mouth before and she truly didn't know how to react. The comparison that'd been drawn was a fairly good one, and Anton had no argument for it. But still, she didn't want to just accept it so easily and so simply. It was still too much to comprehend all at once, and it was still too damned painful.

Instead of saying anything, Anton gave her mother one final glare, making her face look hard and impassive before abruptly turning on her heel and disappearing out the door.

Marina sighed with resignation as she watched her daughter storm off. She'd seen the numerous emotions that raced across her daughter's face, and she knew that the young woman was hurt, frustrated and confused. She supposed that Anton still wanted to be angry with her in some way, and truthfully, she expected such. She knew that what Anton needed most was to digest everything and give it all some thought. Perhaps in time, the young Marquess would see her mother's wisdom and understand that what she insisted was for the best.

Then again, it had to be... the alternatives were too unacceptable.

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[Continued...](#)

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~ **Second Son** ~
by [A. K. Naten](#)

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PART FIVE

CHAPTER TWELVE

It had been a confusing, emotionally-charged three days for the young Marchioness of Weldon. She was not surprised to hear that her husband had left the castle immediately after their violently enlightening altercation, but she was surprised when her handmaid told her that he hadn't returned that night nor the next day.

Gwynneth felt sure that Anton meant to separate from her for good. How could he not? She'd been violated and spoiled by another man and now, according to the doctor, she carried his child rather than her husband's. How could Anton tolerate that? He wouldn't, Gwynneth was certain. Anton could have any woman in the realm... why would he settle for someone like her? For someone impure and ruined?

Gwynneth still cried, but she wasn't sure anymore what she was crying about. Was it the shock of finding out she was pregnant? The shame and humiliation of having to tell Anton what'd happened between her and Aldred? The trauma and terror of having her loving husband turn on her and become so physically hateful? The agony of waiting to discover what her fate, and the fate of her unborn child, would be? Or, perhaps, it was all of these and so much more.

Perhaps it was the realization that her life was taking yet another dramatic turn, and that, again, it was out of her control. The happiness and contented life that she thought she'd found had been unmercifully torn from her grasp and shredded to ribbons. The kind, caring husband she thought she had was now a furious demon who loathed her. Her dreams of having his child and living happily ever after with him had been dashed to a million pieces, and she was now left with nothing. Nothing except the unborn child of a man she would forever despise. Her life had turned into a travesty of the greatest magnitude.

She still couldn't believe it - didn't want to believe it. She went over everything in her mind a hundred times, calculating dates and times and the peculiarities of her 'illness', trying to find some evidence or some way of proving that the child was Anton's. But alas, she could find nothing. She hated to admit it, but it seemed that indeed Victor could be correct about the child's conception, and therefore, parentage.

Gwynneth mourned. She mourned for the baby that now dwelt inside her because of the mixed feelings of joy and loathing she felt for it, and she mourned over the loss of the brief, fleeting happiness she'd shared with Anton. Nothing else really mattered if Anton left her. Whether or not she had a child seemed unimportant if she didn't have her husband. Over the course of the past several fortnights, Anton had become her guiding light, her anchor. She had come to need him and depend on him for everything. If she lost him, all else would become insignificant.

When the Marchioness Dowager came to call on her the second day of her husband's absence, Gwynneth was certain it was to tell her to pack her bags and leave. Instead, Lady Marina asked her what in the world had taken place to cause Anton to disappear. Gwynneth wanted to tell the Lady what had happened, but the only thing she could do was cry. She tried to get her pathetic sobbing under control, but obviously having little patience with the matter, Lady Marina stormed

out of her room and did not return.

Unable to take the pressure any longer, Gwynneth finally broke down and confessed everything to her trusted ladies maid. Alice listened dutifully while Gwynneth poured her heart out and cried all over again, and when the tale was all said and done, Alice told her Lady that she was inclined to agree with the physician as well. Gwynneth was shocked as Alice explained how she suspected that something had happened with Aldred, and how and why she'd been harboring additional suspicions about a pregnancy all along. As Gwynneth wept again at her plight, Alice wrapped her in her arms and rocked her gently, insisting that everything would be all right.

Gwynneth wanted so badly to believe her.

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Alice had arisen early in the morning, determined to spur her young charge out of her depressive state. She'd convinced Gwynneth to get up early and take a stroll with her around the Manor grounds, promising that the fresh air would do her a world of good. Alice carefully helped her Lady dress and stood in front of her while she fixed her hair and chatted enthusiastically about how beautiful the countryside looked at this time of the year.

Gwynneth only listened half-heartedly as she sat in the chair and allowed Alice to primp her. She knew that the handmaid was trying to make her feel better, and she did appreciate it; she just didn't feel like leaving her room today. As far as she was concerned, she didn't care if she ever left her room again.

A knock on the door interrupted both women's thoughts. Gwynneth's heart leapt to her throat as she and Alice exchanged worried looks. Gwynneth nodded and the maid walked to the door and opened it.

The sight of her husband's figure in the doorway nearly caused Gwynneth to faint. She drew a quick breath and gripped the armrests of the chair she was sitting in, fearful that she might actually fall over.

Not waiting for an invitation, Anton stepped into the room. Judging by the look on Gwynneth's face, the young woman was either surprised to see her or absolutely panic-stricken. Refusing to get side-tracked by feelings of guilt, Anton shifted her gaze and spoke to Alice, "I wish to speak to my wife alone."

The low, flat tone of Lord Anton's voice brooked no argument and cut through the tense atmosphere like cold steel. For a brief moment, Alice debated leaving her Lady. Gwynneth had told her what'd happened in the bathing chambers, and Alice was terrified that Anton might revisit his wrath on the young blonde again. She hesitated, indecisively flipping her eyes back and forth between her Lord and her Lady.

Anton recognized and understood the maid's hesitation, and she was even glad that the older woman was so vigilant for Gwynneth. Still, she would not have someone disobey her wishes or her authority. She glared at the maid, arching an eyebrow sharply and silently scolding the

woman.

Alice immediately dropped her eyes and nodded, "Yes Milord." She skittered quickly past Anton but before she disappeared out the door, she turned back and gave Gwynneth a worried, sorrowful look. The young Lady met her eyes and Alice could see the fear plainly visible. Still, the maid obediently closed the door and said a prayer before turning away and leaving the two alone.

Gwynneth's heart was beating in triple time as Anton walked further into the room and stared at her. He opened his mouth slightly as though he was going to say something, but then seemed to change his mind, averting his eyes and turning away to go and stand in front of the fireplace instead. As her mind spun and churned with thoughts and fears of what her husband might have come to say, and do, Gwynneth observed him carefully.

Anton looked tired and weary, but it was more than that. He looked positively defeated. It was as though the past three days had been as hard on him as they'd been on Gwynneth. His strong, beautiful face was pale and creased with tension, his sky-blue eyes were hollow and empty, and his broad shoulders seemed to sag with exhaustion. Gwynneth wondered what on earth she could possibly say to him to help right the wrongs between them. Her natural instinct told her to fall to her knees before Anton and beg forgiveness and plead for her life, but she knew that she should wait for her husband to speak before she did anything too rash. She hoped he didn't make her wait too long; it felt as though her neck was stretched out on the executioner's block, awaiting the cutting blow. When Anton turned back around to face her, Gwynneth's heart nearly leapt out of her mouth.

"I've come to a decision regarding... the situation." Anton said, her voice sounding low and stern as it filled the stilted silence of the room. Gwynneth held her breath and continued to wait. "This... *child*," Anton nearly choked on the word and she clenched her jaw before continuing, "will be accepted and named as mine."

Gwynneth expelled her breath but still stared at her husband anxiously, for he still had not passed judgment on her.

Anton walked toward Gwynneth, wanting to get closer to her so that she understood her next statement clearly. "As for the child's parentage, everyone will assume that I am the father, and we will allow and encourage that belief." she said, her voice dipping even lower as she stared hard at Gwynneth, "*No one* is to know about Aldred... no one is to know what *happened* between the two of you... do you understand?"

Gwynneth nodded vigorously, "Yes, My Lord." she managed. Her heart continued to pound in her chest and she dropped her eyes, unnerved by her husband's intense stare. She could feel herself trembling and she bit the inside of her cheek nervously.

"Good. The pregnancy will be announced soon, so you should prepare yourself." Anton instructed, watching her wife's face and hating the look of fear and shame that she saw there. But the situation had to be clarified and handled; surely Gwynneth knew this had been coming.

Deciding that there was nothing further to say, Anton made to turn and walk away.

A fresh panic gripped Gwynneth as she realized that Anton was leaving and he hadn't said one word about what would become of her, or them; all he'd said is that she should 'prepare'. *Prepare for what?* Gwynneth wondered frantically. She knew that she should be obedient, and she wanted to please her husband and simply stay silent, but the unspoken questions were killing her. What did Anton have planned for her? For them and their relationship? Would they just continue to avoid each other? Would Anton keep her sequestered until the baby was born? Would he divorce her immediately after? Wouldn't people ask questions? Wouldn't they begin to wonder why the once-happy couple now pointedly avoided each other?

Gwynneth couldn't stand not knowing, so she took a chance, swallowing her fear and speaking out before Anton disappeared. "My Lord?"

Anton stopped and turned back to look at Gwynneth. It was only then that she really noticed the strained look of anxiety on her wife's soft, exquisite face. It pained her to see such misery and cloudy uncertainty in the once clear, blue-green depths of Gwynneth's eyes.

"W-What are we to do if anyone asks questions or... or suspects something different from what we say?" Gwynneth asked, her voice timid and tremulous.

"They won't, and even if they would, we do *nothing!*" Anton snapped. "We must pretend that we've been *blessed* and feign excitement over the prospect of having a beautiful, bouncing baby!" Anton said snidely, the thought of having to pretend anything more suddenly infuriating her. "According to my Mother, we should be *celebrating!*" Anton added, lifting her arms and making exaggerated motions, "Aldred has managed to *bless* us from the grave! It's really quite *generous* of him, isn't it?! I must remember to *thank* him in my prayers tonight!" she ranted, her suddenly loud voice echoing off the room's stark stone walls.

Gwynneth immediately dropped her eyes and shrunk back into her chair, shaken by her husband's outburst and obvious lingering anger. She knew the potential of his fury; she did not need a reminder. And yet... still... Anton hadn't said what the future held for her, specifically. What fate did he have in store? What special Hell did he have planned for her? She so desperately needed to know.

Gwynneth swallowed hard and closed her eyes, forcing herself to be brave and praying that her husband would not grow more angry with her persistent questions. "Begging your pardon, My Lord, but, please... c-can you tell me what you plan to do with me?" she asked meekly, her voice quavering as she bowed her head in dutiful subservience.

Anton huffed aloud at the question, "'Plan'? That's amusing... someone told me just recently that nothing can ever really be 'planned'." Her sharp retort was met with silence, and Anton looked down at her wife's cowering form. She hesitated, her tender feelings conflicting with her angry thoughts. "I suppose some might say that I should divorce you, or send you away, or even toss you out into the streets."

Gwynneth's head snapped up, her eyes bulging in sudden panic. She looked at her husband, but his eyes were not focused on her. They were staring over her head, locked in a far-off gaze.

"But... I shan't do that," Anton added, her voice sounding softer as she shook her head slowly, "...I can't. What happened isn't your fault. 'Tis my brother's fault." She paused and continued to stare as an angry undertone crept back into her voice. "But... Aldred isn't here to take the blame and pay the price, is he?" She turned and directed her stare back at Gwynneth. The petite woman wilted, but didn't look away. "You and I, and this child," she continued, pointing to Gwynneth's belly, "*we* shall be the ones to pay the price and endure whatever consequences come."

Gwynneth said nothing; she just continued to look at Anton with pleading apology and doleful regret in her eyes. Anton didn't want to take her frustration out on the young woman. She didn't deserve it. Acutely feeling the tumult of emotions as they roiled inside her, Anton told herself that she had done what she had to do, and now she had to leave. She needed to escape the suffocating atmosphere of the room. She could not stand the look of shame and uncertain vulnerability on her wife's beautiful countenance.

Anton dropped her eyes and turned away, but before she opened the door, she stopped. Turning her head slightly, Anton spoke over her shoulder without looking back. "I... I wish to apologize," she hesitated, her voice soft and guilt-laden, "...for striking you." She paused, closing her eyes as she turned back to the door, "It shan't happen again."

Gwynneth watched her husband leave the room. His presence had filled her with fear and anxiousness, but now that he was gone, she was left feeling empty and even more unhappy. The wonderful, passionate, trusting relationship that had so tenuously been built between them was now lost forever. Lost and ruined because of what she carried inside her... something that was supposed to be positive and happy, but instead left her feeling soiled and guilty. Gwynneth wondered if the feelings would ever fade.

How was she to feel about this child who should never have been? A child who was destroying dreams and lives because of its very existence... a child who put an end to the peaceful happiness she'd only just begun to enjoy. How was this going to affect her in the long run? How would it affect Anton?

Anton would have to deceive everyone and live a lie, and it was because of her... because of this child. They would lie about the pregnancy, and the baby, and they would have to continue with the deception for the rest of their lives. Gwynneth would go along with what Anton wished, but she knew that some day, in some way, Anton would most likely change his mind about either her, or the child, or both. And then what? He'd reacted once in a violent manner; what if it happened again?

Even though she knew that her relationship with her husband was destroyed, Gwynneth told herself that she should be grateful that Anton was apparently willing to keep her. He'd said that he understood it wasn't her fault, and that he didn't blame her. It had surprised her to hear this, truly. She knew that if Anton really wanted to, he could tell everyone the truth and she could be tossed away like mere garbage. If the Marquess so desired, Gwynneth could be blamed for

everything and banished forever for her crime. But, Anton said he would not do that to her, and she wanted badly to trust in what he said.

Gwynneth wanted to believe that Anton was willing to keep her, and the child, because he really did care for her, despite everything. At one time, she would have believed that easily; now she wasn't sure.

The precious bond of trust between them had been broken, and she couldn't be sure of anything at all right now.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was only a few days later that the pregnancy was officially announced. Everyone in Weldon celebrated with joy. Finally something positive had happened for the noble family. Finally the death and depression that had surrounded the kingdom would dissipate, and there would at last be new life and new blood. The dark clouds that had descended upon the small kingdom were lifting. All was well and good once again.

It was a shame that the young Marquess and Marchioness did not share everyone's merry sentiments.

While the rest of Weldon celebrated, Anton continued to avoid her wife, and Gwynneth spent most of her time in her room, day after day, week after week. Whenever someone congratulated either of them, they graciously accepted it while plastering on a fake smile and feigning happiness. Deep inside, however, the stressful situation was beginning to take its toll on both the Lord and Lady.

Gwynneth missed her husband. She missed the happiness that they'd enjoyed and the closeness they'd shared. She missed his gentle voice and the way it spoke to her so kindly; she missed his enchanting eyes and the way they looked at her so adoringly. She missed being held by his arms every night while she slumbered and dreamt. She missed his smell and his warmth... she missed his tender touch and his passionate kisses.... she missed his love. She hated feeling so miserable day in and day out, but she didn't know how to break the cycle of despair.

For her part, Anton was going through her own private Hell. She was now, because of a most sadistic, cruel twist of fate, living not one lie, but two. Not only was she pretending to be a man, she was now also pretending to be a father. She felt like the biggest fraud and hypocrite in the entire world. It was all she could do some days to keep her sanity. She stayed away from the Manor house as much as possible, taking herself on long, cross-country horseback rides, engaging in all-day hunts, or sparring and training with her fellow knights and warriors. Anything to keep herself preoccupied.

The Marchioness Dowager constantly gave Anton encouragement and repeatedly convinced her that she was doing the right thing, but Anton was, quite frankly, tired of hearing it. Her mother

had no idea what it was like to live one life that was a lie, let alone two. Still, that didn't stop Marina from chiding her daughter about how she needed to 'keep up appearances' and be seen in public, affectionately and compassionately supporting Gwynneth. Lady Marina was very concerned about the public perception of the relationship between the Marquess and Marchioness, and she wished that Anton was as well.

Anton knew that it looked bad for her to be spending so much time away from her wife. She knew that tongues were, and had been, wagging for some time. Honestly, she didn't see how that could be prevented or changed at this point. Those who worked in and around the manor knew that something negative had taken place between the Marquess and Marchioness - the rumor mill of the staff and servants had already revealed and devoured that juicy little tidbit. But rather than trying to do damage control and go through the agony of constantly putting on fake performances, Anton instead dropped little hints and excuses here and there regarding her reasons for being apart from her wife. Gwynneth was still feeling poorly... she was in a very fragile condition... she tired very easily and needed plenty of rest... etc., etc. Anton told herself that, technically, it was all true, so she decided that the excuses would just have to do. She convinced herself that she really didn't care if people believed her reasons or not. It was all the justification she was going to provide, 'public appearances' be damned.

But rumor mills and public appearances were only part of the problem for Anton. What troubled her most were the lies and the toll they were taking on her. The fallacy she'd been living her entire life was now being compounded by having two additional lives thrown into the deception. She'd had nothing to do with the creation of either lie, but she was entirely responsible for them now. It didn't seem fair, and it just wasn't right.

Anton was kept awake at night by a multitude of angry feelings and guilty thoughts. She felt primarily guilty because she had screamed at Gwynneth for lying to her, and yet she had been lying to the innocent blonde from day one. *She* was the liar, not Gwynneth.

Anton lied about her true identity because she had to continue with a charade that began years ago. Her mother insisted that her lie was 'necessary', but it didn't make it any easier to swallow or perpetuate. Gwynneth had lied about being with someone else out of shame and a fear of what would happen to her if anyone knew the truth. So which lie was worse? Which one was more justified? Anton didn't really want to contemplate the answers. She only knew that she hated the lies that now dominated and complicated her life, and she saw no way out.

The young Marquess knew that she would just have to let go of the angry feelings and try to move on and live her life. That was easier said than done, however. She had to be careful of everything she did and said. She had to be aware of the eyes that constantly watched her, and she had to be conscious of her reactions and expressions when she was near her wife.

Anton felt a mixture of hurt and longing whenever she did come into contact with Gwynneth. She had always found her wife very attractive and appealing, and still did; but she was having such a hard time dealing with the harsh realization of what had happened between the young blonde and her brother. She just didn't know how to get past it. Aldred had tainted Gwynneth and took something sacred from her. He had damaged her and left her with the most horrible scar

possible... an unwanted child. A child who would remind both of them, every day, of the truth, and the lies.

Anton not only hated Aldred for what he'd done, she hated the fact that her dead brother succeeded where she *should* have succeeded, but never could. She could never get her wife pregnant. She could never transfer a part of herself inside Gwynneth and then watch as their two life forces came together and created a tiny human being that was a perfect combination of the two of them. It was impossible. Marina had said that because of that fact, the child was a blessing in disguise. But Anton didn't see it that way. She only saw that the relationship she'd been building with the beautiful young woman she'd grown to care about so deeply had been stolen from her. The place that Anton should have rightfully filled had been unjustly usurped and filled by someone else. And Gwynneth carried the evidence of the illegitimacy in her womb.

Despite her resolve to just accept the pregnancy, the child, and the lie, Anton found herself stewing about all of it day in and day out. She had been hurt badly by the whole thing.

She would not be hurt any more. She vowed to protect her heart now, just as she protected it in battle... at any and all cost.

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The weeks passed quietly and uneventfully for both the Marquess and Marchioness of Weldon. While Anton's misery and frustration seemed to lessen as she convinced herself just to get over everything and move on, Gwynneth's sorrow and despair began to change into a mildly festering mixture of anger and resentment.

She felt as though she were being punished; punished for something she'd had no control over. Her husband had said that he didn't blame nor fault her, and yet she was treated like a leper. No one in the Manor came to visit her or check on her health or her progress. She barely got a 'good day' from the staff, and no one inquired after her or sought her opinion for anything. Granted, she didn't venture out of her room too often, but still - she was supposed to be the Lady of the Manor, and yet it seemed that everything was operating around her, without her.

She supposed that Lady Marina had stepped up to take control of the servants and the daily tasks and duties in and around the Manor, and as much as she knew she should appreciate the gesture, Gwynneth found that she instead resented it. Perhaps Anton and Lady Marina assumed that she was too young, or too weak, or too feeble-minded to rise above her misfortune and forge ahead with her life. Well, she decided that she would have to prove to them that she was none of those things. If they could carry on as though everything were fine and good, then she could too.

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Gwynneth awoke on this morning feeling agitated. She hadn't slept very well because of a dreadful and bizarre dream she'd begun having lately, so she was especially tired and irritable. Lying in her bed and contemplating her predicament in general, she finally decided that today she would force herself to venture forth from her room and begin the reclamation of her title as Marchioness of Weldon. No more sulking and feeling sorry for herself; no more wallowing in

despair; no more hiding in shame. It was time for her to show some bravery and determined strength.

Alice was, of course, thrilled that her Lady was at last showing some resolve and fortitude. The handmaid knew of her young charge's keen mind and strong will; she'd been anxiously waiting for the blonde to blossom and come into her own. Perhaps now was not the most ideal time, seeing how the Marquess and Marchioness were at odds with one another, but still, any sign that indicated Lady Gwynneth was emerging from her cocoon was a good one, in Alice's mind.

The Manor was abuzz with preparation for a visit from another noble family. Lord Hershel had been a good friend and ally to the former Lord Edgar for many years. The elderly Hershel had been unable to attend Edgar's burial, nor had he been able to speak with Anton since she'd become Marquess. He sent word to Anton several days ago saying that he had recently remarried, and that he and his new wife were traveling the countryside and wanted very much to visit Weldon.

Gwynneth wasn't told about the impending visit until the last minute, and it incensed her immensely. She was the Lady of the House; she should be in charge of all preparations, and yet no one seemed to care one stitch what she thought. She wasn't sure if this was Anton's doing or Marina's. Nevertheless, she decided that it would have to change.

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When Gwynneth at last descended from her room, she immediately came upon Lady Marina harshly barking orders to the staff and servants in the dining hall. Everyone skittered around cleaning, decorating, and outfitting the huge room and table in preparation for the great feast that was planned in Lord Hershel and Lady Josephine's honor. Marina was quibbling with one of the female seamstresses over the color and type of draperies to be used when Gwynneth walked up behind her. Surprised at the sudden appearance of the long-absent Marchioness, the seamstress gasped as she realized who it was.

"M-My Lady," the girl stumbled, bowing her head slightly, "so good to see you up and about." She added with a smile.

Gwynneth smiled back, "Thank you, Anna."

Marina had by now turned to scrutinize her daughter-in-law, and when Gwynneth's gaze came to meet hers, she smiled thinly, "Yes indeed; it is good to finally see you back on your feet again."

The comment didn't sound caustic, but Gwynneth couldn't help but take it that way. Although Marina hadn't said anything negative to her throughout the entire ordeal, Gwynneth had a niggling feeling that the Marchioness Dowager was not completely on her side. She knew Anton felt that she was without guilt, but she couldn't be sure of what Marina felt. The older woman was hard to read, and even harder to figure out. The only thing Gwynneth knew for sure was that Marina was strong, and in order to assert her rightful place in the Manor, she would have to be stronger. The young blonde had been coaching herself about this very moment; she knew her place and knew that she had the authority to overrule Marina. She did not want to ruffle feathers

or hurt feelings, but if she needed to, Gwynneth told herself that she must, and would, fight for her rights.

"I trust that you're feeling better?" Marina asked.

"Oh yes, much better," Gwynneth smiled politely again, "good enough to jump back into the fray of every day life in the Manor." The smile was sweet, but the words were laced with underlying inferences. Inferences that Gwynneth hoped said, *'I'm in charge here.'*

Gwynneth turned her attention to the seamstress, bypassing Marina's mildly surprised expression. "You two seemed to be at odds; what were you discussing?"

"Err," the seamstress hesitated, flashing a quick look at Lady Marina before answering, "we were just discussing which colors to use, Milady." She explained, indicating the long swaths of embroidered drapes she held in her arms.

Marina interrupted, unable to keep her mouth shut, "Yes, Anna was preparing to use the blue drapes and colors, but I feel burgundy would be much better."

"Hmm," Gwynneth pursed her lips as she reached out to finger the dark blue cloth of the drapes in question. "Anton's favorite color is blue... I think we should go with that."

She looked at Anna, who in turn flipped a quick sideways glance at Lady Marina. Annoyed at the older woman's obvious influence over the seamstress, Gwynneth turned to give Marina an expectant look. She held her head high and raised an eyebrow, daring Marina to usurp her authority and go against her wishes.

Surprised at the young Lady's sudden display of bravery, but knowing that she was being tested, Marina graciously cocked her head and nodded once, "As you wish... you *are* the Lady of the House." She said in a tone that told Gwynneth that she understood the message that was being sent.

Instead of gloating, however, Gwynneth merely gave a small nod in return, then turned back to the seamstress. "Hang the blue drapery, and please be swift about it."

"Yes, Milady," the seamstress said, quickly turning on her heel and dashing away.

Gwynneth turned back to face Marina again, wondering if the older woman would have something to say now that they were alone. But she found only Marina's back as she watched her disappear from the dining hall. The young Marchioness wondered if everything between her and the older woman would be a contest from now on. Would Marina denounce Gwynneth's ability and authority and try to force her ways and beliefs? Or would she deign authority to Gwynneth and only publicly pretend to let her handle things while privately trying to keep control? Could they ever learn to run the Manor together, in harmony, or would there always be a power struggle?

Gwynneth didn't know; she supposed only time would tell.

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Lord Hershel and Lady Josephine's visit was now in its second full day, and Anton was quite ready for the old man and his entourage to leave Weldon. He was a kindly old soul, but he was dreadfully boring, and he kept prattling on and on about Edgar's death and how he fancied himself growing closer to the grave with every day. Still, Anton played the gracious host, listening to the old man's repetitive laments and assuring him that he was alive and well, much unlike her father.

The visit was stressful and draining on the young Marquess, in many ways. It was bad enough that Hershel was depressing Anton and boring her to tears, but in addition to that, the old Lord's young wife was shamelessly coquettish, and her handmaids and personal attendants were flirtatious as well. Anton apologized to Hershel the first few times his wife casually looped her arm through Anton's or touched her in what Anton considered a much too friendly way. She feared the old man would think she was inviting the brash behavior, but instead, Hershel laughed it off and applauded his wife's 'youthful zest for life'.

At first it shocked Anton to have all these female visitors openly interact and toy with her so boldly. But after awhile, Anton grew to rather enjoy their unabashed, flirtatious attention. She wasn't getting attention anywhere else - not that she was pointing fingers; she knew that it was by her choice - so she decided that if Hershel didn't seem to mind, she wouldn't either.

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It was the third, and hopefully final, day of Lord Hershel's visit to Weldon, and Gwynneth was more than tired of all of them and all the false pretenses.

She hated the stress that permeated the room every time she and Anton needed to be together for Hershel's sake, and she hated the fact that they had to do this repeatedly. Lord Hershel was a blathering old bore of a man, but he never failed to eye Gwynneth lecherously and toss her overly friendly grins every time she walked into the room. He stood too close to her, and he smiled entirely too much at her. The old man unnerved her greatly. And, if that weren't bad enough, Hershel's wife, Josephine, and her attendants were shameless trollops who flirted and batted their eyes at Anton - right in front of her, no less. She realized that her husband was young and attractive and obviously garnered the attention of women easily, but still, to be so blatant was downright shameful and rude.

She just wanted all of them to leave, posthaste.

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Gwynneth had finally managed to leave the library, using the excuse that she was very tired and needed to retire for the night. She left Anton with Lord Hershel, noticing the obvious boredom on her husband's blank face as Hershel ranted and raved about death and dying, but not feeling

much sympathy for him. She was upset that Anton not only permitted the visiting women to cavort with him, but he seemed to be enjoying it a bit too much. They smiled and fluttered their eyes at him, and he smiled right back. He escorted Lady Josephine all around the Manor, gladly taking her arm in his while chatting and smiling pleasantly. Gwynneth could read her husband's expressions and body language fairly well by now, and she could tell when he was pretending or not pretending. It infuriated her that he was relaxed enough with these women to the point where he laughed and talked with all of them at length.

Feeling a bit too uptight to actually retire for the night, Gwynneth decided to climb the stairs to the open tower and gaze at the night sky. The fresh air helped to relax her and she needed to clear her mind. She ended up not star-gazing for long, however. As her repetitive yawns proved, she was more weary than she thought, so she headed back down the stairs and down the long hallway toward her bedroom.

As she was passing an intersecting hallway, she distinctly heard the murmur of voices, punctuated by a shrill giggle. Her curiosity piqued, Gwynneth started down the other hallway in search of the noise source. When she rounded the corner, she was flabbergasted to find her husband and one of Lady Josephine's attendants huddled against the corridor wall, talking lowly and laughing with one another. Anton had one hand leaning against the wall and the other propped on his hip, but that wasn't what troubled Gwynneth. What troubled her was the young woman - she was standing much too close to Anton and was gazing up at him with a twinkle in her eyes and a filthy smirk on her lips... and her fingers were playfully fingering the hem of Anton's silk shirt.

Gwynneth was appalled, and she felt an acute rush of shock and hurt wash over her. She hesitated in the hallway, too astounded to move, and not quite brave enough to cause a distraction and interrupt the moment. Finally she made herself turn around and walk away from Anton and the woman, scurrying out of the hallway and away from the distressing situation.

Gwynneth was in tears by the time she reached the top of the tower where she'd been only moments earlier. The night breeze ruffled her hair and chilled the tears that streamed down her cheeks, and she wrapped her arms around herself tightly as she gazed out across the countryside.

As she stood and contemplated things, her hurt began to turn into anger. How could Anton carry-on with these women and behave in such a despicable way? Gwynneth knew that it wasn't uncommon for Lords and noblemen to do whatever they pleased with whomever they desired, but as far as she knew, Anton had never done this. In her mind, it was deplorable and unfair. She was being vilified for being with another man - against her will - and yet her husband could go and cavort and philander with strange women whenever he wished? ...It wasn't right. Besides, what if Anton were to carry-on with one of the women and end up getting her with child? Based on the way the fates had been treating them lately, it was certainly something Anton should consider! As far as Gwynneth knew, Anton had not been with anyone since they'd been married. She couldn't be absolutely certain, but judging from the way her husband had behaved before things became... complicated... Gwynneth had always assumed that she was the only one. But now, it appeared that this was no longer so.

More tears streamed down Gwynneth's fair cheeks as she mulled over the fact that her husband would rather be with some strange woman than with her. *Why?* She wondered. *Is it because I'm so loathsome, he can't stand the sight of me? Is it because I'm so wretchedly soiled, he can't bear the thought of touching me?* She began to cry harder. What if Anton was trying to 'get back' at her, or at Aldred? Perhaps he thought that since he couldn't make his own wife pregnant with his child, then by God he'll make someone else pregnant. Could that be what he was thinking? Could he, and would he, really do such an awful thing? Gwynneth didn't know. Her mind kept racing from one absurd thought to another as she stood there in the night's silence and released her frustration and anger through tears.

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Anton was tired as she climbed the stairs to the tower. She'd played nicely with Lady Josephine and her maids, but when one of them followed her to her bedroom chambers and tried to cajole her way inside, Anton decided that she'd had enough. She tried to turn the girl away as gently and politely as possible, kindly telling her that she appreciated her attentions, but that she wasn't interested in carrying-on with her. The girl didn't take the turn-down immediately to heart, and when she began boldly caressing Anton's arms and frolicking with her clothing, the Marquess knew that she needed to be more firm. She fully expected to hear some kind of complaint about her rejection from Lord Hershel, but she didn't care. They were leaving the morrow, and daybreak couldn't come soon enough for her.

As soon as Anton reached the top of the tower, she saw that she wasn't alone. Immediately fearing that it was another one of Lady Josephine's handmaids, she nearly turned and dashed back down the stairs. But she hesitated a moment, thinking that the figure looked familiar. She walked closer and soon recognized her wife's form.

Gwynneth heard the footsteps and turned around, surprised to see her husband standing before her. Her heart fluttered with a mixture of fear and lingering anger over what she'd witnessed earlier.

Anton frowned at the tears and the strange expression on Gwynneth's face. It looked like she was upset and angry, but Anton couldn't be certain; she'd never seen the blonde display any kind of anger before. She wondered why Gwynneth would be up here late at night, all alone and obviously distraught over something.

"What are you doing up here at this hour, alone?" Anton asked, "It's quite late; you shouldn't be out and about; you should be in bed, resting."

Gwynneth's hackles rose at the scolding tone in her husband's voice. "I dare to say the same to you, My Lord." She replied, carefully trying to mind the tone of her voice. "But then, you weren't exactly *alone*, were you?" She tried to sound casual, but it didn't come out that way; it came out caustic and angry.

Anton's gaze narrowed, and she immediately understood what was going on. She'd thought she heard someone else in the hallway when she was trying to rebuff the flirtatious young maiden; she just didn't realize it'd been her wife. She supposed she should just tell Gwynneth that the girl

was being very forward with her, but that nothing had happened. But, she was tired, and she didn't feel like going into detail about the whole annoying mess. Besides, Anton reasoned, it was ridiculous for Gwynneth to be angry; the young woman couldn't possibly give a whip about her brutish husband or their relationship anymore.

Before Anton could formulate more thoughts, Gwynneth interrupted, "Who was that, that *woman* you were speaking so *intimately* with?" The disdain in her voice was evident.

Anton sighed, not in the mood for any more drama this night. She was surprised, though, that the little blonde had the audacity to broach the subject and raise her voice in such a way. She'd heard from her mother that Gwynneth was growing quite bold and assertive, but she hadn't given the complaint much credence. She'd just figured that her mother was feeling the pinch of being replaced and harbored a little jealousy.

Anton shook her head slightly, "She is no one," she answered dismissively as she turned away and walked over to the edge of the parapet wall. "...No one you need to concern yourself with."

Gwynneth gave a snort of incredulity, "Oh I think I should be concerned... I think I should be *very* concerned when my *husband* allows himself to be so, so... *familiar* with some strange woman!"

Anton spun around to face Gwynneth, surprised at what her wife seemed to be inferring. She would not deny that she had dilly-dallied with visiting ladies and maidens in the past, when she was merely Marquess Edgar's second son, but even then she'd never fully taken advantage of any of them. And now, being a married man, she knew that she would never even consider such a thing. To have her wife assume differently and dare to question her about it incensed her greatly. It was one thing for Gwynneth to question and disagree with her mother as the former Marchioness, but it was quite another to question Anton as the Marquess and Lord of the Manor.

Anton glared at her wife, "I don't believe it's any of your business what I do, and it's certainly none of your *concern* whom I choose to do it with." she retorted, her voice low and warning.

Gwynneth's mouth dropped open in horror; how could Anton say such a cold and heartless thing? She took a step toward him, "It *is* my concern!" Gwynneth responded emphatically, daring to raise her voice further. "I am your *wife*! I am the Lady of this House and the mother of a future Lord or Lady of this House!" She touched a hand to her slightly-swollen abdomen.

Anton gritted her teeth and stepped closer to the younger woman, glaring menacingly, "Yes, you are my *wife*," she growled, taking another step and coming nose to nose with Gwynneth, who was suddenly realizing that she'd made a huge mistake in challenging her husband. "But you are a *Lady* in title only... or do you need to be *reminded* that the child you're carrying is my brother's *bastard*?!"

The loud voice and cutting words sliced right through Gwynneth. Her mouth opened in shock at the vehemence coming from her husband's lips and she brought a hand up to her chest to quell her racing heart.

Anton's eyes flashed blue fire as she held her face close to her wife's and scolded further, "You would be wise to *remember* that fact before you even *dare* to speak to me this way again!"

The warning was delivered loud and clear and Gwynneth received it full force. Anton continued to stare harshly and bore her message into her wife until finally the younger woman succumbed and dropped her eyes. Gwynneth bowed her head, silently admitting her defeat and submitting to her husband's dominance and authority. A tense moment passed before Anton turned on her heel and disappeared quickly, leaving Gwynneth in tears and reeling with shock at her husband's bitter, angry words.

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It was hours later, and still Anton was rehashing the altercation with Gwynneth. Part of her felt anger and resentment toward the blonde, but part of her also felt bad for lashing out and saying such spiteful things. She told herself that she couldn't help it though; Gwynneth should have known better than to speak to her in such a way. How dare the little woman presume to lecture to her, the Marquess and Lord of the Manor, about propriety and behavior? It was absurd.

She almost wished that she'd told Gwynneth that she should really be thankful that her husband *hadn't* taken some young thing to bed in order to curb urges and release frustrations. She certainly could do that if she pleased; noblemen did it all the time!

But... Anton knew she would never do that. It was true that she still ached inside and that sometimes she even wished she could hurt others the way she hurt; but still... Anton knew that she could not betray Gwynneth outright. Despite the angry words and lingering pain between them, Anton could not deny that she still cared for her wife, deep down inside.

At times the damage to their relationship seemed hopelessly irreparable, yet Anton continued to hold on to a glimmer of hope that Gwynneth not only still cared for her, but that some day, somehow, they might find their way back to one another.

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[Continued...](#)

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~ Second Son ~
by [A. K. Naten](#)

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PART SIX

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A fortnight passed since the stinging argument with her husband, and Gwynneth had once again retreated inside herself. Having learned her lesson about being outspoken, the young woman spent most of her time either cooped up inside her own room, or climbing up to stand in the open tower, where she would linger and stare blankly out over the Manor's surrounding countryside.

Everyone had noticed the downtrodden demeanor and defeated attitude of the Marchioness, for it had been apparent for some time. The young woman who had, at first, been such a breath of fresh air now seemed sullen and painfully withdrawn. Indeed, the Lord and Lady who had once seemed so happy and content with each other now appeared aloof and obviously uptight when in the same room together.

Rumors abounded that the noble marriage was in trouble for some reason, but no one could fathom what the reason might be. Things were going well at Weldon, and they were expecting a child; what trouble would that bring about? No one knew, but it was obvious that something had gone awry.

When the Lord and Lady were in each other's presence, they barely made eye contact nor spoke to one another. Lord Anton made a point of keeping himself occupied with various outdoor activities while Lady Gwynneth hid herself away inside the castle's thick walls.

Gwynneth's pregnancy seemed to be coming along fairly well, but many thought she appeared pale and too thin. The physician, Victor, was concerned about her eating habits, as well as her entire well-being. He often questioned Gwynneth's ladies maid, Alice, who dutifully told him whatever she could. Alice was equally concerned, so she talked to Victor willingly, hoping that he could help her distressed Lady.

Alice unhappily told Victor that Gwynneth barely spoke to her, nor anyone for that matter; she mostly just sat and stared, her eyes full of pain and tears. Alice would have her favorite foods made up, in hopes of enticing her to eat, but when the meals were presented, Gwynneth hardly touched it. She would just look blankly at the food, occasionally taking a bite here and there, but ultimately pushing it away, scarcely eating a thing.

The maid also reported that Gwynneth complained of not sleeping well. She claimed to have dreams and nightmares that kept her awake at all hours of the night. She never gave much detail about the dreams, only that they were very strange and left her feeling unsettled. She did admit, once, that she felt very lonely and desperately missed her husband's once-loving presence, not

only in her bed, but in her day-to-day life as well.

Alice almost felt like she was betraying her Lady by revealing such information, but Victor assured her that it was vital for him to know as much as possible in order to help Gwynneth. And Gwynneth, Alice knew, desperately needed help.

Having gathered all this information and seeing Gwynneth's poor health with his own eyes, Victor finally decided that he needed to call attention to the matter before it was too late.

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The elderly physician had traversed the entire expanse of the fortified manor searching for Anton. Finally finding someone to point him in the right direction, he walked outside for quite a distance until he came upon the Marquess and some of her fellow knights. The small gathering of warriors were sparring with each other out in an open field, the clash of their swords clanging louder as Victor reached the grassy clearing where they skirmished.

The old man watched Anton for a moment, marveling at her skill and obvious strength. It was no easy feat to fight handily with a heavy steel sword, but Anton made it look as though it were nothing. Victor thought that it was no wonder no one suspected she was not a man; she sparred as if it were an actual foe and her life depended on his utter defeat.

Anton and her opponent circled each other, the young Lord moving with careful steps as her friendly opponent grinned and taunted her amiably. Anton held her sword at the ready, parrying swiftly whenever her opponent made a move or took a swipe at her. And then, when an opening occurred, she'd react with a lightning-fast response. Her wrist would quickly swivel the hilt of the sword and her arms would heave the mighty weapon over her head, slicing it through the air with deadly accuracy and forcing her opponent backward as he tried to deflect the force of the blow. Over and over she would repeat this, her blows raining down harder and harder until she at last drove her opponent to his knees. The young man cried out in frustrated defeat as Anton's sword finally knocked his out of his hands. Both warriors were huffing and puffing for air, their bodies completely spent.

Anton lowered the tip of her sword so that it pointed at her foe's bobbing throat, "Yield?" She rasped heavily through clenched teeth, sweat streaming down her unflinching face.

Her opponent nodded his head, acknowledging his Lord's dominance, his teasing grin long since disappeared, "Aye," he panted, "Yield, Milord."

The other men who were gathered whooped and clapped their approval at the battle as Anton lowered her weapon and offered her hand, helping the young knight to his feet.

"Gods above! You fight like the Devil himself, Milord!" the young man said, shaking his head in astonishment.

Anton laughed at the comment and clapped him on the back, "You're a fine warrior, Harold, and a very worthy opponent. Bravo to you." She turned and walked away, leaving the other men to

talk amongst themselves.

Richard, a friend and fellow knight who had served the House of Weldon for many years approached Anton, smiling broadly. "'Tis good to see that married life hasn't softened you any, Milord." Richard taunted gently. He and Anton had been friends and allies for a long time, and they had always enjoyed an easy camaraderie.

Anton reached for a pail of water and helped herself to a cup before answering. "Well my friend, though my marital experience has been rather brief, I believe I can safely say that it isn't marriage that makes you soft. It's over-indulgence and indolence." She grinned at her friend and took another gulp of water.

Richard chuckled and nodded, "Very true words, sire. I'm quite sure that after today, none of these men shall think you *indolent* in any way whatsoever." The knight and the Marquess laughed together.

As Victor walked past the men toward Anton, he had to smile inwardly at their murmured comments. If only they knew that the Devil who'd apparently just bested every one of them was a woman.

Victor at last reached Anton, finding her and one of her comrades gulping down cup after cup of water. He smiled as he came to stand behind them, "Quite the display you put on, My Lord. Do you often make it a habit to trounce your own men so thoroughly?" The old man's voice was teasing.

Anton finished off her water and turned, "We're practicing, Victor. It keeps all of us sharp and saves us from *indolence*... right, Richard?" She said, tossing her friend a knowing smirk.

Richard smiled, "Indeed, Milord."

Victor grinned as well, glad to see a smile on the face of the Marquess for a change. "Begging your pardon, My Lord, but might I have a word with you?" His voice took on a more serious tone as he looked at Anton.

Anton lifted a grimy shirt sleeve and dragged it across her sweaty, dirt streaked face. "Of course." She turned to her friend, "Richard, would you leave us please?"

"Certainly, Milord." Richard nodded dutifully and walked back to the group of men.

"What brings you out here, Victor? Need someone on whom to practice your surgical skills?" Anton quipped.

"Not quite, My Lord, although, judging from the way you were fighting, I'm surprised someone isn't injured."

"We were *sparring*, Victor, not fighting."

"Yes, yes, *sparring*." Victor waved dismissively. "Having at sport is fine and good, but you've been at this every single day for, what? ...at least an entire fortnight." he said, looking at Anton knowingly.

"What does that matter?" Anton sniffed, tossing the water cup back into the empty pail.

"Well," Victor cleared his throat uncomfortably, "while you've been *occupying* yourself out here, there've been some things happening back at the castle which I daresay must be brought to your attention."

Anton propped her hands on her hips, "What 'things'?" Her tone indicated annoyance and impatience.

"Well, mostly your wife, My Lord." Victor hesitated, "She's quite unhappy."

Anton sighed in response. "I *know* she's unhappy, Victor."

"Yes, but it's more than just 'unhappiness', Anton." Victor reached out to grasp Anton's upper arm, silently demanding her full attention. "She isn't eating, she isn't sleeping... she's listless and so dreadfully pale." The physician shook his head, "It's extremely dangerous for her to carry on this way; the baby's health and well-being is suffering, as is her own."

Anton frowned, regarding Victor seriously, "What do you mean?"

"Gwynneth has gained virtually no weight, and she's well into her fifth month of pregnancy. She should be growing plump and full, but instead, she's thin as a whippet."

"Well, then... see that she's given more to eat!" Anton spat, feeling exasperated.

"She gets plenty of food served to her... she simply won't eat it. She just sits and stares... and weeps."

Anton let out another distressed sigh and ran her hand through her sweat-soaked hair. "Well what am *I* supposed to do about it? I can't *make* her eat or sleep! I can't force her to do anything she doesn't desire to do! If she wishes to let herself waste away, how am *I* to prevent that?!" Anton's voice grew louder and more impatient.

"You must make amends with her." Victor said, looking squarely into Anton's eyes. "The two of you must overcome these obstacles that have been thrown at you and find a way to bring your relationship back onto stable ground." Anton made a noise of disgust and turned her head away, but Victor gripped her arm again, forcing her to lock eyes with him. "Listen to me, Anton." The older man was insistent, "She's got herself worried sick, to the point where she's dreadfully unhealthy! The two of you *must* heal things, before it's too late! You must find some way to make peace and come together again!"

Anton shook her head slowly, "That isn't possible Victor, and you know it."

"Why not? Why can't you at least *try* to get over this hurdle? It isn't her fault-"

"It isn't my fault either!" Anton shouted.

The old man fought back, "No, it isn't, but she's the one being made to suffer the most, isn't she?!"

"How is her suffering any greater than mine?!" Anton roared suddenly. "She hurts, she weeps, she wallows in misery - so do *I*, Victor!" She pounded a hand against her chest and then nervously flicked her gaze over to her men, realizing with embarrassment that they had turned to see what the commotion was.

Both Anton and Victor stood in silence for a moment. Finally Victor closed his eyes and drew a deep breath before speaking quietly. "Anton... all I ask is that you try. *Try* to make amends... *try* to at least interact with Gwynneth... let her know that you're still there for her, and that you still care. You *do* still care, don't you?" He bored his eyes into Anton's, demanding a truthful answer.

The Marquess drew a deep breath and turned her gaze away, letting it travel across the countryside. "Yes," she said, her voice almost a whisper as she closed her eyes, "...Yes, I do."

"Then go to her." Victor's voice was gentle and pleading. "She needs you so."

Anton gave a soft snort, "She doesn't need me. After what I've done and said to her, she can't possibly want anything to do with me."

Victor shook his head, "You're wrong about that." Anton turned back and looked at him, her eyebrows knitted together. "You're quite dreadfully wrong." the physician said with finality.

Before Anton could say another word, a young man on horseback came galloping up to them. "Milord! Milord!" He shouted as he drew near. "Lady Gwynneth," he said, gulping for air as he jumped off the horse and stumbled, "Lady Gwynneth has taken a fall!" He gasped the words, and Anton's heart plummeted to the bottom of her stomach. "She's hurt, Milord... you need to come quickly!"

Anton and Victor exchanged panicked looks, and quick as a flash, the Marquess leapt onto the horse. Anton wheeled the beast around and kicked him mercilessly in the flanks, urging him back toward the Manor with the greatest speed possible.

Arriving back at the castle courtyard, Anton dismounted and sprinted inside, immediately being directed by a waiting servant. She spotted a circle of a half-dozen people huddled around the fallen Lady and frantically ran toward them.

"Out of the way! All of you, out of my way!" The Marquess shouted, pushing and elbowing everyone aside.

Looking down, Anton's heart nearly broke at the sight of her wife lying on her back, unconscious, a trickle of blood leaking down her face from a gash just above her right eyebrow.

Alice knelt on one side, dabbing a cloth against the cut while Lady Marina knelt on the other side.

"S-She won't wake up," Alice said as she looked up, her voice fraught with fear.

"She's just unconscious!" Lady Marina immediately snapped at the maid. Looking up at Anton, the Marquess could plainly see the uncertainty in her mother's eyes as her mask of control slipped just a bit. Anton's stomach churned at the thought that her wife might be gravely injured. "Where is Victor?" Marina demanded.

"Get Victor in here, *now!*" Anton shouted to the perplexed onlookers around her. Someone mumbled an acknowledgement and took off to retrieve the physician. Anton turned back and quickly knelt down, scooping her arms underneath Gwynneth's limp body.

"What do you think you're doing?" Marina squawked as Anton stood up with the blonde in her arms.

"I'm taking her upstairs." Anton barked back, "I hardly think it shall do her any good to lie on this cold, hard floor, shall it?"

A loud groan silenced everyone. Anton stilled her movements and looked on wide-eyed as Gwynneth's eyes fluttered and slowly opened.

Everything was blurred as Gwynneth blinked and blinked and fought to make out the voices and faces in front of her. When at last she could see clearly, the sight of her husband's visage so close to her made her heart leap.

"W-What happened?" she mumbled, glancing from Anton to her mother-in-law.

"You fell down the stairs," Lady Marina blurted - a little too harshly, apparently, based on the warning glare Anton shot her.

"You must have hit your head; you were unconscious." Anton said, speaking gently, "You've cut yourself too." she added as her eyes flickered to the still-bleeding brow.

Gwynneth looked at her husband in confusion, wondering why he was so dirty and drenched with sweat. A wispy memory of the dream that'd been torturing her every night entered her throbbing head, and she frowned at the way the recollection seemed to merge with the current reality.

Just then, Victor appeared, winded and breathing loudly. "My Lord, let us take her to her chambers so that I might have a look at her."

Anton nodded and looked down to lock eyes with Gwynneth again, "Hold on to me now," she said as she began to make her way over to the stairs that lead up to her wife's room.

As they began the slow, careful ascent up the stone stairway, Gwynneth tightened her grip around Anton's neck, bringing herself closer to him. She didn't mind the fact that his shirt was nearly soaked through completely. She could smell the distinct tang of his sweat-coated body, and for an instant, it reminded her of the way he smelled after they'd had an intimate encounter, particularly the lengthy and energetic kind. She closed her eyes and dreamily recalled what it felt like to touch her lips to his. Clinging to him now, Gwynneth could feel the firmness of his chest and the taut muscles of his arms as they flexed and tightened around her body. She squeezed her eyes shut, greedily absorbing every sensation and nuance, for she knew not when, or if, she might ever feel any of them again.

Finally reaching their destination, the Marquess walked inside and laid Gwynneth down on her bed very carefully, making sure the young woman's head didn't get jostled too much. Anton withdrew her arms, reaching out to carefully fix Gwynneth's dress where it had ridden up on her. Victor, Marina and Alice all swooped in, surrounding the injured young Lady as the doctor began to examine her. Gwynneth closed her eyes and remained quiet after Victor looked at her pupils and started feeling all around her head for lumps and bumps. Anton stood behind Victor and watched every move the elderly physician made, her face frowning and her forehead creasing with tension as she waited for the official pronouncement. As Victor hit a particularly sore spot on her head, Gwynneth let out a yelp, her face contorting in pain.

"I'm sorry, my dear," Victor said, patting her hand.

Tears welled in Gwynneth's eyes, and as Victor continued to examine the rest of her body, her gaze wandered up until it collided with her husband's. She was amazed to watch the look of intensity on his face quickly soften and change into one of gentle concern. As Anton gave her a slight nod and whispered, "It's alright," the floodgates opened. Tears began streaming down Gwynneth's cheeks as the reality of what'd happened and the pain began to register at the same time.

By that time, Victor had scooted further down Gwynneth's body and was running his hands all over her petite frame, squeezing and prodding with his fingertips in his search for injuries. Gwynneth winced again as he felt along her hip, and Anton couldn't stand it any longer.

She stepped around Victor and came to stand against the edge of the bed, right beside Gwynneth's head. "Must you be so rough with her, man?" The Marquess snapped with irritation, scolding the doctor.

"I need to see if anything's fractured or broken, My Lord," Victor calmly explained, continuing with his examination. "I'm nearly finished."

"Well hurry it along! Can't you see that she's in pain?" Anton motioned toward her wife's tear-streaked face.

Victor glanced at the Marchioness, who had now turned her face away in embarrassment, then looked back at Anton, fixing the Marquess with a sad, knowing expression. "Yes, My Lord." He then reached out, grasping the edge of Gwynneth's dress as he started to lift it up, but stopping himself short. "Oh, uh, I need to....," Victor hesitated and looked up at Anton, inclining his head toward Gwynneth's abdomen. "I need to listen..."

Anton frowned at him and shook her head, "Yes, yes!" She waved her hand impatiently, wondering why in the world he was asking her for permission.

Victor scowled and made a face, tipping his head toward Gwynneth and silently trying to send a message that the Lady might become more upset if he looked any further.

Anton immediately got the gist of the message, and she leaned down toward her wife. "Gwynneth," she called out softly. "Victor needs to have a listen with the baby... is that alright?"

The young woman still had her head turned away, but she mutely nodded her consent.

Anton reached down and patted her hand, "Alright... he'll be done soon." She turned and nodded to Victor, and the physician discreetly began to lift the heavy dress.

When Gwynneth's swollen lower abdomen was exposed, Victor laid his ear upon it and listened carefully. Anton let her hand rest atop Gwynneth's hand the whole time, and when the side of Victor's face first touched the Lady's skin, she flinched and her hand turned to grasp hold of her husband's.

Anton glanced at Gwynneth's face, noting the flush that raced across her cheeks. The Marquess couldn't imagine what the poor thing was going through, and she truly felt badly for her. All she could do was reassure her with a gentle squeeze of her fingers.

At last Victor pulled away, lowering Gwynneth's dress again and quickly standing up and away from the bed. "Well, everything sounds alright, as far as I can tell," he pronounced. "Aside from several nasty bruises and a sore noggin, you should be fine." He directed his comments to Gwynneth, who had turned her head back and looked somewhat sheepishly at the doctor. "You gave us all quite a scare, My Lady."

Gwynneth lowered her eyes, her face blushing again, "I'm sorry." She whispered softly.

"Don't apologize, My Lady, just promise me that you'll take better care of yourself." Victor's voice was kind rather than scolding. "You need to *eat*... you need to keep your strength up and put some weight on this body." He pointed to her stomach, "and on that body too. You shan't be able to climb any stairs at all if you don't." Gwynneth didn't look up, she merely nodded in mute acknowledgement. "Very well," Victor said, turning his attention to Anton. "I shall call on her later to check on things, hmm?"

The Marquess nodded and released her wife's hand so she could shake the physician's. "Thank

you, Victor." The elderly man disappeared out the door, leaving the room suddenly quiet and uncomfortable.

"Well, now that that's over with, I trust you can handle things from here." Marina said, interrupting the silence and addressing Alice.

The handmaid glanced over at Anton, who gave no indication of whether he planned to stay or go, then came back to the Marchioness Dowager. "Yes, Milady. I'll take care of her."

Marina nodded and turned to look at Anton expectantly. The Marquess had been watching her wife, waiting for her downcast eyes to look up and tell her what she was thinking, perhaps. When the silence became obvious, Anton looked up at the two waiting women.

"Yes, well," she began, clearing her throat, "I believe I'm in desperate need of a hot bath." She earned a tiny smile from Alice but nothing from her wife. "After that, perhaps I'll stop back." She added, looking again to Gwynneth to see if she would give her approval, or disapproval. The soft, youthful face remained expressionless, however, so Anton just turned and slowly walked out the door.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was some time until Gwynneth finally managed to get some peace and quiet in her chambers. She'd been barraged by the events and emotions of the afternoon, and people kept stopping by her room to check on her and bring her things. She was glad to finally have some solitude so she could sort through the thoughts and feelings that'd been plaguing her all day.

Mostly what plagued her was the attitude and behavior displayed by her husband. The way he'd spoken so caringly to her... the way he'd held her and reassured her... what did it all mean? Was his attitude toward her changing? Could all this mean that Anton still cared? If he didn't care, would he have acted the way he did, so concerned and careful? Or was he just being polite because he felt pity for her? She didn't know. Thinking about it so much made her already-injured head throb painfully, so Gwynneth finally conceded to her fatigue and allowed herself to fall into an uneasy sleep.

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It was very late when Anton finally made her way back toward Gwynneth's chambers. She'd been thinking about anything and everything since leaving her wife earlier in the day, her thoughts primarily centering on how unfairly she'd been treating the young woman.

It had taken something like Gwynneth hurting herself and putting the fear of God into everyone, but Anton now realized how much, and how unnecessarily, she'd been punishing her wife.

Victor had been right about Gwynneth, as usual. She did not look well, and her misstep and fall down the stairs proved just how weak and unstable she'd let herself become. Whether or not her

self-neglect was intentional or a side effect of the stress and unhappy conditions she'd been living in, Anton didn't know. All she knew was that it all had to stop - everything. The cold war of silence between them, the blame, the anger, the guilt... all of it had to cease before they both went mad.

Anton believed that Gwynneth was innocent of any wrongdoing, yet she admittedly had still been penalizing the poor blonde. It wasn't Gwynneth's fault that Aldred did what he had done, but it had been so hard for Anton to get over and move past it that she ended up punishing Gwynneth anyway. Striking her, screaming at her, avoiding her... all of it was punishment for a crime Gwynneth never wanted to commit, yet could not avoid being forced into. Aldred was the one Anton was truly angry with, but he was dead, and there was nothing Anton could do about it, nor about what had happened. She needed to accept that, and, she needed to accept the fact that Gwynneth was going to have this baby, period. If she needed justice to be served, she would simply have to be satisfied with thinking that perhaps Aldred got what he deserved in the end.

Anton vowed to change her relationship with her wife. She'd been so cruel and callous to the lovely young woman who had once captured her heart. Hitting her, scaring her to death with mad ravings, treating her like she was an outcast... all of it would stop, and it would stop now. Even if she no longer cared for her wife, she still knew it was just wrong to treat her the way she'd been. And Anton still cared about Gwynneth... she still cared quite deeply.

Arriving at Gwynneth's door, Anton knocked very softly, wondering if perhaps her wife was asleep by now. Receiving no reply, Anton opened the door very carefully and peeked her head inside. Gwynneth was lying on the bed, her eyes closed, her lips parted slightly as she slumbered. Anton smiled at the beautiful sight and figured she should probably leave the poor exhausted woman alone, but seeing the angelic face so relaxed and at ease changed her mind. After all, she rarely had the opportunity to observe her so blatantly.

She walked into the room and came to stand beside the bed, watching silently as Gwynneth's chest moved up and down, her button nose and rosebud lips drawing in air and breathing life into her body... her body, and the body of the child she carried within. Anton stared at her wife's covered abdomen for a moment, contemplating the slightly mounded area that seemed to almost beckon her. She had never really taken a good look at Gwynneth's burgeoning belly, not even secretly. She had been so busy avoiding the blonde altogether that she'd avoided even glancing at the spot where the baby so obviously dwelt.

Overcome with a sudden urge to touch Gwynneth and begin righting all wrongs as soon as possible, Anton sat down carefully on the edge of the bed, bringing herself as close to her wife as she could without waking her. Gwynneth was asleep when Anton reached out to gently touch her now-bandaged forehead, but as soon as her fingers made contact, the Marchioness awakened abruptly.

Blue-green eyes shot open and Gwynneth gasped aloud as her sleep-fogged vision took in the apparition of a dark-haired man leaning over her. A memory instantly exploded unbidden in her mind; a horrid recollection of Aldred and the way he used to creep into her room unannounced and...

"Shh, shh," Anton hushed, "It's alright... it's alright." She said, patting the blonde's hands where they had grasped the covers and drawn them up to her chin. Seeing Gwynneth's frightened reaction filled Anton with additional shame. Her wife was so petrified, and here she was, wanting to touch her so badly.

Gwynneth's eyes finally focused and when she saw pale blue staring at her, she recognized her husband. Anton smiled and reached up to gingerly brush some fair hair aside, further reassuring that she meant no harm. But Gwynneth's heart continued to pound as her sleep-addled brain tried to figure out what in the world her husband was doing in her room, and why he was touching her.

"How are you feeling?" Anton whispered.

Gwynneth hesitated a moment before answering. "Better, thank you, My Lord." Her voice was quiet and raspy and she continued to grip the bed sheets while shifting herself into a sitting position.

Anton just nodded and continued to stare for a few moments, unable to think of anything else to say. She felt the heavy silence and suddenly hated the painful distance between the two of them more than ever. They used to be able to talk so freely, so openly. And now things were strained and stilted as they sat in mute discomfort, averting each other's eyes and struggling for something to say.

Unable to withstand awkwardness of the moment, Anton stood abruptly and turned, taking a few steps away from Gwynneth's bed. After a brief moment of contemplation, she turned and faced her wife.

Gwynneth felt the weight of her husband's intense gaze as it found and held her, and she felt a tingle of fear course through her bones.

"Gwynneth," Anton began quietly, "I... I'm dissatisfied with the way things have been proceeding."

The Marchioness just stared at her husband, holding her breath and wondering where he might be going with the conversation.

Anton felt herself fumbling for words as she struggled to express what she wanted without sounding like a fool. She frowned and tried again, "What I mean is... I dislike the way things have become... the way *we* have become." She glanced at her wife, who just continued to stare with wide, wary eyes. Sighing and running a hand through her hair, Anton walked a few paces away before turning back to her wife. "I'm unhappy with things being so strained between us, Gwynneth." Her voice was low and quiet. "I want to change it, but I'm not sure that I know how."

Gwynneth's mouth opened a bit, but she just continued to stare. She truly didn't know what to

say. For her husband to actually say what she'd dreamt of hearing him say was a welcome, though unexpected, balm to her ravaged heart. Tears immediately began to burn behind her eyes and Gwynneth swallowed hard and blinked to keep them at bay.

Anton took a step closer toward the bed, "What I do know is that we cannot continue like this. It's not good for either one of us... most particularly you."

Gwynneth sat up straighter in her bed as she watched her husband step carefully closer.

"I'm tired, Gwynneth. I'm tired of hurting and feeling anger and resentment. It's madness, and it needs to stop... I want it to *stop*." Anton whispered emphatically.

Gwynneth could scarcely believe what she was hearing, but she managed to nod her head in agreement. Her voice was raspy and quiet when she finally spoke, "I-I want that too, husband. I know we can't ever be as we once were, but I'd like to try to make things better, at least."

Anton stared at her and nodded her head slowly, "Yes, I'd like that too."

With that, Anton came up to the side of the bed and sat down very close to the nervous blonde. Gwynneth shifted uneasily, her eyes never leaving her husband's.

Moving slowly, Anton reached out and caressed a lock of her wife's golden hair before cupping a soft cheek in her hand. "I'm sorry that I hurt you." The words were whispered quietly, sincerely, and Anton prayed the apology would be accepted.

Gwynneth heard her husband's gentle words and his unspoken request for atonement, and her chin trembled as his clear eyes held hers while he apologized. Only able to nod, she silently forgave him for everything that had gone wrong.

They stared at each other for a moment, seemingly lost in thought, or perhaps too afraid to act on the feelings that both felt bubbling up inside.

Finally, giving in to what she'd been thinking and feeling for too long, Anton hesitantly leaned forward and kissed her wife.

Gwynneth's heart leapt as her husband's soft lips pressed against hers, but before she could fully react, Anton broke them apart. Looking at each other for just a moment, Gwynneth watched as Anton's eyes dropped away from hers and traveled downward. She drew a quick, quiet breath as she felt one of his hands come to rest on her covered abdomen. Not only was this the first time Anton had touched her swollen belly, it was the first time he'd acknowledged the baby without being upset or angry.

They sat there on the bed in silence, Anton's hand gently pressing against the rounded protrusion while Gwynneth's fears and worries began to rear their ugly heads once again. What if Anton wants to make amends and bring their life back to normal but can't? What if he tries to accept the child but is unable? What if he decides he doesn't want any part of the baby, or of the woman

who brought it into the world? Gwynneth closed her eyes and begged her heart, and her head, to calm down and cast the ugly thoughts aside. A soft caress to her cheek broke her reverie, and when she opened her eyes, Gwynneth was met by her husband's intense, sky-colored gaze.

Anton could read the uncertainty on Gwynneth's face, and she gave her a faint smile, hoping to encourage her. Touching and feeling the swell to her wife's abdomen was something she'd been thinking about for quite awhile, and although it was covered up, Anton considered the move to be a step in the right direction. For too long the baby had merely been something to be talked - and argued - about. Actually feeling it and acknowledging its presence would help to drive the message home that it was a living, breathing thing, and that it did exist in the here and now.

The Marquess and Marchioness stared at each other again, their eyes tracking all over one another's faces, thinking and wondering so many things. Gwynneth marveled at the naked emotion she saw on her husband's face; it was an emotion she couldn't identify, but she thought it encouraging, still. Anton, on the other hand, wondered again how she managed to keep herself away from someone so incredible and beautiful, both inside and out.

Leaning in once more, Anton gave in to her wants and kissed her wife again, but this time, Gwynneth gladly returned it. It was only a matter of moments until hands reached up to tentatively touch and caress... only moments until fingers threaded through hair and cupped faces and urged bodies closer together... only moments until the kisses deepened and emotions began to swirl and swell and threaten to ignite passions that had been impatiently lying dormant.

But, before things got out of hand, Anton twisted her lips away and broke them apart. Breathing heavily, she took a moment to rest her forehead against her wife's so that both of them could regain their composure and slow their racing hearts.

It would be so easy to give in to their hedonistic desires. It would be so easy to forget everything that'd happened and just let the rest of the world fall away. But they both knew they couldn't do that. It would be too much too soon.

No matter how much they wished otherwise, things were different now. They were different, and their relationship was changed. To simply let their sexual feelings rage uncontrollably and take over for a few blissful hours would be a mistake.

There were apologies to be made, hurt feelings to be mended, realities to be acknowledged, and lessons to be learned. They needed to right wrongs and rebuild a relationship that had been shattered, and they needed to do all of this slowly.

When Anton finally looked up at Gwynneth, her lips were still reddened and her flushed cheeks silently said that she'd enjoyed their brief sport as much as Anton had. But, knowing that it would be best to just leave before she did something unwise, Anton pushed herself further away from her wife.

"I... I should go." Anton's voice was hushed and strained as she struggled to get the words out.

Gwynneth merely nodded at him, too emotional to respond and too overwhelmed to grasp everything that had just happened.

Anton stood up, but before she walked away, she leaned down and placed one last kiss upon her wife's lips. "Goodnight my wife," she whispered.

Moist, jade eyes looked back up, "Goodnight my husband."

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[Continued...](#)

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~ **Second Son** ~
by [A. K. Naten](#)

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PART SEVEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The days at Weldon Manor passed a little more easily than they had been, now that the Lord and Lady had apparently arrived at some sort of reconciliation. They had not leapt swiftly back into each other's beds, but it was obvious that the tensions between them had eased significantly. Everyone felt the sigh of relief that seemed to permeate the air, and the Manor's atmosphere was once again reasonably relaxed and content.

Now in the midst of the summer months, people all over the land were busy tending to their fields and crops and partaking in outdoor activities. Pleasant weather seemed to bring everyone outside, including the Marquess and Marchioness. Servants and commoners were surprised but pleased to see the two strolling outside the Manor from time to time, pausing to speak to anyone who crossed their path, or stopping to sit in the gardens and chat for a spell.

Gwynneth was more than grateful that she and Anton were getting their relationship back on solid ground, albeit slowly. Anton seemed content to keep things at the pace of a courting couple rather than a married couple, silently taking things one careful step at a time. Perhaps he still felt reluctant, or perhaps he still harbored uncertain feelings. Gwynneth couldn't be sure. She only knew that their present situation, however chaste, was far better than the dreadfully unhappy days and nights she had been spending alone.

The two of them had not advanced their rekindled relationship past sharing a few short-lived kisses here and there. Anton was courteous and gracious in every way possible, but Gwynneth got the impression that he was making it a point not to do or be anything more. When he touched her, it seemed merely as an offer of assistance or an act of chivalry; not because he wanted or needed to touch her. Gwynneth worried that Anton did not, and perhaps never would, want to be with her the way he used to. She supposed she couldn't blame him. Knowing what he now knew and seeing the way her body was changing and turning from a slender, attractive girl into a fattened, bloated matron... surely he wanted no part of that. She told herself she should be happy that he paid any attention to her at all.

Still, Gwynneth longed for her husband's touch, and she longed to touch him as well. She found herself constantly standing as close to him as she could and, even more, she stole little touches and grazes too. She would reach out and touch his hand whenever they engaged in conversation, or she would place both her hands on his arm or shoulder under the pretense of needing stability whenever she sat or arose. And, she would walk and linger closely beside him, subtly brushing against whatever part of his body she could make contact with. She thought herself incredibly pathetic, but still she was desperate enough to continue with the ridiculousness.

As time proceeded, it became more and more difficult for Gwynneth to subjugate her feelings for her husband. They once had been so very close and so wonderfully open with one another. Even though that closeness had been stripped away for awhile, Gwynneth's emotional and physical feelings had not diminished greatly. They were still very much alive. She could only hope and pray that her husband might someday feel similarly.

In fact, Anton still did have those feelings. And, she was also finding it difficult to hold herself back when it came to expressing them. Anton already knew that through all the trial and tribulations of the past few weeks, she never once stopped caring for Gwynneth. Even after their relationship had been so badly damaged... even after the trust between them had been violated and torn asunder... even after everything... Anton remained completely besotted with her wife.

Anton couldn't help but watch Gwynneth whenever they were together. Every chance she got, she stole glances here and there, intensely evaluating her movements and observing her thorough, exquisite femininity. She realized how truly glorious her young wife was, and was continually amazed as she watched Gwynneth's body grow and change.

Once in awhile they were able to share a quiet moment or two together where they took little walks or enjoyed a nice picnic someplace outdoors. Usually they spent time talking about various things, but sometimes they just sat, neither one saying a word as they quietly listened to sounds and noises while absorbing the fresh summer air. Sometimes one or both of them would

even doze off for a bit. Still, every time they were together, Anton couldn't help but stare at Gwynneth and marvel over her.

Being pregnant, Gwynneth somehow personified the quintessential 'woman' to Anton. However, rather than be put off by her wife's burgeoning body and impending motherhood, Anton thought Gwynneth appeared even more lovely and delicate than before. But she also seemed fragile and vulnerable too, and Anton suddenly felt an extreme, overwhelming urge to take care of her and protect her more than ever.

The Marquess often wanted so badly to take Gwynneth in her arms and love her, but she resisted. She still thought that they shouldn't move things too quickly, and besides - if Anton was really honest with herself - she had to admit that she was a little scared to move things any further. She knew nothing about pregnant women, and she wasn't sure if it was safe to touch Gwynneth the way she wanted to touch her. She was aware that conventional church rules frowned upon a husband being intimate with his wife while she was pregnant or 'unclean'. However, Anton's marriage - and indeed her entire life - had been so utterly unconventional from the very start, she wasn't overly concerned about what the church dictated. It was a bit late for that. The risk to Gwynneth and the child concerned her much more. She thought that perhaps she could speak with Victor about it, but a little bit of pride and a lot of embarrassment kept her from seeking his wisdom on the matter. At least for the time being.

Lately, whenever she thought Gwynneth was safely napping, Anton would reach out and very gently touch her swollen abdomen, caressing it lightly, lovingly - but always while it was safely covered up. She didn't have the nerve to ask to touch it in the flesh, even though the thought had begun crossing her mind more and more. Anton wished that she could feel and act like the classic proud father, but she knew it was the farthest thing from the truth. Still, she could dream.

Unbeknownst to Anton, Gwynneth had become aware of the fact that Anton was touching her while she rested. Although she longed to open her eyes and smile up at her husband and kiss him soundly, Gwynneth decided not to acknowledge nor say anything about it. Instead she just kept silent and enjoyed the connection, allowing it to give her hope that perhaps her husband was coming to accept the child at last. In the back of her mind and the corners of her heart, she still secretly prayed - against opposing evidence and insistence - that the child really was Anton's and not Aldred's.

Only time would tell if any of their dreams and hopes would be answered.

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A tall warrior stood in an open field, his teeth gritted in determination as he wielded his great sword wildly. Over and over he swung, slashed, thrust and hacked at his foes until his face and arms were spattered with their blood and gore. Halting his movements, the warrior scanned the fields, his dark hair hanging wet and limp as sweat ran down his dirtied face in rivulets and mixed with the blood of his enemies. Suddenly a whooshing noise sounded and the warrior was struck hard in the chest with a large, heavy arrow. It thudded as it impaled him and he cried out in shock as he staggered and sank to his knees. Immediately, another arrow slammed into his shoulder and yet another plunged into his unprotected belly. His hands trembled and touched the

arrow shafts as he looked down in disbelief before groaning and falling backwards onto the ground. Pale blue eyes stared up at the sky, noticing that dark, ominous storm clouds had begun moving in. A rumbling sound echoed in the distance and the warrior blinked once before his eyes glazed over, no longer able to see anything except blackness. As his last breath left him, a great white mist began to emanate from his body, hovering overhead for just an instant before turning opaque and materializing into some sort of figure. Slowly the figure took shape and came to stand beside the body of the fallen warrior. The strange figure was tall and covered in a long, hooded white cloak, and as the features came into focus, it was clear that it was a woman. She was a striking beauty with long dark hair, a strong jaw, pronounced cheekbones, and the most exquisite light blue eyes. Her flawless face was pale and she looked mournful as she turned away from the fallen warrior. She held her arms out and began to move her mouth. No sound could be heard, but her lips were easily read. *"I'm sorry,"* they mutely said... *"I'm sorry."*

Gwynneth's eyes sprang open and she bolted upright off the blanket, startling her ladies maid.

"Milady, what it is?" Alice inquired from her seated position.

Gwynneth pressed a hand to her chest and looked around to get her bearings. Her heart raced wildly and her head still churned with the strange and terrible visions from the dream she'd just had. She looked around at the blanket and picnic lunch before her, remembering that she and Alice had shared the nice meal out in the flower garden, and after some pleasant conversation, she had dozed off.

"Milady?" Alice queried gently as she reached out to touch Gwynneth's arm, noticing that the young woman was shaking.

Closing her eyes, Gwynneth shook her head, "'Twas nothing... just a silly dream."

"But you're trembling, Milady."

"'Twas a *disturbing* dream, Alice." Gwynneth's voice was sharp and Alice quickly withdrew her hand. The Marchioness instantly regretted her words and reached out to grasp her maid's arm. "I'm sorry, it just... it's just left me feeling unsettled, that's all."

Alice smiled, despite her misgivings. "We can go back inside if you wish, Milady. Lord Anton may have returned from his hunting excursion... perhaps we shall have a nice venison dinner this eve?"

"Mm yes, perhaps." Gwynneth nodded absently. At the mention of her husband, the face of Gwynneth's dream warrior flashed in her head again. She frowned as she realized the warrior resembled Anton a great deal. *But if the warrior was Anton, who was the spectral woman?*

Alice stood and looked down at Gwynneth, noticing the confused look on the youthful face. "Would you like for me to go and fetch Lord Anton, Milady?"

Gwynneth shook her head, "No, thank you. I'll see him later. Help me up, will you? I'm quite

ready to go now." She grasped Alice's offered hand and stood, brushing the creases out of her dress.

Just as the two women began to gather up their things, a rumble sounded overhead. Gwynneth looked skyward at the dark, ominous clouds that had suddenly appeared on the horizon, and she felt a shiver of dread race up and down her spine.

"Oh mercy... it looks like a terrible storm is approaching. We should hurry and get inside before it reaches us." Alice fretted as she quickly stuffed things into a woven basket.

"Yes..." Gwynneth murmured, still frowning and staring at the blackened sky. "...A terrible storm."

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A handful of soldiers and knights had gathered near the guard barracks late in the afternoon, eager as always to jaw with one another and catch up on the happenings of the world around them. Often times the visits would end up with a sparring match or some kind of friendly challenge issued and carried out between two or more of them. Today would prove to be no different.

"Come on then, who shall help me break in this splendid new sword of mine?" Anton grinned at the men, spinning the hilt of the shiny new weapon in her hand. "Charles?" she queried, turning to the young man in question.

"Oh no, Milord. I don't b'lieve I'd be up to task today." Charles mumbled around a mouthful of bread.

One of the older warriors laughed aloud. "Yer not up to it 'cause yer still eating yer bloody midday vittles!"

Another man broke in, "Aye, he's tryin' to catch up on his sleep 'cause he spent all night and the wee hours of the morn sowing some oats with that wench from the ale house! Isn't that right ole boy?"

Charles threw the remnants of his bread at the man's face, and all the men laughed raucously.

"Well, who then?" Anton asked again, finding no takers until her eyes landed on her loyal friend, Richard. The two smirked at each other. "What say you, friend?" Anton asked, an eyebrow arching sharply as her lips curled into a devilish grin.

"Oh bloody hell, why not." Richard said with a roll of his dark eyes. He slung his sword over his shoulder and walked toward open ground, preparing to face Anton in a friendly bout. "It's been awhile since I've done battle with you, Milord... you'll go easy on me now, won't you?" Richard's eyes gleamed as he smirked.

Anton laughed as she got into position, "Not on your life, man." They both laughed and with a

clang of metal, the sparring began in earnest.

Lady Gwynneth observed from afar as her husband battled with his friend. Anton had been partaking in the sparring matches quite a lot lately, and Gwynneth had gotten into the habit of following after him to watch as he honed and sharpened his fighting skills.

She watched the action raptly, impressed with her husband's skill and surprised at his ferocity. Anton and Richard seemed to be a fairly even match, and they went round and round for quite awhile before Anton appeared to take what looked to be a very close call to his face. Gwynneth cringed when she saw him jerk backwards and nearly fall. However, the apparent near miss seemed to goad Anton into action, and after a series of furious blows, Richard's sword was knocked from his grasp.

With the match finally over, the two warriors stood and shook hands amicably. Gwynneth watched as everyone congratulated them, laughing and administering hearty slaps on the back. What really caught her eye, though, was the way in which Richard stopped Anton and pointed at his face, and the way Anton kept repeatedly wiping a hand across his forehead. It made her wonder if the near miss had not been a miss at all. She couldn't imagine why the men would risk hurting themselves like that. Suddenly, rather than be impressed by the exercise, Gwynneth was fearful of it.

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Less than an hour had passed after the sparring tournament, and Gwynneth decided that she would go to her husband's room under the pretense of congratulating him hoping, in reality, to see if he was injured.

She reached Anton's door and found it partially open, but still she knocked.

"Come in," a far away voice called out.

Anton did not look up as Gwynneth stepped inside, but the Marchioness could see that he was standing in front of a table that held a large basin of water and a pile of cloth bandages. His back remained to the door as he dipped the cloth in the basin and dabbed at his forehead.

"You and your men fight like demons," Gwynneth said.

Surprised to hear her wife's voice, Anton half-turned and gave her a slight grin. "It's good practice, for all of us." He held the wet cloth against his head as he spoke, confirming Gwynneth's suspicions.

She pursed her lips and walked closer. "It's *dangerous* practice... you've injured yourself." Gwynneth's voice gently accused.

Anton shook her head slightly and turned away, "Barely." She continued to dab at her brow. "Just a small scratch."

Gwynneth frowned and hesitated before speaking again. "You've been having at these practices quite a lot lately. Is there any particular reason why?"

Anton stared down at the table and dipped the cloth into the basin while she hedged with an answer. "No particular reason." She finally replied, not looking at her wife. "'Tis always a good idea to keep oneself in the best condition possible, is it not?"

"I suppose." Gwynneth replied quietly, dissatisfied with her husband's answer. She knew that she wouldn't get anything more out of him, so she thought it best to let the issue rest. However, seeing Anton still pressing the cloth against his head, Gwynneth approached him and reached out to touch his shoulder. "Let me see this so-called *scratch*." Anton turned and looked at her but didn't remove the cloth. "Please?" Gwynneth implored tenderly.

The Marquess took one look into her wife's kind eyes and lost her stubborn resolve. She removed the cloth to reveal a long, deep slash just above her left eyebrow.

Gwynneth gasped, "Merciful heaven! That's not a scratch, that's a serious laceration!" The Lady fretted as the wound immediately began to ooze blood. "You need to have that stitched up straight away!"

"No, no, it'll be fine." Anton made a shooping motion with her hand and tried to turn away.

But Gwynneth grasped his shoulder tight, "Husband!" She scolded, her voice a little more firm this time.

Anton sighed and rolled her eyes. "I'll find Victor tomorrow and have him look at it, alright?"

Gwynneth gave a disapproving look. "You'll bleed half to death before then." She motioned dramatically with her hands. "Let me go and find something to suture it up for you right now."

Surprised at both the offer and the unbeknownst skill, Anton hesitated for a moment before nodding dumbly, "Uh, well... alright... if you're... able?"

Gwynneth gave him a perturbed look, "Of course I'm able." She stated matter-of-factly before turning on her heel and exiting the room.

Several moments later, Anton was seated on a stool and Gwynneth was looking at the wound and cleaning it. She stood right up against her husband's seated body, and the Marquess could feel the warmth of her rounded belly where it touched her arm.

Anton closed her eyes, inhaling the smell of jasmine as she thought about what it would be like to just reach up and caress the strange protrusion with both hands. She wondered if Gwynneth would think her insane if she asked permission.

"You call this a 'slight scratch'." Gwynneth's voice interrupted Anton's thoughts. "You'll be fortunate if you don't have a dreadful scar from this, no matter how well I sew it up."

"I had no idea you possessed such skills." Anton winced as the tiny needle began to pierce her skin.

"Hold still, and stop moving." Gwynneth gently reproved as she squinted her eyes and leaned even closer. "Of course you wouldn't know. Up until this point, I haven't had the occasion to use the skills, now have I?"

"No, but, when and how did you learn?" Anton persisted, wishing to get her mind off her wife's warmth and the heady scent of her perfume. "Ow!" She yelped and flinched as she felt a sharp pinch.

"If you would stop moving around, it wouldn't pain you so." Gwynneth chided, grabbing hold of her husband's chin firmly to get her point across while glaring down at him.

Anton clenched her teeth gave Gwynneth a mock growl, but she capitulated, feeling her wife press into her again as she continued.

Gwynneth sighed aloud as she stitched. "As you know, Clarendon was a small place, but it was full of knights and warriors." Her fingers worked nimbly as she talked. "Often times, after battles, we had more injuries than we had hands to heal them. So, I took it upon myself to learn how to help out." Gwynneth explained with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Hmm." Anton merely hummed, obediently keeping her lips closed.

A quiet lull ensued as Gwynneth stitched and Anton sat contentedly with her eyes closed. Then, without warning, Anton sensed pressure and movement along her upper arm where Gwynneth's belly pressed against it. It was a gentle, very slight bump-bump-bumping type of pressure that, had either of them been talking, might not have been noticed. A light suddenly flickered in Anton's head, and she quickly realized what the sensation was. Recoiling in sudden shock, Anton jumped off the stool, pulling the needle and thread right out of Gwynneth's hands.

"What?" Gwynneth asked, startled at the abrupt action, "What's the matter?"

Anton stared at her, wide-eyed, "It-It...," she stuttered, pointing to Gwynneth's belly, "I felt it! It *moved!*"

Gwynneth sighed aloud and half-smiled, "Well yes, of course; it's supposed to do that."

"I-I know, but..." Anton stammered and shook her head, "I didn't think that... that I'd be able to... feel it... in such a way."

Gwynneth nodded, "Oh yes, you can feel it. Especially if you lay your hands right... right on it... you know?" She motioned toward her belly with her hands. She was really rather hoping that Anton would want to touch her, and the baby, at least a lot more than he had been. It seemed that he just stared at it more than anything. She supposed it was wishful thinking, especially since her

husband was apparently horrified by the thought of feeling the child move.

"It's a..." Anton struggled to express her thoughts. "It's a strange feeling... amazing, but... strange nonetheless."

"Mmm, I suppose. I've gotten rather used to it, though." Gwynneth said, folding her hands over her abdomen and smiling weakly, trying to keep the disappointment from showing on her face. "Speaking of 'strange', you look awfully silly with that needle and suture thread hanging from your face."

Having forgotten, Anton reached up and touched her fingers to her head, feeling the dangling implement. "Oh, yes... sorry." She mumbled, coming back to the stool and sitting down obediently.

They were quiet for a few moments as Gwynneth finished up and began snipping away the excess thread. She dabbed some ointment on it and stepped back to admire her work. "There... all done. You must be sure to keep it clean, alright?"

Anton nodded and stood up, "Yes, thank you."

They looked at each other for a moment, so many unspoken thoughts and feelings between them, as always. Finally Gwynneth gave a faint smile, her eyes seeming immeasurably sad as she turned and began to clean up the doctoring supplies she'd brought to the room.

Anton bit her lip and blinked long, cursing herself for reacting badly and being such a coward. She watched as her wife began to walk toward the door, and suddenly she couldn't be quiet any longer. "Gwynneth, wait." Anton called out.

Gwynneth turned around and looked at her husband's tall form, nearly overcome with an intense urge to run into his arms, hold him tight, and beg for him to love her like he used to.

"Uhm, would you perhaps like to..." Anton hesitated, wracking her brain for the right words. "I mean, if you don't mind, could I..." Still she fumbled, "Would it be alright if I..." She finally just pointed at Gwynneth's bulging abdomen.

Gwynneth felt a flood of immense relief. "Would you like to feel him move?" She touched her belly and smiled.

"Him'?" Anton's eyebrows shot upward. "You know it's a boy?" She asked, almost excitedly.

"Well, no." Gwynneth admitted, hating to burst her husband's bubble, "I've just taken to thinking and referring to it that way... wishful thinking, I suppose." She shrugged sheepishly.

"Oh, yes, well... no harm in that, I'm sure." Anton smiled, feeling a need to ease her wife's feelings, though she wasn't certain they'd been hurt.

They stood there and looked at each other awkwardly for a moment until Anton waved toward her bed. "Uhm, why don't we lie down?" She offered, but quickly amended, "I mean, just to rest, of course." She didn't want Gwynneth to get the wrong idea. "I could use the rest, and I'm quite sure you could as well."

Gwynneth merely nodded and walked over to her husband's bed, her mind suddenly whirling with memories of what they'd done in that bed at other times. She climbed up and laid down on her back, keeping still while Anton settled himself alongside her.

They looked at each other for a moment, both feeling a little awkward and nervous, until Anton finally garnered some courage and brought her hand up to rest upon her wife's covered stomach. She held very still, watching and waiting for something, anything.

"I don't feel anything. I don't think he likes me." The Marquess quipped and Gwynneth released a sharp little burst of laughter. Anton smiled broadly, thrilled to have made her wife laugh in such a way. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen the pretty blonde do such a thing.

"Sometimes you can feel it better when you... uhm..." Gwynneth hedged uncertainly, "When you're just touching... well, skin." Her face blushed a soft pink as she spoke the words, and she suddenly couldn't meet her husband's eyes.

"Would you mind?" Anton whispered.

Gwynneth looked up at him and shook her head slightly, her lips twitching in an adorably shy smile. "No."

Quietly taking a deep breath, Anton reached down and lifted her wife's dress, pushing it up until the fleshy bulge of her belly was exposed. This was the first time Anton had seen the protrusion uncovered, and it absolutely stunned her. She'd never seen anything like it before. She was speechless and stared dumbly until Gwynneth looked down in fear.

"What's the matter?"

"N-Nothing, I just..." Anton fumbled for thoughts. "It's... it's *amazing*." The Marquess gushed in a quiet voice. Gwynneth relaxed and smiled.

Feeling an overpowering need to make physical contact with the miracle that was growing inside the younger woman, Anton carefully cupped her hands around the soft bulge and let them lay very still. Her eyes were wide as she stared, waiting anxiously to feel any type of movement. It was incredulous to her to realize that there was a tiny human being living and breathing inside. Even more incredible was the feel of little twitches and bumps beneath her fingertips as the child finally stirred.

A huge grin spread across Anton's face and she looked up at Gwynneth with shining eyes. "Incredible... absolutely *incredible*." She repeated in an awe-struck whisper.

Gwynneth smiled down at her husband as his fingers began gently stroking the skin of her abdomen. The delightful feel of his caresses mixed with the feeling of immense relief as the weight of a dozen worries lifted from her shoulders at last.

A few moments passed and when it appeared that the child had stilled, Anton relinquished her touch and moved to lie down beside Gwynneth. Not wanting to abandon the pleasant, carefree moment, Anton propped her head on her hand and gazed down at the lovely face before her.

Gwynneth was relaxed and, it seemed, happy with the way things were progressing. Anton wondered if her wife had enjoyed the little bonding experience as much as she had. She made a mental note to do it again, and soon. The Marchioness sighed and gazed up at Anton adoringly, her clear oceanic eyes sparkling with warmth and joy. She was so lovely... so precious and delicate... so beautiful. It nearly stole Anton's breath away.

The Marquess could feel liquid gathering in her own eyes, but she blinked it away, managing to cover her sudden intense feelings with a faint smile. Still, she felt a need for connection. The moment was simply too beautiful to pass up, and she needed to somehow tell Gwynneth that she, too, was happy with everything.

Reaching out slowly, Anton touched her fingers to Gwynneth's cheek, letting them gently stroke the silky skin and lightly dragging them over the soft contours of her rosebud lips.

Gwynneth's lips parted slightly as her husband caressed her face, his eyes becoming dark and intense while his touch remained tender and gossamer. Her heart began to thud harshly as Anton scooted closer to her, pushing his hands into her hair as he leaned over her. All she could hear was a thundering in her ears as Anton's lips descended upon hers.

The kisses began soft and tender but soon began to edge toward something more thorough, more intense. Gwynneth nearly gasped as Anton moved his mouth to her neck, kissing and devouring the soft flesh there while gently insinuating his thigh between her legs. She wrapped her arms around Anton's shoulders, urging him closer to her. Feeling her husband's body pressing against her, Gwynneth's head began to buzz with arousal as his hips began to undulate mildly against hers. When Anton's lips moved back up to take possession of her mouth, Gwynneth couldn't help herself, and she moaned her pleasure aloud.

Something about the sound snapped the Marquess out of her lustful haze, and Anton abruptly broke the kiss. She looked down at Gwynneth's face and, seeing the flushed skin and swollen lips, realized that they were going farther than was probably wise.

Anton closed her eyes and sighed, dipping down to kiss Gwynneth's cheek before letting her head rest in the soft blonde pillow of hair. "I'm sorry," she said in a hoarse, muffled whisper. "I seem to have lost control of my senses."

Gwynneth closed her eyes, drawing a deep breath and trying to calm her racing heart. "It's alright," she said, her voice tremulous. "I don't mind, really." She cringed as soon as the words left her, thinking that she sounded like a harlot. But her husband's soft chuckle instantly eased her worry.

Anton smiled at her wife as she raised her head again. *I must speak to Victor*, she thought as she watched a subtle blush wash over Gwynneth's adorable face. *We end far too many meetings like this*. The war inside her raged, and she really didn't know how much longer she would be able to hold her desire in check. Deciding that she must go no further this night, Anton squeezed her eyes shut and murmured, "The day has grown late. I must let you go so that we may both prepare for the evening meal." She pushed herself up and moved away from Gwynneth and off the bed.

Gwynneth's heart sank a little as her husband eased away from her. She knew she should be deliriously happy with what they'd shared this day, but still she couldn't help but want more. She feared, in some ways, that she would always want more than Anton would be willing to give.

Standing up, Anton looked at Gwynneth, her feelings vacillating between arousal and frustration. Forcing them all aside, she offered her hand to the smaller woman and helped her off the bed. The two of them looked at one another for a moment, both contemplating so many thoughts and feelings.

Leaning down, Anton bestowed a kiss on her wife's lips, "Until we meet again, my wife." She whispered. Blue-green eyes looked up at her and she smiled weakly.

I want to stay with you, Gwynneth thought, but did not utter. Instead she reached up and placed another kiss on Anton's lips, "Until we meet again, husband."

Anton saw her to the door and as she stepped into the hallway, Gwynneth turned and gave her husband one last long look. Smiling and nodding, Anton bid his wife farewell and closed the door. Leaning against the wood, the young Lord ran her hands through her hair and sighed loudly. *I absolutely must speak to Victor...as soon as possible*.

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[Continued...](#)

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~ Second Son ~
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PART EIGHT

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Unable to sleep, Anton arose at daybreak. Last night's intense bussing session with Gwynneth had severely shaken Anton's resolve to take things slowly, and she was determined to talk to Victor about if, and how, she could be intimate with her expectant wife. The only problem was, Anton felt terribly uncomfortable discussing such a personal matter with the elderly doctor. To overcome her unease, Anton reminded herself that Victor, her lifelong friend and confidante, knew her like no one else. He'd brought her into this world and was one of the few who knew nearly every detail of her life. She could trust him.

As she sat down to eat her morning meal, Anton began to rehearse her conversation with Victor, but she was soon interrupted by a courier bearing an urgent letter from a neighboring province. The message was one of several Anton had received over the past few months informing her that a number of manors and small provinces in the land were being plagued by a group of murderous bandits. The group was rumored to be part of a small army that was lead by a fierce warrior named Liam. Liam was one of the few remaining sons of Wesley of Rencor - the former warlord who overthrew King Joffrey two decades ago and took the throne, ruling the region for many years with greed, violence and cruelty until the War of Insurrection removed him from power.

It was reported that Liam's little army was growing each and every day, and that he thirsted for the same power his father had years ago. His forces were no longer a mere nuisance - they were now threatening to conquer the provinces one by one. Because of this, the Lords of the besieged provinces were asking for assistance, and Anton's allies were calling on the Marquess of Weldon and his forces to join in the fight.

Anton's mind became filled with concern as she sat and ate her morning meal alone. She would need to inform her mother of the worrisome war developments, and...she would need to tell Gwynneth. Anton hadn't had occasion to join in a battle for a long time - certainly not while married to Gwynneth. She wondered how her wife would react to the news. Then again, she knew that Gwynneth was certainly accustomed to having her brother, Gerrod, go off to battle. In fact, Gerrod and his knights were part of the allied provinces, and they would be taking part in this battle, should it come to that. Anton held onto the hope that someone would come up with a diplomatic solution to the problem, and war could be avoided. Still, the Marquess dreaded having to tell her young, pregnant wife that she would most likely need to go off and fight someplace, for an unknown length of time.

Once she'd finished her meal, Anton decided that before she sat down to begin planning maneuvers and strategies for a possible conflict, she would first find Victor and speak with him.

Anton took her time in reaching Victor's domicile. She was still hesitant about speaking to her

old friend, but her need to know urged her forward. It was still quite early and she felt badly about the hour, but she knocked on the physician's wooden front door anyway.

Victor's sleepy, grizzled countenance greeted the Marquess, and the older man immediately feared something was wrong. "My Lord? What is it?" Victor asked anxiously.

"Nothing, nothing. Everything's fine. I just needed to seek your counsel about, uhm...an issue."

"Yes, of course, My Lord." Victor opened the door wider, waving Anton inside. "You'll have to forgive my appearance. 'Tis a bit earlier than my normal time for receiving patients."

"I apologize. Shall I return later?" Anton said, walking back toward the door.

"No, no." Victor waved, "Come and sit down." They both took a seat in front of the fireplace. "Now then, what can I do for you?"

Anton drew a deep breath, "I wanted to speak with you about...Gwynneth."

"Yes. Is she well?"

"Yes, oh yes. She's quite well. Much healthier, I think."

"Mm yes. I've noticed a distinct improvement in her appearance. Her color is better and she seems to at last be putting on weight. Whatever you're doing, it appears to be working wonders. Well done." Victor nodded approvingly. "It is good that the two of you have made amends. She seems happy again."

"Mm, yes. I believe she is," Anton nodded. "I mean, I hope she is."

Victor noticed Anton's discomfort - had noticed it from the start. "And you, Anton. Are you happy too?" The physician asked carefully.

"Yes." Anton answered, noticing Victor's concerned expression. "Yes, I'm happy, Victor. We're getting along splendidly. In fact...well, I suppose that's what has brought me here." Anton fidgeted in her seat as Victor frowned and waited. "You see, we...uh," Feeling agitated and uncomfortable, Anton cleared her throat and stood up, pacing back and forth as she struggled to compose her thoughts.

Victor remained silent as he watched the young Lord's nervous actions.

Anton finally stopped and turned to face Victor. "We've been getting along very well. So well, in fact, that we've begun to..." she faltered again. "We've begun to...grow close again. And we've reached a point now where we want to..." she raised her eyebrows and looked expectantly at Victor who merely nodded, a bemused half-smile on his face. "And, well, you see, I'm uncertain just exactly what it is we may or may not...do." Anton arched her brows again and Victor smiled broadly.

"Are you asking me if you may make love to your wife, My Lord?"

Anton's shoulders fell and she released a sigh. "Yes, that is it." Victor chuckled and slapped his knee. Anton frowned and huffed aloud, "I don't find it humorous, Victor. I know nothing about the intricacies and proper handling of a woman when she's pregnant, for heaven's sake."

"No, I suppose you don't, My Lord." Victor stood up, still chuckling, and padded over to fetch a cup of water. Anton stood and stared impatiently while he returned to sit again. "I'm sorry, Anton. Forgive me if I appear to be taking this matter as anything less than serious." He smiled at Anton, who finally relaxed and sat down again. "I understand your fears, and you are quite correct to have them. An expectant mother needs to be treated with the utmost care and delicacy." Victor paused as he drank from his cup. "However, a pregnant woman is not without needs. In fact, women are frequently more lustful and passionate when they are with child."

"No - Really?" Anton frowned in surprise.

"Oh yes." Victor nodded. "I'm not certain as to why. Perhaps it is due to the tremendous changes the female body goes through as it harbors and grows the babe...I don't think anyone knows for sure. At any rate, I'm sure Lady Gwynneth is feeling rather emotional and has increased desires, as this is quite normal. She would probably welcome some intimate attention from her husband." Victor cocked an eyebrow at Anton, whose cheeks colored at the words.

"Mm yes, I suppose." Anton frowned, trying to conceal her embarrassment.

"You should not be fearful of fulfilling her needs. The only words of caution I can give you are that you should take exquisite care to handle her very gently."

"But, the...activity won't harm the baby?"

"Not if you're extremely careful. Avoid pressing on her abdomen, of course, and don't penetrate too deeply."

Anton's cheeks flushed again and she cleared her throat and stood abruptly. "Yes, well...I shall be sure to take care then. Thank you, Victor, for answering my inquiry." She reached out and briskly shook hands with the physician. "As always, you've been most helpful."

"You're quite welcome, My Lord." Victor almost laughed again at Anton's stiff mannerisms and obvious discomfit. He knew that she had probably fretted over having this discussion, but Victor thought it was a chivalrous gesture on Anton's part, as well as a sure indication of the young Lord's tender feelings for her wife. They walked to the door but before Anton exited, Victor reached out to touch her arm. "Anton," the physician said as the Marquess turned back. "I truly am glad to see the two of you happy once again."

Anton smiled softly, relaxing just a bit, "Yes. So am I."

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Relieved to have finally spoken with Victor and obtain the answers she sought, Anton leisurely made her way back to the manor. She stopped to chat with people here and there, most of them inquiring after the Lady Gwynneth and wishing the noble couple well on the upcoming birth of their first child. Anton took all the good wishes in stride, continuing in her role of the proud father as she smiled and thanked people politely. Deep down inside, she harbored the wish that all her actions could be authentic. She still hated the deception but, as always, knew that it was necessary.

It was mid-morning when the Marquess finally entered the manor's castle, and she immediately headed up to her chambers to begin drafting letters to her allies in response to the urgent messages she'd received earlier. The leaders of the allied provinces would have to come together soon to discuss the situation with Liam's army and the possibility of war. Anton figured they would most likely gather at Weldon, as they had in the past, which meant she would have to notify everyone and begin making necessary preparations. As she began writing letters and making lists, she mentally noted all the things that would need to be done. The knights who served her would have to be rallied, the militia would have to be mustered and briefed on whatever military situation might develop, supplies and provisions had to be gathered...

A sharp knock on the chamber door interrupted Anton's thoughts and she sighed at the intrusion. "Come."

Marina opened the door and entered. Her face wore a tense, worried expression. "Anton, a courier came to call while you were gone." She waved a piece of parchment in front of her. "There's talk of war here. What in heaven's name is going on?"

Anton sighed and ran a hand through her hair. She was annoyed that her mother read the letter that was obviously intended for her, but that was a minor irritation at this stage. "A situation has arisen. We may have to go to battle to quell it."

Marina stepped anxiously toward her daughter. "What sort of situation?"

"Some of the outer provinces have been suffering from continual raids. A small band of thieves was thought to have been the culprit, but now it appears that the small band is really part of a larger organization - an army, if you will - which seems to have arisen out of the ashes of Wesley of Rencor."

"What?" Marina was aghast.

"Wesley's youngest son, Liam, is rumored to be leading the army. And their intent, I daresay, is to conquer all the outlying provinces one by one. Apparently, Liam wishes to follow in his father's footsteps."

Marina clutched her chest. "Merciful heaven."

Anton nodded. "If we don't stop him, he could very well succeed."

Marina drew a deep breath and sat down in a chair. Silence filled the room before she spoke again. "You're going to convene a meeting here with all the allied forces, I suppose, and decide whether or not you'll make war against him." The Marchioness Dowager stared at the floor as she spoke, more in statement than question.

"Yes. We need to move quickly. Surprising Liam with swift action would prove the best maneuver, I feel."

"Mm." Marina nodded, still staring at the floor. "It never seems to end, does it?" She lamented, finally looking up at her daughter.

"No, I suppose not." Anton gave her a sad half smile.

Marina frowned as something occurred to her. "Have you told Gwynneth yet?"

Anton sighed. "No, not yet. I-I'm not sure *how* to tell her exactly. I'm afraid it shall upset her terribly."

"Of course she'll be upset. War is an upsetting situation." Marina snapped. "She's going to have to become accustomed to it, just as I did."

Anton frowned at her mother, surprised by her sudden shift in temperament. "I'm not sure it's something anyone ever becomes *accustomed* to, Mother." Anton glared but Marina looked away. "I'll speak to her today. I must tell her that we'll be hosting visitors and I must make certain she knows what to expect while I'm gone. I don't want her to be too overwhelmed."

Marina huffed. "She'll be overwhelmed alright. She won't know how to work at anything that doesn't involve sewing or writing letters."

Anton glared at her again. "She will understand *perfectly* what she needs to do. She is well aware of her duties and responsibilities."

"Hmph, nevertheless, I'm sure she has no idea of the numerous complexities involved in a long-term absence."

"I have complete faith in her." Anton approached her mother so that Marina had to look her in the eye. "And I expect that you will honor my wishes and lend her your full support, Mother."

Marina sighed and rolled her eyes, "Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

"Because you haven't as of yet, and because you've been nothing but critical of her since she set foot inside this castle." Anton's voice grew louder and more firm.

"That's not true."

"It *is* true."

Marina huffed impatiently. "Well I can't help it! She's too young, too naïve, and too inexperienced to handle the affairs of the castle while you're *here*, let alone when you're *gone*! She's barely eighteen summers old; she doesn't fully understand her role. To this day she lacks in her responsibilities as Lady of the Manor!"

"She may be young, Mother, but she isn't incapable. And she would learn more if you would *help* her rather than constantly find fault with her!" Anton sighed with exasperation and wearily rubbed her face. "Please, I need to know that you shall help Gwynneth take care of Weldon while I'm gone."

Marina didn't say anything. Instead, she glanced away.

"Mother?"

"You know that I shall help her. *Everyone* is going to have to *help* her. That shouldn't be your primary concern."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I don't think you need to fret about what your wife and I do while you're gone. What you should be concerned with is what will happen if you *don't* return."

"What the devil are you talking about?" Anton frowned at her mother's cryptic words.

Marina fixed her daughter with a grave look. "Anton, you know as well as I that Earl Clarendon and his brute of a son are waiting in the wings to descend upon this castle like a pack of scavenging vultures."

"What?" Anton's eyebrows furrowed further in confusion.

"If something were to happen to you-"

"Nothing is going to happen to me! Why do speak this way? What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying, that if something were to happen to you - may God forbid it - but if it did...there would be nothing to prevent the Earl or Gerrod from taking Weldon from Gwynneth...or from me, for that matter."

Anton gave the older woman an angry, shocked look. "T-That's not true. They are our allies. Indeed, I have fought alongside Gerrod numerous times!"

"Oh Anton, please! The only reason they allied with us is because they want Weldon for themselves!"

"But that's ridiculous...there is no way they could simply *acquire* Weldon!"

Marina hopped up out of her chair and came to stand in Anton's personal space. "They can if they *marry* into it."

Anton's mouth dropped open and she stared at her mother in disbelief. Finally she blinked and turned away, sitting down in a nearby chair. "No, that...that cannot be. Our houses married simply to build an alliance...to seal an agreement...the Earl wasn't scheming for anything beyond that."

"Anton," Marina sighed, "do not tell me that you've never wondered why the Earl was so agreeable, even eager, to allow his daughter to marry one of us...why he paid us so handsomely for the privilege, even after Aldred was killed and you were put in his place. Surely you must have considered the possibility that the Earl and Gerrod have motives other than a mere political military pact."

Anton stared at the floor in disbelief, her head shaking slowly. "But, father...father wanted an alliance with them...he would never have married our houses if he'd had doubts."

"He *did* have doubts; he didn't trust them completely. But his desire to bind himself with someone powerful and secure our military might overrode any sense of hesitation he felt. He wanted to believe that the Earl was a man of his word, and he convinced himself that it was better to be bound to Clarendon by blood ties rather than by friendly words alone. He allied with them, but he never trusted them entirely. I myself was always averse to a marriage with their house. I never wanted their blood to mix with ours."

"You were against the marriage?" Anton asked incredulously.

"Yes, I certainly was!" Marina snapped. "Gwynneth is nothing more than a spy, placed here to inform the Clarendons of our every move! They're nothing but a bunch of murdering, money-grubbing heathens! Why, rumor has it that the Earl had both of his wives murdered simply because he grew tired of them!" She threw her arms out in gesture. "What's to keep them from killing off all of us?"

Anton's brow creased further and she shook her head. "Gwynneth...a spy? Great God, Mother, you're speaking madness!"

"Am I? I see her writing letters nearly every day. One can only imagine what they say and to whom they are sent."

Anton glared at Marina. "I don't want to hear any more of this. I refuse to believe that Gwynneth reports to her father and brother about anything that goes on here. And I refuse to believe that Gerrod would try to usurp Weldon from Gwynneth, from his own sister! If I were to die, it would be all she'd have. He wouldn't take that from her."

"Wouldn't he? He could swoop right in, pretending to help his poor widowed sister, and take

over everything if he so desired. Who could stop him? I certainly couldn't, and Gwynneth would never stand up to him."

Anton's eyes flew up to meet her mother's, "Yes she would."

"She would *not*, Anton! Gerrod is her family, her blood! She would do whatever he wanted! They probably already have a plan in place!"

Anton shot up out of the chair. "No! You're wrong! Gwynneth has come to love Weldon. She would not hand it over and simply walk away! Her allegiance is to me, not her brother or father!"

Marina just gave her daughter a grave look. "I wish I could believe that, Anton, but I cannot."

Anton was angry now and quickly stepped toward her mother. "You constantly doubt her and criticize her every move...you continually knock her down and then stand by and watch as she struggles to rise back up...you condemn her because of her lineage when she has committed no treachery against us! You know *nothing* of her, Mother! You have no idea what kind of person she is! You only see a foolish, naïve girl, but I'm the one who knows her! And I see *so* much more than you do, Mother! So very much *more!*"

Marina, having waited through Anton's outburst with quiet patience, said calmly, "You only see what you *want* to see because you're attracted to her and she fulfills your *needs*."

Anton, shocked by her mother's heartless words, was speechless for a moment. Gathering herself quickly, she straightened up and looked the older woman straight in the eyes. "No, you're wrong. I see what I see because I love her."

Marina was now stunned. She knew that Anton fancied Gwynneth, but she never would have thought that she'd say she loved the girl. The two of them stood and stared each other down for a few moments before a fuming Anton finally turned away.

The Marquess thought for a moment before turning back to face Marina. "You have forced me to take steps and make demands on you that I never wanted to make, Mother."

Marina's eyes narrowed as she looked at her daughter and waited to hear the demands.

Anton walked up to stand directly in front of her mother so that their noses nearly touched. "I am the Lord of this manor, and as my wife, Gwynneth is the Lady of this house. She speaks for me and acts on my behalf when I am gone. Whether you like it or not, you will defer to her from now on. You will amend your attitude, and you will show her the respect and authority that she deserves. Do I make myself abundantly clear?"

Marina glared at her daughter. "Perfectly, My Lord." Her voice was full of contempt.

The two of them stared at each other fiercely until Anton finally turned on her heel and walked out the door.

"Hmph," Marina muttered aloud in the now empty room, "You think you love Gwynneth, but the question is...does Gwynneth love you, Anton?"

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Anton was furious. Furious and upset by her Mother's words and accusations. How could she think such awful things about Gwynneth...sweet, innocent Gwynneth. What proof did Marina have to give rise to such accusations? Had she seen something Anton hadn't? Anton knew that Marina sometimes had a tendency to overreact...was that all this was? An exaggerated reaction to a few silly notions in her mind? Anton didn't know.

The Marquess kept replaying the questions that Marina had raised about Gwynneth's writings. It was true that the young Marchioness wrote quite a lot. Anton knew that she kept a journal, and she had seen her wife scribbling away on pieces of parchment too. But she had never given it much thought. Gwynneth was a learned woman, and Anton had just assumed that she enjoyed writing, as a sort of hobby. She never considered that Gwynneth was writing to anyone about anything in particular. And she never considered that the younger woman might be writing to her father or brother.

It can't be. I refuse to believe it until I see it with my own eyes. Anton thought angrily as she walked about the castle in search of...something. As she made her way down a hallway, she rounded a corner and nearly ran into Gwynneth's handmaid, Alice.

"Oh! Forgive me, Milord." Alice bowed and stepped out of Anton's path.

"Quite alright, Alice. Tell me, is Lady Gwynneth in her chambers?"

"No Milord. I believe she's in the sitting room. She's been busy sewing some clothes for the wee one." Alice smiled happily.

Anton forced a half smile and stumbled for something to say. "Ah, I see. That's...very good."

Alice noticed her Lord's tense demeanor. "Is everything all right? Shall I go and fetch her for you, Milord?"

Anton held a hand up, "No, no. Everything's fine. Thank you, Alice." She skirted around the maid and continued swiftly down the corridor.

Determined to find some way to prove her wife's innocence, and secure her own piece of mind, Anton reached Gwynneth's chambers and went inside, closing the door behind her. She leaned against the heavy wood door, still mulling over her mother's accusations. Could it be that she did not know her wife at all? Could Gwynneth really be deceiving her? Pushing away from the door, Anton began frantically searching her wife's room for evidence; specifically, for letters. It wasn't

long before she turned up a cache of well-inked parchment lying beneath the book that she recognized as Gwynneth's journal.

Anton touched the papers with hesitant hands, feeling torn between invading her wife's privacy and discovering the truth. *I'm only doing this out of absolute necessity*, Anton told herself. It didn't make her feel any better, but she forced herself to pick up the letters and look at them.

Gwynneth's handwriting was delicate and precise. The inked words were neat and flowed gracefully across the pages, giving them an artful, dainty look. Anton noted that the dates were all recent as her eyes quickly scanned the pages, looking specifically for any references to the Earl of Clarendon or Gerrod. She saw nothing of the kind. Instead, what she saw was her name, over and over.

...I fear that my husband grows weary of me already. Though we have made strides in rebuilding our battered relationship, Anton still seems to pointedly avoid me.

Anton frowned and flipped through the sheets of parchment, reading another passage.

...When our hands touch, I feel as though my skin is afire. When our lips touch, I feel a surge of heat race through my body, as though the flames are consuming me alive. We go no further than these most chaste, delectable kisses, though I wish for so much more. Alas, I fear Anton will think me wicked and depraved if he knew of the bawdy desires of my flesh. It is a sin to harbor such thoughts, even about one's own husband, but I cannot stop myself.

Anton flipped to another, earlier sheet and read more.

...Anton avoids me. I fear he finds me loathsome and repulsive. Not only do I represent the worst kind of sin, but I grow more and more hideous every day. As my body swells, he is surely reminded of his brother's crime and of my weakness. He detests the bastard that dwells inside me. My whole being repels him.

And yet another.

...I feel so utterly alone. I have no one to confide in, save Alice, and she cannot possibly understand the darkness of my heart. The Lady Marina treats me as though I am a plague to her, and to her son. I feel as though I don't belong. My life here is a travesty. The brief happiness that Anton and I once shared is gone and I mourn its passing every day.

Anton's mouth hung open as she at last pulled her eyes away from the letters - letters that were, as it turned out, written to no one. Gwynneth had simply been pouring her heart out onto the pieces of parchment, not writing secret messages to her father or brother.

Filled with a mixture of anger and shame, Anton replaced the letters and walked over to Gwynneth's bed, where she sat down heavily, her head falling into her hands. The Marquess sat like that for a long time, her mind swirling with thoughts of regret and feelings of sorrow.

So deep was her anguish that she never heard the chamber door open, nor did she hear the footsteps that approached her. Only when a hand lightly touched her on the shoulder did she flinch and look up. Eyes of deep, vibrant sea-green looked at her with great concern.

"Husband?" Gwynneth asked softly. Alice had told her that Anton was looking for her, and that he seemed distressed. Seeing him sitting and holding his head, looking so mournful, she had to agree. She was surprised to find him sitting in her room. "Were you looking for me?"

Anton struggled with her thoughts. She didn't want Gwynneth to know that she had just been rifling through her personal things. "Uh, I...I suppose so." She half shrugged.

Gwynneth regarded her husband curiously for a moment before sitting down beside him on the bed. Clearing her throat nervously, Gwynneth ventured forth, reaching out to lay a hand on Anton's arm. "Are you troubled by something?"

"Troubled? Yes...I believe I am."

Gwynneth tensed for a moment, fearing that Anton's trouble had much to do with her. "Is there any way in which I can help you? I mean...I'm uncertain what use I might be to you, but...if there is anything I can do..."

Anton quickly turned her head and pinned Gwynneth with steely eyes, "You *are* useful to me, Gwynneth. And you do help me. Your mere presence is a balm to my soul, truly."

Gwynneth's cheeks flushed and her hand fell away from Anton's arm. "You flatter me unnecessarily, husband." Her mouth twitched with a nervous smile.

Turning to fully face her wife, Anton reached out to grab her hand. "No, I speak the truth. You should not doubt yourself. And I am truly sorry that I have been remiss in showing you your worth."

Shocked by her husband's words, Gwynneth could only stare at the serious expression on his face. "Y-You have not been remiss, husband." She swallowed against the lump in her throat. "On the contrary...you have been most gracious and patient with me. I only wish that I could repay your kindness."

"You needn't repay anything. You are my wife. The kindness should be inherent in the relationship."

"Should be, perhaps, but it rarely is." Gwynneth said shyly, "You are a much kinder husband than most."

Anton leaned closer, "I am only kind to those who are deserving," she looked at Gwynneth again, her voice soft, "to those I care about."

Gwynneth swallowed hard again, trying to read the gentle but intense expression on her husband's face. It seemed to her that he was trying to say that he cared for her. Her heart leapt at the thought, but before she could fully absorb the implications, she found Anton leaning toward her and bringing their mouths together.

They kissed tenderly at first, their lips gently pressing and sucking, but soon Anton increased the tempo, deepening the kisses as she slid her hands behind Gwynneth's neck and around her waist.

Gwynneth hesitantly brought her hands up to encircle Anton's shoulders, all the while emitting tiny moans and gasps as they continued to kiss. The little noises sparked Anton's smoldering desire and mixed immediately with the residual anger from the earlier upheaval with her mother. The explosive combination caused her passion to flare wildly, and she quickly urged Gwynneth to lie back on the bed. Moving partly atop her wife, Anton began to kiss and run her hands all over the petite frame, her mind solely intent on satisfying each other's need for release.

Gwynneth's heart pounded furiously as her husband kissed and caressed her roughly. This pleasurable foray was proving to be nothing like their prior ones. Anton seemed to be intent on accomplishing something this evening, and the Marchioness held her breath with the hope that they would perhaps quench their desire at last. When she felt one of Anton's hands trailing up her thigh and come to rest at the vee between her legs, she gasped aloud. Her husband paused his kisses and pulled back to look at her.

Anton breathed heavily as she watched various expressions play across her wife's flushed face. Dipping her head to kiss soft, swollen lips, Anton whispered, "I want to touch you, Gwynneth." She gently slid her hand down, fully cupping her wife's sex through the thin material of her undergarments. "I need to touch you."

Gwynneth emitted a low, breathy groan, "Yes...oh yes, Anton." she whispered against her husband's lips before he crushed their mouths together again.

Anton reached down and slipped her hand beneath Gwynneth's underthings, her fingers quickly finding their way to the warm, damp spot between soft thighs. Acutely aware of her wife's delicate condition and remembering Victor's advice, Anton made herself go slowly. She trailed her fingers lightly through and around Gwynneth's womanhood, teasing and touching. She thought she would go mad at the sweet, slow pleasure of it all, but was afraid to press further inside.

Gwynneth did not give quite so much thought to her condition. All she could think about was the exquisite feeling of her husband's hands as they danced all over her body. Her hips shamelessly gyrated against his hand and she dug her fingers into his shoulders as she clutched his shirt and pulled him closer to her, as close as possible. She wanted to feel the familiar weight of his body on her; she craved that comfortable reassurance.

Encouraged by Gwynneth's soft panting and the movement of her hips, Anton carefully slid his fingers into her, his palm pressing against the center of her pleasure. A cry escaped Gwynneth's lips as her body arched and a hand flew down to grasp the forearm that moved between her thighs.

Anton felt the gripping fingers and immediately ceased her movements and pulled back. "Am I hurting you?"

Gwynneth's eyes were mere slits and she shook her head. "No, no." She brought her hands back to grasp her husband's shoulders and urge him closer to her. "Please don't stop." She whispered breathlessly, her hands moving up and pushing their way into dark hair.

Relieved at her wife's words, Anton kissed Gwynneth deeply as her fingers returned to their snug home and she resumed her movements.

Gwynneth's arousal grew quickly, her hands twisting in her husband's hair as her hips gyrated against his steadily stroking hand. She could feel the firmness of his manhood as he ground his pelvis against her hip, the friction creating a pleasant heat. Feeling the familiar pressure building between her legs, Gwynneth's eyes fluttered shut while blissful sensations began to wash over her.

Soon kisses began to fall apart and breathing became more ragged. Lips barely touched as they panted open-mouthed against one another. Anton increased the speed of her strokes and Gwynneth squirmed and whimpered more, her fingernails digging into Anton's back and shoulders as hips undulated faster.

As Gwynneth reached her climax, she cried out, grabbing Anton's shoulders and clinging to him tightly as she shattered and broke all around him.

Burying her face in Gwynneth's neck, Anton worked her hips harder until she too hit her peak, shuddering at last against her wife's body.

They both stilled, the only sounds in the room being their heavy, rasping breaths. After a few moments, Anton finally lifted her head and kissed Gwynneth softly. They broke apart and Anton smiled down at her. "You're beautiful," she whispered, dipping her head to place delicate kisses on her cheek and all around her mouth. "You're so beautiful, Gwynneth."

Tears immediately flooded Gwynneth's eyes and her throat threatened to close up tight. "As are you, Anton." She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and drew him against her again, "...As are you."

They laid on the bed in quiet bliss for a long time, their racing hearts and pounding pulses taking quite a while to subside. Finally Anton situated them so that she was laying on her back with Gwynneth snuggled up to her side, her blonde head resting on her shoulder. Anton knew that she had to talk with Gwynneth about the visitors who would be descending on their house soon, as well as the likelihood of her going off to war. She was loathe to disturb the air of peace and

content that surrounded them but knew that she had to broach the subject.

Sighing aloud, Anton cleared her throat. "I'm afraid I have some distressing news to tell you, love."

Gwynneth's heart jumped at the term of endearment, but constricted at the other words. She tilted her head up to look at her husband as he continued to speak.

"Some trouble is brewing in the provinces to our north and west. A small army of raiders has been terrorizing the villages and manors...and its leader is rumored to be one of the sons of Wesley of Rencor."

"What?" Gwynneth bolted upright. "I thought Wesley and his spawn were all killed during the war?"

"No. Two of his sons were never accounted for. Liam, the youngest, is said to be leading this army, eager and determined to avenge his father, it appears."

Gwynneth shook her head and looked away. She was young while Wesley of Rencor was in power, but she remembered the War of Insurrection quite well. Her brother had fought in it, and she remembered fearing, every day, that word would come that he'd been struck down. Any thought or mention of fighting or war made her blood run cold. She turned back to look at Anton, "What does this news mean to us?"

"The provinces that are under attack are asking the neighboring provinces for assistance." Anton looked at her wife gravely. "Liam must be stopped." She resisted saying any more.

"How will he be stopped?" Gwynneth's heart began to thud in fear.

"I'm not sure. The leaders of the allied armies will have to convene quickly and discuss the situation. I've been asked to host the gathering here, at Weldon."

Gwynneth frowned and stared at Anton, "But that's all you're doing? Just meeting and talking?"

Anton reached out to clasp her arm, squeezing it gently, "Yes, love. For the moment, that's all we're going to do." It felt as though she was lying to Gwynneth, and Anton hated herself for holding back.

Gwynneth closed her eyes and nodded, telling herself to calm down and trust her husband. If anything else were develop, surely Anton would inform her.

"We'll need to act quickly and get the manor ready for visitors. I can count on you to handle the necessary preparations, can't I?"

Opening her eyes, Gwynneth nodded. "Yes, of course."

Anton reached up to caress her face, "Thank you." Gwynneth gave her a weak half-smile and Anton's heart nearly broke. She sat up and brought a hand around her wife's neck, pulling her in for a gentle kiss. "It will be all right, love, you'll see. Everything will be all right."

As they kissed softly, Gwynneth prayed her husband was right.

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[Continued...](#)

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~ **Second Son** ~
by [A. K. Naten](#)

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PART NINE

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It was nearing the end of what had been a long, exhaustive day for the Marchioness of Weldon. Keeping her promise to her husband, Gwynneth had worked diligently all day in getting the manor ready for the gathering of the allied military leaders and knights of the realm. Even Lady Marina contributed to the preparations. She said very little, but she agreed with Gwynneth's thoughts and ideas and followed whatever instructions the young Marchioness doled out.

As they worked, Gwynneth's heart remained filled with a sense of dread and foreboding, and her mind continually conjured up all kinds of terrible thoughts and ideas about what could happen in the days and weeks ahead. She realized now that Anton must have been practicing his swordsmanship over the past few fortnights with good reason, and it disturbed her to think that he may have known about this brewing problem for some time, yet did not tell her. But, she told herself that military matters were not meant to be her concern. Her duty was simply to fulfill her role as Lady of the House and not question her husband about his affairs. So, as she worked, Gwynneth forced herself to push her fears aside and simply do what was asked.

When the evening mealtime approached, Gwynneth was grateful. She was so washed-out, she instructed the cook to simply prepare whatever he wanted; she cared not what they all ate this evening. She just wanted to retire to her bed for the night. Another bad dream had caused her to sleep restlessly during the night, and she arose quite early in the morning to get started with her work.

The Marchioness sat in the library as she awaited the call for dinner, her body trying to find a comfortable position in the padded armchair. She rested her hands on her rounded belly, hoping that the child inside didn't decide to start kicking and squirming too much. She had steadily been growing larger and larger, and people had begun noticing and making comments about a little woman having such a big baby. She knew they meant well, but she was tired of being made to feel like she was inordinately humongous. She wondered if the expansion of her waistline would ever slow down, or better yet, cease altogether. She felt like a waddling cow as it was. As Gwynneth's eyelids began to grow heavy, she blinked longer and longer. Drifting off into a light sleep, her mind immediately filled with visions of the disturbing dream she'd had earlier that morning.

It had been similar to the dream she'd had before - where a warrior was struck by large arrows and fell to the ground in a bloody heap. This time, however, it seemed to move in slow motion, and there were no sounds. The whoosh of the arrows could not be heard, Gwynneth only saw them as they zipped through the air and struck the warrior, who was dressed like a knight. As the knight fell to his knees, his face turned heavenward and his mouth opened, but again, not a word could be heard. When he finally collapsed to the ground, his face was clearly discernible. The dark hair was long and the face was streaked with dirt and blood, but Gwynneth's mind could not mistake the contours of the strong jaw and cheeks and the eyes so pale and blue...eyes that could only belong to her husband...her Anton. As the nobleman lay bleeding on the reddened earth, a pair of muddy boots appeared beside his head. Gwynneth's dream eyes trailed away from the boots, traveling up the mail-clad legs and chest until they reached the face of the newcomer. Gerrod of Clarendon stared expressionlessly down at Anton for a long moment before looking up and staring coldly into what would be his sister's eyes.

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Having searched the castle for her wife to summon her to dinner, Anton smiled when she reached the library and found the little blonde slumbering in one of the large chairs. She paused a moment, taking in the cherubic face, now more filled-out and softly rounded from pregnancy. She'd always heard that a woman was most beautiful when with child and, gazing at her young wife, Anton had to conclude that it was true. Gwynneth was beautiful - more beautiful than ever. She knew that the blonde worried about growing large, but Anton didn't care. In her mind, Gwynneth's ever-burgeoning abdomen meant that she was eating well and that she and the child were healthy. Smiling again, Anton leaned down close, pausing to inhale the smell that was uniquely Gwynneth before gently pressing her lips to the exposed, ivory skin of the young woman's neck.

The feeling of warm pressure on her neck startled Gwynneth out of her dream, and her eyes flew open as she flinched and shrieked aloud.

Anton jumped from her wife's sudden reaction, then frowned as she took in the blonde's fearful, wide-eyed look. "Gwynneth? Are you all right?"

Gwynneth couldn't answer at first. Her blood rushed through her head so loudly, she could barely hear, and she clutched at her chest, feeling her heart hammering harshly. A gentle, calloused hand touched her cheek and her eyes fluttered as they looked up and into familiar eyes...eyes so pale and blue. Eyes that could only belong to her husband...her Anton.

"Anton! ...Oh my love!" Gwynneth whispered, her voice strained and anguished as tears instantly filled her eyes.

Anton quickly knelt before the blonde, "What? What is it?" She cupped Gwynneth's face in her hands, wondering and worrying at her wife's distress.

Gwynneth brought her shaking hands up and laid them atop Anton's as she continued to stare into his eyes, unable to say anything or explain her irrational panic. *It wasn't him...he's not dead...he's right here!* Her mind whirled as she realized she'd simply had another nightmare. Closing her eyes, Gwynneth felt embarrassed. She shook her head. "I'm sorry husband. It was just...I was just dreaming."

Anton stared at her wife, unconvinced. She noted the dark smudges that underscored the brilliant jade eyes and felt certain there was more to her distress than Gwynneth let on. "Just dreaming?" Anton asked as she trailed a finger over one of the dark shadows beneath her wife's eyes. "Are you certain that's all it is?"

Gwynneth flushed, knowing that Anton didn't quite believe her. "It was a bad dream...a nightmare. I've had it several times."

Anton frowned, "And you've never told me of this. Why not?"

"It is nothing, husband, truly. Just a dream." Gwynneth answered softly, hoping to escape further scrutiny. She didn't dare tell him all the details and how real the dream felt.

"But if it distresses you, dearest, I wish to know about it." Anton gently cupped her face again, "Even something as seemingly insignificant as a dream."

Tears filled Gwynneth's eyes and she closed them. She squeezed Anton's hands, "I'm all right now, love." she opened her eyes and looked back at him with as much surety as she could muster. "I'm all right."

Anton leaned in and placed a soft kiss on her wife's lips, then stood and extended her hand. "Come. The evening meal is ready. Let us eat and then retire for the night. We've another long day tomorrow."

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The next day dawned bright and warm as Weldon prepared to welcome the allied forces. By midday, people slowly began to arrive. Some came alone, some came by the dozens. Nobles and their entourages, knights and their squires, and lone warriors - they continued to stream in all day and into the early evening hours.

Gwynneth made herself scarce as the allies - mostly men - began to arrive. The presence of so many warriors and knights frightened her, and she decided that she'd be better off overseeing the kitchen staff and helping them prepare the meals that would need to be served. She did not know if her brother, Gerrod, would be in attendance, but she imagined he would be. If she did not see him by nightfall, Gwynneth decided that she would ask Anton if Gerrod was or would be present. It had been so long since she'd seen or heard from her family; perhaps seeing her sibling would lift her spirits and ease some of her ill feelings about her disturbing dreams and the whole Liam of Rencor affair.

As evening drew near, Gwynneth retired to her favorite sitting room to rest. She'd managed to keep herself busy all day, but now she was exhausted, and her back and feet ached tremendously. She sat in one of the chairs, propping her feet on a nearby stool and preparing to close her eyes when a knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," Gwynneth called out as she sat up from her slouched position.

The door opened and Gerrod stepped inside. "Gwynneth!" the young knight exclaimed, his arms opening in invitation.

Gwynneth smiled. Even though she and Gerrod were not close, and indeed, were often at odds with one another, it was good to see a familiar face. "Gerrod." The Marchioness smiled as she rose from the chair and walked over to give her brother a hug.

"Ohh, it's so wonderful to see you!" Gerrod said, embracing his sister tight - a little too tight, in fact, as Gwynneth made a noise of discomfort and pushed away. Taking a moment to look at his sister, Gerrod quickly understood why. "Oh my." His eyes were wide as he took in her large, rounded belly, "I-I had no idea, sister." Gerrod covered his shock with a forced smile. "You certainly work quickly, don't you?"

A bright blush raced across Gwynneth's face and she felt embarrassed. "Yes." She quirked a forced smile. Gerrod had always had a way of making her feel uncomfortable by subtly insulting or belittling her. She had hoped to forget the discord that had always existed between the two of them, but that seemed impossible.

"It's nice to see that you've fulfilled your role and secured your future so adequately. I suppose congratulations is in order."

Gerrod's voice carried an edge of sarcasm and Gwynneth felt ill at ease. She didn't understand why her brother would be upset by her pregnancy. Still, she remained calm as she looked back at him, "Thank you, Gerrod." They looked at each other awkwardly for a second before Gwynneth

motioned toward the chairs. "Why don't you come and sit down. Tell me about father and the things that are happening back at Clarendon." She was determined not to let her brother rattle her.

As the two siblings sat and chatted, Gwynneth became increasingly uneasy with Gerrod. He had always been flippant and condescending to her, but she'd always attributed that to youthful arrogance. It didn't matter that they were only half-brother and sister, they still endured a strong sibling rivalry, and Gerrod had always treated Gwynneth as though she were less. He used to make comments about her figure or the way she dressed, and he would stand close to her or brush against her and say inappropriate things. She was sure that he did it intentionally, as a way of making sure that she feared him. *And it seems to work, still*, Gwynneth considered.

As they talked now, it seemed to Gwynneth that Gerrod's arrogance had grown and changed into something else. Something more sinister and hostile. Gwynneth felt as though an air of darkness surrounded Gerrod, and it unnerved her a great deal. He talked very little about their father, Earl Leopold. Instead he spoke mostly about the day when he would take over Clarendon, which, according to him, was close at hand.

Gwynneth worried about the Earl. "Is father not well? Is that why he'll be handing things over to you so soon?"

"Oh well, you know how it goes, Gwynneth. Father is old and weary. He needs me to take over. I'm younger, I'm stronger, and I know what's best for Clarendon. As soon as I find a suitable wife, I'm sure father will turn everything over to me. Then I shall make him proud and happy." Gwynneth merely nodded, not knowing what else to say. Gerrod eyed his half-sister with suspicion. "And what about you, sister?"

Gwynneth frowned, "What?"

"How are you faring here at Weldon? Are you happy?" Gerrod pinned her with dark eyes.

Gwynneth faltered but forced a pleasant-looking smile, "I'm fine, truly," she nodded, "and yes, I am happy."

Gerrod nodded back, seeming to accept her answer. "And what of your husband? Are you happy with him as well?" Gerrod leaned in closer to her, "Is he good to you, sister?"

Gwynneth swallowed, her throat suddenly feeling dry. "Yes, brother, he is good to me." She paused just for a second, averting her eyes. "My life is quite...content." It sounded like she was unsure and Gwynneth immediately regretted it. She wasn't unsure, she was just becoming flustered by Gerrod's inquisition.

Gerrod frowned at her answer, "Content?" he questioned, furrowing his dark blonde brows, "Content is a far cry from happy, sister dear." He placed his hands on her shoulders and leaned down to look her directly in the eyes, and Gwynneth immediately stiffened. "You can be honest with me, Gwynneth. If Anton is not treating you well, or if you are dreadfully unhappy, you must

tell me." His voice was low and serious. "The situation can be rectified, just as it was before."

Forgetting her discomfort, Gwynneth frowned and looked at Gerrod in confusion. "Whatever do you mean, brother?"

Gerrod was now the one who was uncomfortable. He hadn't meant to say what he'd said. "Nothing, I merely meant..." He faltered and stood up quickly, walking a few steps away from his sister. "I merely meant...you were so unhappy with Aldred, as was everyone else...but then you ended up with Anton, and...well, it all turned out for the best." He was rambling, and Gwynneth was instantly suspicious.

"No, Gerrod." She shook her head and stood up, walking after him and pinning him with narrowed eyes. "Why did you say, 'just as it was before'? What are you talking about?"

"Nothing, nothing...forget that I spoke of it," Gerrod waved a hand at his sister and began to turn away, but Gwynneth grabbed his arm and spun him back to face her.

"Don't treat me as though I'm an ignorant child, Gerrod!" The Marchioness spoke loudly and stared harshly into eyes the same color as her own. "You know something about Aldred's death, don't you?" Gerrod clenched his jaw and shifted his gaze away from her. "Tell me, brother...I *demand* to know!" Gwynneth's eyes were hard and unyielding.

Gerrod drew a deep breath and closed his eyes, feeling annoyed. He hadn't planned to let the information slip. Gwynneth wasn't supposed to know anything about that fateful day. She, like everyone, was supposed to think it was an accident...a well-timed, convenient accident, and nothing more. *But then again*, Gerrod considered, *would it really matter if she knew the truth now?* If things went well and the opportunity that he'd been waiting for presented itself, Gerrod wouldn't have to worry about any of the secretive nonsense anymore. He finally looked back at his sister, his face blank and emotionless. "Alright, I'll tell you. Aldred's death wasn't entirely accidental."

The young Marchioness frowned and gave him a confused look. "What does that mean exactly?"

Gerrod sighed loudly. "It means that his death was somewhat...intentional." There...he'd said it. Now he would wait for the fallout.

Gwynneth stared at him, her eyes widening and her mouth falling open as comprehension took hold. She could scarcely believe what she was hearing.

"Oh don't look so flabbergasted!" Gerrod scolded, "You *detested* him! You told father that he was vile, hideous, and evil!"

"Yes, but I never told him to get *rid* of him! For the love of *God*, Gerrod!" Gwynneth exclaimed incredulously, placing a hand on her heaving chest, "You...you *murdered* him!" she was aghast at the horror of it all.

"Oh I wouldn't say 'murdered', just...provided *assistance* with his unfortunate accident, really." Gerrod sounded nonchalant as he made a flippant motion with his hand. "And I didn't do it personally...someone else did." He added as he shrugged at his sister, who remained stunned with disbelief. "We paid a woman to seduce him - which, as you well know, was quite easy - and lure him away from the castle, then take him riding in a secluded area to give us the perfect opportunity. When one of our men suddenly appeared on the trail in front of the fool, his horse reared fitfully and the stupid bloke couldn't control it. He got himself thrown off and killed - we didn't have to do a thing!" Gerrod wasn't going to try to justify it any further. He knew that his sister was shocked beyond comprehension.

The only thing he needed to do know was to convince Gwynneth that Aldred's murder was necessary. He couldn't afford to have her turn against him. At least not yet. "Sister," Gerrod began calmly, "believe me when I say that it was really just a political maneuver...purely strategic." He watched the blonde woman for a reaction, but she just stood there, stunned and staring silently at the floor. "Aldred was weak...cowardly...he was a despicable rake, and you had good reason to despise him. He would have been of no use to anyone, or to you. Anton was a much better choice to be the Marquess of Weldon, as well as your husband." Gerrod continued to reason, "And you ended up with a much better man, did you not? Haven't things have turned out infinitely better? I mean, look at you! The *Marchioness* of Weldon! Living in the lap of luxury, expecting a child." Gerrod motioned with his hands.

Gwynneth's stomach churned when he said that. Of course Gerrod didn't know that the murdered man he spoke of was, most probably, the father of her unborn child, but she knew. She felt dizzy and nauseous and placed a hand on her forehead. "I-I need to sit down," she mumbled.

Gerrod reached for a chair and helped her ease into it. Brother and sister didn't say anything for a few moments as Gwynneth held her head in her hands and Gerrod just looked on, knowing he really couldn't say anything more to defend himself. His thoughts, therefore, began to turn to how he would convince his sister to keep quiet about the information. That would prove to be much more difficult. If Gwynneth were to tell anyone about what she'd learned, Gerrod's long-range plans could be ruined for good. And that was something he would not allow.

Meanwhile, Gwynneth sat and tried to make sense of all that she'd heard. And she struggled to recognize the man who stood before her. This was not her brother. This was a man who supposedly shared her bloodline, but whom she did not know at all anymore. She and Gerrod had never been close, but now, he was an absolute stranger to her. Moreover, he was a murderer. No matter what rationale he gave, she still saw him as a cold-blooded killer. And that thought chilled her to the bone.

Gwynneth began to shake her head back and forth, whispering aloud, "I can't believe it...I just can't believe it..."

Gerrod sighed deeply, growing tired of the scene. "Oh come now, Gwyn, you can't tell me you never knew that father dabbled in the mercenary business? With all those warriors and knights and unseemly characters hanging around our little kingdom all the time? What did you think they were doing there?"

Gwynneth shook her head, feeling a surge of anger. "I most certainly did not know! How would I have known such a thing? I had *no* idea!" She paused for a moment and looked up at her brother with hard, angry eyes, "Who else have you killed for *political* reasons?" Gerrod didn't answer. "Who *else*, Gerrod!"

"That is of no importance to you. We do what we have to do when the situation calls for it. Always have, probably always will." He bit off the words.

Gwynneth was so outraged she could barely speak. The man in front of her was not only a murderer, he was a heartless monster as well. She gritted her teeth and shook her head slowly, "If Anton knew about-"

"No!" Gerrod shouted, leaning down and sticking his face in front of Gwynneth's, making her shrink away. "Anton must *never* know what happened to Aldred. Do you understand me? *Never!*"

"You expect me to keep something like this from him!"

"Yes...you *must*...for his own well-being...and yours." Gerrod said, looking at his sister with ominous warning in his eyes.

Gwynneth's mouth dropped open again, "Are you threatening me? Are you saying you would do away with *me*...your own sister!" she asked with incredulity.

"If it ever came to that, I would defend and protect you as much as I could...but, Anton..." Gerrod trailed off with hesitation, shaking his head slightly.

"You would kill him if he caused a stir." Gwynneth said, more in statement than question. "You would kill him just as easily as you killed Aldred, and you would think *nothing* of it, would you!" She was horrified at the thought.

"We do what we have to do to keep things under control in this region!" Gerrod retorted with an angry glare.

"Who is this 'we' that you speak of?" Gwynneth shouted back, her courage bolstered by her outrage. "Some kind of clandestine horde of ruthless murderers who roam the countryside, killing anyone who doesn't suit their agenda?"

"We are not a horde of ruthless murderers! We are a necessary, but secret, military order! We keep the peace and resolve problems and situations before they get out of hand! We are a brotherhood, and we never want to deal with another 'Wesley of Rencor' again! We will *never* have a leader or a Lord who does not abide by the ideals and the laws of this land!"

"You mean who abides by *your* ideals and *your* laws!" Gwynneth spat back.

Gerrod's eyebrow shot up, "You may interpret it however you desire."

The two siblings glared at each other for a moment, seemingly at an impasse. Finally Gerrod spoke again, wishing to bring the conversation to an end. "The fact of the matter is, Aldred was a blathering idiot who was unfit to rule, and I knew he would not treat you well. Simply put, he had to go."

Gwynneth stared at her brother incredulously. "What kind of a monster are you? Are you so inhumane that you can kill simply because someone doesn't *please* you? Tell me, brother, if you decide that you dislike Anton, shall you just snap your fingers and make him disappear as well!"

Gerrod paused for a moment, staring at his sister defiantly. "At this point, I suppose that depends on you." His lips curled into a sneer as his voice taunted Gwynneth. "Tell me again, sister, how *truly* happy you are here, with Anton."

Gwynneth glared back, determined now to appear strong and certain. "I *assure* you, brother, I am *truly* happy."

Gerrod was genuinely surprised at his sister's confidence. She had changed a great deal since coming to Weldon. He smiled at her cruelly, "Well then, see...you and your beloved have nothing to fear." He held a finger up in front of her face. "Provided you keep our little 'discussion' to yourself, that is."

Gwynneth fought to contain her disgust. She glared at her brother with pure disdain in her eyes, "You *disgust* me...the whole bloody lot of you!" She spat the words out and stood, abruptly turning and walking toward the door, needing to get away from Gerrod and his wretched words immediately.

Gerrod laughed dismissively. "Of course we disgust you, but dear sister, before you condemn us all to the fires of Hell, there's something you should know..." His voice trailed off enticingly.

Gwynneth stopped and half-turned to look back at him.

"...Your beloved husband is one of us."

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Gwynneth searched the castle for Anton, but was unable to find him. She was still filled with shock and horror, and she needed someone to quell her jangled nerves. She figured that Anton was probably with the gathered men, but she was unwilling to venture that far to find him. Not knowing where else to turn, she decided to go to Anton's chambers and wait for him there. Even if he didn't return until late, she would at least take some comfort by being in his room and being surrounded by his things.

As Gwynneth lay upon Anton's bed and stared into the darkness, she thought of Gerrod's treachery, and her mind spun with worry and dread. Aside from her chambermaid, Alice, she had no one that she could confide in, save her husband. She wouldn't dream of telling Alice everything that was going on, and she knew that she could not tell Anton about the things Gerrod had told her. As she replayed everything Gerrod had said, she wondered just how much Anton knew of the other political murders her brother had hinted at. Was Anton a part of the scheming and plotting? Could he not be trusted either? She thought about how Gerrod had threatened her life, and her husband's. How was she going to keep all this awful knowledge to herself? If she told Anton, what might he do with the information?

The Marchioness thought about her husband and his constant swordplay and practice. If Anton were indeed part of Gerrod's secret sect, he would have to be prepared to go off into battle at any time. She imagined that all the men who'd gathered at the castle were involved, and that they were probably going to go to battle to kill Liam and his army. Gwynneth's heart constricted as she thought about Anton going off to war. She didn't want him to leave her and go fight. The young lady was worried sick and feared her husband leaving for many reasons - mostly because, now that she knew the truth, she feared what Gerrod might do to Anton, and to her. She hated that she knew the truth, and she hated that she couldn't tell her husband. Gwynneth shivered at the thought of what could happen if she did tell Anton, and he in turn confronted Gerrod.

Gerrod would surely kill him. I could see it in his eyes, Gwynneth thought fearfully. *Even if I didn't tell Anton, Gerrod must be uneasy with my having this information. What if he does something to Anton? What if he thinks he can't trust me to keep quiet and decides to kill Anton anyway?* For if Anton were killed off, she would be alone, desperate and vulnerable, and Gerrod could maneuver himself into taking control of Weldon. Marina would be easy to get rid of, and there would be no one else left who could help her. Her brother would have an instant dynasty on his hands and would have no need for her, nor for her child. Gwynneth cringed, squeezing her eyes shut at the horrific thought.

Gwynneth didn't want to believe that her own brother could have his sights set on Weldon for any reason, nor did she want to believe that he would hurt her or do such a vile and heartless thing as murder her own husband. Then again, after what he told her, and in the manner with which he told her, Gwynneth feared she no longer had any idea what her brother was capable or incapable of.

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All the visitors arrived by the time night fell, and the meeting of the allies began in earnest. As the men feasted and theorized about what Liam and his army were planning, it became clear that the group was divided in their beliefs.

Gerrod and several other knights and warriors felt that a swift and ferocious battle should be waged against Liam immediately. Anton and most of the nobles wished to try a diplomatic solution first, to avoid bloodshed if at all possible. The argument began to heat up as the evening dragged on.

One of the noblemen stood and spoke to the group, "Liam has been quiet for nearly a fortnight. I

believe he realizes that he is running out of options and would be open to negotiations." The room filled with grumbles and murmurs.

"He isn't running out of options, he's only plotting his next move!" one of the knights argued.

"But we can't be certain of that. He hasn't given notice of any plan to attack." another argued.

"He doesn't abide by any standards! He won't give notice!"

Gerrod of Clarendon stood, "I sent men to spy on Liam's camp. They returned a few days ago and informed me that Liam is building siege weapons." The room hushed at this revelation. "This can only mean one thing: Liam is preparing to lay siege to one of the fortified manors or castles." He motioned to the men, "I daresay it might even be one of our own." The room erupted with noise again.

"How in the world does he have the means to build siege machines?" one man asked.

"He's thieved and stolen so much - it's no wonder he's got the means and the supplies!" another cried out.

"He must be stopped!" Voices began to rise in agreement. "He must be stopped now!"

Gerrod smiled and stood again, holding his hands up to urge quiet. "We are not dealing with someone who will listen to negotiations. We are dealing with a brutal, heartless killer." Gerrod's eyes scanned the crowd. "I propose that we move immediately to destroy Liam and his army." A murmur of approval sounded. "His forces are stationed near the village of Alsbury, but Liam himself is camped in the town of Yardon. I say we catch him off-guard by burning both towns to the ground. While he scrambles to gather his men, we will easily overwhelm him with our forces. Once that is done, we can divvy up the lands amongst us."

"Now wait just a moment!" The cry of outrage came from Anton, who stood abruptly. "Why must the villages be destroyed and conquered? The people whom Liam overran are waiting to have their homes and communities returned to them. If we burn everything and take the lands for our own, they'll have nothing left!"

"They'll be left with their lives, Anton!" Gerrod scowled at the Lord of Weldon. "I should think they'd be grateful for that!" The room seemed to hush at the tense discord between the two noble warriors.

Anton gave Gerrod a fierce look, "Burning the towns and taking them isn't necessary, Gerrod. The people of these villages and towns came to us to help them defeat Liam. We can do that without completely destroying their homes and land. We have the power to drive Liam and his men away from this region. Anything in excess of that is uncalled for. We must not be as heartless as Liam!"

"You want everything to be neat and tidy and fair, Anton. Well war isn't neat or tidy, and it isn't

fair!" Gerrod's voice grew louder. "It's brutal and destructive, and there are prices to pay! Liam and his men must not be merely driven out of the region; they must be *annihilated!* And the people can repay us by giving us their land!" More loud murmuring ensued and the room was filled with commotion.

Finally, one of the older noblemen stood. He was a revered knight who was admired and respected by many. "Comrades, comrades," he called out, waiting for the voices to quiet. "I do not wish for this meeting to end at an impasse. We must make a decision, and my suggestion is this: we make war against Liam, immediately. We move our forces quickly to the outlying areas of both Alsbury and Yardon, arriving under the cover of darkness." The murmuring began again. "But-" the man's loud voice quieted everyone again. "We will not burn the towns nor take them over. Instead, we will lie in wait and make our charge just before daybreak, before Liam and his men have awakened. Once they've been destroyed, we shall leave." The men began to chatter. "All those in favor, raise your hand and say 'aye!'"

The room erupted loudly with waving hands and the united sound of agreement. The elder nobleman nodded at the group. "It's settled then. We shall leave Weldon tomorrow. In three days, we will gather in Falsworth Valley, just to the east of Alsbury. The following morn, long before the sun rises, we will move into position and attack."

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It was well into the evening hours when Anton at last climbed the steep stone stairway that led to her chambers. She was exhausted after the grueling meeting with the allies, and she was quite ready to retire for the night. She'd thought about looking in on Gwynneth but figured that the young Lady was surely fast asleep. *I'll wake her in the morning and ask her to have breakfast with me before bidding our visitors farewell.* Anton thought as she reached the door to her chambers. When she opened the door and saw the candlelit form of her wife lying on her bed, Anton's weary face broke into an easy smile. She closed the chamber door and approached the figure, sitting carefully on the edge of the bed and reaching out to caress a soft, downy cheek.

Gwynneth flinched, the subtle flutter of something against her face rousing her from her restless sleep. She opened her eyes, fear nearly taking hold of her before she had a chance to focus on the face she saw before her. Once she recognized the easy smile and glittering eyes, she relaxed. *...Anton.* Gwynneth smiled sleepily at her husband.

"Hello my love." Anton leaned down and kissed Gwynneth lightly. "Was your bed not satisfactory this night?" he teased gently.

Gwynneth slowly sat up. "No, I just...I hadn't seen you all day." She shrugged sheepishly. "I was feeling...uneasy. I missed you tremendously."

Anton smiled again. "And I missed you." She leaned forward and placed a firmer kiss on Gwynneth's lips, humming happily when the blonde returned the overture. They broke apart and Anton cupped her wife's face. "Why were you feeling uneasy?"

The Lady sighed. "All these knights and warriors and unsavory characters lurking about the

castle. They wreak havoc on my nerves. And the murmuring talk of war and fighting...it worries me. I'm frightened, husband."

Anton scooted closer to her wife, laying a hand on her thigh. "Well, yes, it is worrisome but what worries me more is that the villages around us are being overwhelmed one by one. Soon Liam and his army will attack entire kingdoms. I daresay that he may even target Weldon. He must be stopped." Anton explained, her voice remaining gentle and calm.

"So it's true then. You are going off to battle."

The Marquess felt a pang of guilt as her wife pinned her with an unwavering gaze. The blue-green eyes, once so clear and bright were now dulled with worry, the delicate skin beneath them lined with dark shadows. "Yes. I am." The words came out in a shameful whisper.

Gwynneth felt her heart constrict and her eyes filled with tears. She closed them tight and hung her head so that her husband couldn't see.

Anton hated that she'd put such a worry in her wife's fragile heart. "Gwynneth, my dear, please try to understand." She reached out and touched a finger to her wife's trembling chin, urging her to look at her. The tear-streaked face and reddened eyes finally looked back at her. "The people of these villages are desperate. They have turned to us for help; we cannot turn our backs on them."

Gwynneth reached up and urgently clasped Anton's hand, "Yes, but why must *you* go, husband? Why have these people and these men come to seek *your* help? Weldon has but a small fighting force - why can't these embattled villages seek some other knights and warriors to help them?"

Anton sighed and gentled her voice further, "I am part of the allied league, my love. What causes they take up, I take up. What battles they fight, I must also fight."

Gwynneth shook her head, letting it fall into her hands. "I don't understand. I don't understand why you want to go and be a part of this!"

"Gwynneth," Anton began softly, reaching out and pulling the little blonde closer, "I *must* go...I am the leader of my men and my people. What kind of a leader doesn't stand up and fight alongside his brothers in battle? What would it say about me if I didn't go?"

"It would say that you wanted to stay *alive*!" Gwynneth's eyes flashed as she jerked her head up. "It would say that your family is more important than a bunch of peasants who don't know how to fend for themselves!" Her voice was suddenly louder and emphatic.

Anton frowned and looked at her wife, trying to put herself in Gwynneth's shoes and understand why she was so upset. It was unlike the Lady to not give a damn about others, and Anton wondered if there was something more bothering her. Then again, it was perfectly natural to worry about someone who was going off to war. Anton supposed that all she could do was reassure the younger woman as much as possible. "You needn't worry about me. In addition to

my own forces, there will be many allied knights and warriors fighting with me. And, Gerrod and his numerous knights will be fighting alongside us as well. Surely you know how skilled your brother's forces are? They're among the most cunning and powerful in the realm."

Looking down again, Gwynneth grimaced and closed her eyes, feeling her heart lurch at the mention of her brother. "Yes...I know." she rasped, her voice strained.

Anton noticed the odd response. "That doesn't ease your worry, I take it?"

"No, it does not."

The Marquess touched a finger to her wife's chin and again lifted it up. "Why not?"

"Gerrod's forces are *his* men, not your own. They shall act on his interests first."

"Yes, and Gerrod's interests are my own."

Gwynneth shook her head. "No. Gerrod is...he's...different, somehow. He's changed. I don't trust him."

Anton frowned and gave her a puzzled look. "What do you mean?"

Gwynneth sighed and blinked her tears away, "I don't know." She scolded herself for arousing Anton's suspicions. "I just wish that you would send Gerrod away, and all the men. Please. Send them all away!"

"Dearest, why do you speak this way? Gerrod is an ally and a trusted friend. We've known each other for years."

Gwynneth's eyes flashed, "He is no friend to you, Anton! He does not respect you! You must not trust him! He...he..." She leaned forward, pressing her face against her husband's shoulder as she began to cry anew, unable to verbalize anything more.

Anton was momentarily dismayed at the blonde's frantic words. Recalling how her wife had once told her that she and Gerrod did not get along, the Marquess figured that the younger woman was just experiencing a fit of panic. She tenderly stroked her silky hair and kissed her head.

"Gwynneth," she whispered the words softly, "why do you say these things? Tell me what is wrong?"

Gwynneth just shook her head, her eyes gushing more hot tears. She struggled to speak without breaking down. "Please, Anton. *Please* don't go! I implore you! If you go...I fear you will never come back!"

"Gwyn, Gwyn," Anton soothed. "You're speaking nonsense my love. I shall always come home to you, my beautiful, precious wife." He kissed her fretting mouth but she shook her head again.

"Please, just...just send everyone away from here."

"They're all leaving the morrow, love, as am I."

"What?" the Marchioness gasped in horror and reached up to clutch at her husband's shirt. "So soon?"

"Yes." Anton covered Gwynneth's hands with her own. "But I promise you, I will be gone only a fortnight. Perhaps more if the battle proves difficult, but I don't think it will. At any rate, I will return hale and hearty, and we will laugh at your fears. You'll see."

"I hope we will laugh," Gwynneth whispered, weakly letting her hands fall away.

Anton sighed, wondering how to assuage the younger woman's fears. She placed her hands on Gwynneth's shoulders. "I know you don't understand, and I'm afraid I cannot explain the many reasons why I must be involved and why I must go. You shall just have to trust me, Gwynneth."

Teary jade eyes looked up. "I do trust you, Anton. I just...I dislike having secrets and mysteries between us." The statement was meant for the both of them.

Anton closed her eyes, feeling guilty. She brushed her knuckles along a fair cheek. "I know this, and if I could, I would tell you *everything*, my beloved. Every detail...my whole life story...one day I truly hope that I am able to lay everything at your feet. Please believe that." she whispered, a pained look crossing her features.

"I do believe you." They stared longingly at each other until Gwynneth finally worked up the nerve to speak her heart. "I...I love you, Anton."

The words struck Anton with such impact, she drew in a sharp breath. Her eyes began to burn with tears as she smiled unsteadily and reached out to place a hand behind Gwynneth's neck, pulling her close. "Oh Gwyn...I love you too."

Their lips met with a sudden urgency, the turmoil of the situation mixing with their jumbled feelings of love, longing and fear. Gwynneth wrapped both her arms around her husband's neck, pulling him to her and pouring all her desperation into the consuming kiss. She held Anton close and tight, thinking that if she couldn't make him listen to her words of plea, then perhaps she could make him feel them. Feeling bold, Gwynneth slowly pushed her husband backwards until he lay down on the bed. Maneuvering herself so that she straddled his hips, the younger woman leaned down and took her husband's mouth with a combined tenderness and ferocity that left him quaking, but with no doubt about the depths of her love and devotion.

Anton's hips automatically began to move beneath the warmth of her wife's womanhood. As they continued to kiss, she brought her hands down and slid them beneath the layers of the blonde's bunched-up dress, stroking the soft skin of Gwynneth's thighs and squeezing her buttocks. The Marchioness moaned quietly and rocked her hips, the motion grinding their sensitive parts together and mutually inflaming their desire.

Unable to take any more, Anton finally slipped a hand between Gwynneth's inner thighs and touched her intimately. Her fingers slid slowly through the wetness that'd gathered there, spreading the slick moisture that seeped out of the petite body and pressing against the center of her pleasure. Gwynneth threw her head back and moaned, her hands seeking purchase on Anton's shirt as they grasped and kneaded it. Anton watched the expressions that flitted across her wife's face as she continued to stroke her, enjoying the view but wanting to share in more of the physical ecstasy too.

Gwynneth's eyes opened to mere slits as she looked down at her husband, his fingers continuing to milk her as his hips worked in tandem beneath her. She struggled to keep her eyelids open as she watched him watching her, the lustful glint in his eyes lighting a fire deep inside her. She quickly decided that she wanted more than this. She wanted to be even closer, as close as possible. She wanted to feel her husband fill her completely. She wanted that precious connection that only an intimate coupling can bring, for she knew not when she might feel it again. She wanted her husband's passion, and she wanted to have the evidence of his love deep within her.

Not even stopping to consider whether or not Anton would approve, Gwynneth leaned down and kissed her husband deeply, brashly. "Anton," she rasped against his lips, "I want...I-I want..." She struggled to speak the words aloud. She had never dared to say such a thing before. "I want you...inside me."

Anton had been thinking the very same thing, and she smiled against her wife's mouth. "Oh yes, my love...yes."

Eagerly lifting herself and parting her legs wider, Gwynneth gave her husband room to maneuver. Moving quickly, Anton worked beneath the cover of Gwynneth's dress to free her phallus. Grasping it with one hand and her wife's hip with another, Anton slowly, carefully guided the shaft into the welcoming warmth. Gwynneth let out a loud, breathy gasp when her husband filled her, unable to keep quiet from the feeling, and her fingers dug into Anton's shirt and the flesh of his abdomen as her eyes fluttered shut.

Anton began to work her hips slowly, forcing herself to be easy and gentle. Her hands grasped and squeezed Gwynneth's hips and soft buttocks, and her eyes closed as her body began to surge with arousal. "Mm, Gwyn," she groaned, her breathing growing ragged as she pushed in and out carefully. "My wife...my beautiful, beautiful wife."

Gwynneth's heart surged at her husband's words, and she began to feel perspiration erupt along her forehead as their bodies slid together and blissfully merged with each other again and again. She was amazed by the nearly forgotten sensations and her own shocking need of them. "God," she breathed aloud, "Anton...oh, God." Her eyes began to fill with tears as her heart thudded and she squirmed and rocked against him, the waves of pleasure slowly beginning to rise and ripple through her body. She moved her hips and ground herself against her husband a little harder, meeting his every stroke with hedonistic delight. Leaning down again, Gwynneth placed her hands beside his shoulders and dipped her head to kiss him deeply, eliciting a deep groan of

approval. Traveling her lips down her husband's face and throat, Gwynneth kissed and nipped at the soft skin there, gently biting at the cords that stood out in his neck and then laving her tongue over the bites. She had never felt this way before, so hungry, so brazenly bawdy and lascivious. She craved her husband and wanted to touch and smell and taste every bit of him. She wanted Anton's climax. She wanted to feel his body quake and hear his voice break as he called out her name. She needed, somehow, to reassure herself that her vital young lover was alive and well and that he would stay that way.

Anton was nearly going mad. Gwynneth was out of control and bold with desire, and though it surprised her, she was enjoying it immensely. The younger woman's fiery passion had quickly pushed Anton to the edge, but she didn't want it to be over just yet. She had missed sharing such intimacy with Gwynneth. She'd missed the beauty and perfection that was her wife's body, and she'd missed the intense pleasure and emotional connection their lovemaking had always brought about. Anton felt the firm bulge of Gwynneth's belly pressing against her stomach, and she thought about the child for a moment, hoping that their actions weren't hurting it. Her thoughts on that vanished when Gwynneth lifted her head up, her face so near but her eyes closed as she panted softly and continued to move her hips.

Feeling herself teetering on the very edge of climax, Anton tugged her wife's hips a bit harder. "Gwynneth," she whispered urgently, "open your eyes," she begged. "I want to see your eyes, my love."

Gwynneth forced her eyes open and they locked with her husband's. She felt her thighs begin to tremble as a hot feeling began to burn within her chest. Anton reached up and pulled her head down, crushing their mouths together. She could feel his body shuddering as he arched up against her, clutching her hips and gasping against her mouth as he called out her name. Anton's explosive release instantly triggered her own, and Gwynneth dug her fingers into his shoulders as the waves began crashing over her. "Oh, God!" she shouted as she shattered and broke apart, then promptly collapsed onto Anton's chest.

They both rested for a long time, still and quiet. Gwynneth kept her face nestled against Anton's neck, her body still thrumming and her eyes still leaking hot tears.

Anton felt the wetness against her skin and wrapped her arms around her wife, holding her and reaching up to stroke her damp hair.

They lay like that for a moment until Gwynneth finally raised her head, "I'm not too heavy, am I?" she whispered.

Anton grinned, "Not at all."

Gwynneth smiled back but began to ease her body off her husband anyway. As she positioned herself on her back, Anton quickly tucked the phallus back inside her pants and turned on her side so that she could lean over her wife. Seeking out her lover's hands, Anton wove their fingers together and dipped her head, placing gentle kisses all over the fair face. "Gwynneth," she whispered against the parted lips as she kissed her, "my beloved."

The young Lady sighed with content as her husband continued to trail tender kisses along her jaw and throat. Although her body was relaxed and enjoying the lazy afterglow of their love, Gwynneth's mind slowly began to churn, and ugly thoughts started to surface. Thoughts about war and the fact that Anton would be leaving her and going off to battle. She recalled her terrible dream and her heart clenched with fear. She bit down on her lower lip, feeling the sting of tears in her eyes once more.

Anton could sense the change in her wife's demeanor and she pulled back to look into the watery blue-green eyes. "What is it?" Gwynneth shook her head, seemingly embarrassed, but Anton knew what it was. Her leaving to go off to war was a dark cloud that would hang over Gwynneth and haunt her the entire time she was gone. Anton wished she could do something to prevent that, but she couldn't. She leaned down and kissed Gwynneth again, trying to communicate to her that she understood her, and her fears. All Anton could do was promise to come home as quickly as possible, and comfort her wife while she was here. Comfort her, and love her.

The desire to see and feel her wife's body - all of her body, in its fully naked glory - had been gnawing at the young Lord for quite some time. Now that she knew she was going off to battle - a battle that, while not major, would still be dangerous - she felt the urge grip her even more thoroughly, as though it were an absolute necessity rather than just a pleasurable indulgence.

Anton released Gwynneth's hands and pulled away from her. She propped herself up on one hand and reached out with the other to finger the scooped neckline of her wife's dress. Her hand trailed across Gwynneth's chest and up to a shoulder, where she gently tugged the material until it slid off, exposing pale, glorious skin.

Gwynneth could see the hooded look in her husband's eyes and realized what he intended. Her heart began to pound in panic at the thought of Anton seeing her body exposed. She felt hideous enough while clothed; showing her bulging body in the nude would be even worse. She squirmed uncomfortably and felt her skin flush violently as her husband peeled the dress off her other shoulder, his eyes watching her carefully.

Sensing Gwynneth's unease, Anton paused her actions and leaned down to kiss her wife. "Let me see you, my love...please?" she whispered. "I want to look upon you in your purest form, unobstructed and unencumbered by anything."

The young Lady hesitated, not wanting to doff her clothing, but not wanting to deny her husband his desire either. What she'd rather see is the pure form of her husband. She bit her lip, "Might I see you as well, husband?"

Anton felt a flash of panic. She'd been dreading this situation since they married nearly half a year ago. She knew the time would come when Gwynneth's curiosities would pique and the younger woman would begin to wonder what lay beneath her husband's clothes. She had to put her off somehow without hurting her feelings or arousing her suspicions. Anton leaned down to kiss succulent lips again, "For now, allow me to just enjoy your loveliness, hmm?" she smiled and kissed her wife again.

Gwynneth was disappointed but made herself smile in return. She had dearly hoped to get closer to her husband by way of flesh, but since he wished only to see her, she would acquiesce to his desires and put off her own until later.

It took a few moments to untie laces and remove all the confusing layers, but when at last Gwynneth wriggled free of her cumbersome dress, she was literally laid bare before Anton's searching gaze.

Hovering over her wife, the Marquess took a long moment to run her eyes all over and behold the lovely vision of flesh and perfection spread before her. She knew that Gwynneth was gorgeous, but now, seeing her displayed like this, the reality of her fair, delicate beauty was breathtaking. "So lovely...my god, so lovely," Anton whispered reverently.

Anton stayed at Gwynneth's side while reaching a hand out and letting her fingers glide up one arm and down the other. They criss-crossed over her silky-smooth chest and trailed down and over each plump, rosy-nippled breast. So fascinated and absorbed was she with the display of flesh that she was actually shocked when she came upon Gwynneth's swollen abdomen. Anton stopped abruptly, removing her hand as she stared incredulously at the wide, bulging protrusion. She was well aware of Gwynneth's impending motherhood, of course, but seeing the belly fully exposed, looking larger than ever, truly drove home the reality that there was a tiny human being growing and thriving inside her wife's body. Anton's throat constricted at the sense of amazement and humility that suddenly filled her, and she blinked against the emotion that unexpectedly made her eyes flood with moisture.

Gwynneth felt her husband's halted movements and watched as a shocked expression overtook his features. She immediately feared that her earlier worries were rearing their ugly heads again. When Anton had avoided her before, for such a long time, she was sure it was because her body had grown so distorted and hideous. She felt certain that her husband was disgusted by her condition. She squeezed her eyes shut and was just preparing to apologize when she felt one of Anton's hands come to rest ever so gently on her swollen stomach. The hand began to move very slowly, touching and caressing with such reverence and tenderness. Confused by the action, Gwynneth opened her eyes and ventured a look at her husband. What she saw filled her with such emotion, she thought she would burst. Anton had a look of pure astonishment on his face, and his blue eyes were filled with wonderment and awe as he brought his other hand down to join in the gentle exploration.

Anton glanced up and caught Gwynneth's tear-filled gaze, and the realization that this baby was, indeed, a beautiful and wonderful thing came crashing down upon her.

The two of them smiled at each other and Gwynneth reached down to place her hands on top of Anton's, wanting to share in the emotional magnitude of the moment and feeling the need to pass the blissful feelings on to her unborn child - as much as she hated to think it, she knew that there was a very real, very horrible possibility that Anton might never get the chance to see the child nor hold it in his arms. It was a bittersweet moment.

Gwynneth's eyes were so blurred with tears that she felt rather than saw Anton move back up and lean down to kiss her soundly. She brought her hands up and wove her fingers through her husband's dark hair, pulling him down further and holding him tight as they exchanged deep, emotion-filled kisses.

"I love you Gwynneth," Anton whispered emphatically against her wife's lips, "...oh how I love you so."

Tears began to trickle down Gwynneth's face and her voice broke as she whispered back, "I love you, Anton...so very much." Wrapping her arms around his neck, she kissed him with every ounce of passion she had left.

After a few moments they parted and Anton lay down beside Gwynneth, pulling a blanket over her naked body and encouraging her to snuggle against her. For a long time they lay together in silence, Anton gently stroking her fingers through her wife's silky blonde hair and Gwynneth faintly caressing her husband's stomach through his shirt.

Neither of them wanted to think about the next day, but as they began to drift toward sleep, Gwynneth considered how wonderful it had been to make love, and proclaim love, with her husband. She felt the burden of her marital troubles at last lift from her shoulders, but just as one fear had been allayed and put to rest, another seemed to take its place and loom even larger.

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[Continued...](#)

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~ **Second Son** ~
by [A. K. Naten](#)

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PART TEN

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Anton and Gwynneth arose early the morning after their night of passion and love. Still full of warm feelings, they kept the atmosphere light as Anton clumsily helped her wife get dressed so she could leave the room without drawing stares. The Lord playfully tickled and nipped at her Lady's exposed skin as she tied up the back of Gwynneth's gown, eliciting soft giggles and half-hearted swats.

Kissing her husband soundly, Gwynneth reluctantly left him so that she could go bathe and put on fresh clothing.

The Marquess had to hurry and begin gathering her things in preparation for the battle that awaited her. Falsworth Valley was a good two-day journey, so she and her men needed to get moving as soon as they could. They would travel all day, make camp at nightfall, then travel all through the next day, arriving at the Valley hopefully that night or at the latest, the following morning, where they would rendezvous with the rest of the allies. The next day would be spent organizing approaches and finalizing attack plans. Then, in the darkness before the morn, they would make their first strike against Liam's encamped army.

Anton's heart was heavy as she prepared. Not only did she have uneasy feelings about rushing into a war with Liam, she also felt guilty about leaving Gwynneth. She knew her wife was worried sick, and Anton hated that she was putting additional stress on the pregnant young woman. She hoped that the battle would be over quickly, and that their victory would be swift. Mostly, she hoped that Gwynneth would be well while she was gone.

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Gwynneth hurried through her bath, anxious to return to her husband. She knew he would be on his way soon, and even though it would kill her to watch him prepare to leave, she felt a great need to be by his side.

Last night had been a mixture of many things, both good and bad. Good in that they had reconnected with one another in very intimate, very emotional ways, and bad in that the pleasure and relief was to be very short-lived. Gwynneth had given in to her craving and spoken her wants aloud to her husband who, thankfully, did not think her too wicked and in fact, returned her overtures with much enthusiasm. Combined with their mutual declarations of love and the physical and emotional connection Anton seemed to make with their unborn child, Gwynneth's heart had been happy and full.

But the fullness did not last, for as the dawn broke, the lovers were reminded that on this day, Anton would be leaving Weldon Manor, and Gwynneth, to go off to battle. It seemed that, once again, the couple's happiness was being torn from their grasp.

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Once Gwynneth had gotten dressed, she immediately went in search of her husband, stopping

first at his chambers. Not finding Anton there, she began looking throughout the castle. After several moments, she began to panic, fearing that perhaps he'd already left. She was debating heading out to the stables to look for him when she finally spotted Anton walking into the great hall with Albert, the castle's steward, Edwin, the castle's chamberlain, and Marina. Lifting the hem of her dress, Gwynneth hurried after them.

Anton was speaking quietly to the other three when Gwynneth entered the room. Her eyes went immediately to her husband, and Gwynneth's heart clenched at what she saw. Instead of his usual white silk shirts and colorful finery, Anton was clothed in all black. The garments were beautiful, and Anton looked quite dashing in them, but Gwynneth knew that the attire was not for display. Anton wore a long-sleeved gambeson beneath a long, black leather surcoat, under which was worn a pair of black leather pants and knee-high boots. A long war sword, sheathed in a leather scabbard, hung on his left side, and tucked at the small of his back, half-hidden in his black belt, was a dagger. Gwynneth couldn't help the small noise of dismay that escaped her mouth, causing everyone to turn their eyes toward her.

The young Lady bit down on her lip and quickly forced a smile on her face. "Forgive me. I didn't mean to interrupt," she said as she approached the quartet.

Anton smiled, "You aren't. We were just going over a few things." She looked back to the others, "If you'll excuse us, please."

"Of course, Sire...Milady." Albert and Edwin bowed to the Lord and Lady, and Marina simply nodded as they left the couple alone.

Anton curved an arm around Gwynneth's back, "Come dearest. Let us talk for awhile."

Gwynneth took hold of her husband's other hand as they walked toward the library. "I couldn't find you...I feared that you'd gone already." She said, her mouth twitching in a nervous smile as she looked up at her husband.

Anton smiled and leaned down to kiss her wife gently, "No, but I am prepared to leave. I've a long journey ahead of me."

They reached the library and Anton closed the door, wanting some private time with her wife. As soon as she turned around, the blonde was in her arms, hanging on to her as though her life depended on it. Anton knew that this would be the worst part of her departure, and she dreaded the pain and emotion that was to come.

Gwynneth relented after a few moments and looked up at her husband, tears trickling from her eyes. "I implore you once more, Anton... *please* don't go." She gave him a pleading look and grasped at his shirt. "These dreams I've been having...I'm certain they're about you." Anton's sad expression became a frown. "I feel they portend something dreadful happening to you!"

Anton grimaced and closed her eyes as she lifted her hands to lay them on her wife's narrow shoulders. The tearful fear and hurt reflected in her lover's oceanic eyes stabbed painfully at her

heart. "Gwynneth, we've been over this."

"I know, but-"

Anton squeezed her shoulders, "Nothing is going to happen to me. I plan on staying alive - *very* much so."

More tears dribbled down fair cheeks as Gwynneth stared up at her husband's strong, beautiful face. She wanted to believe him, but she feared the worst nonetheless.

"I don't want to leave you, beloved, but I must...'tis my duty. You know this." Anton spoke quietly, moving her hands to hold Gwynneth's face and caressing her trembling lips with a gentle thumb. "I shall return home before you know it. Until then..." Anton reached down and removed the signet ring from her right hand, then, taking her wife's hand in hers, she slipped the ring onto Gwynneth's finger. "...You must take care of Weldon for me." Anton lifted the ringed hand and pressed it to her lips. "I entrust everything to you." More tears ran down Gwynneth's face. Anton touched her cheek, "You are strong, Gwynneth...be strong for me while I'm gone."

Gwynneth looked into her husband's eyes. There was love, promise and trust in the sky-blue depths and she felt encouraged, but only a little. She leaned forward and wrapped her arms around him again, fighting to get hold of herself. After a few minutes, she released her grip and stood back. Clearing her throat, Gwynneth nervously glanced up at Anton. "...I wanted to give you something." She reached into the bodice of her gown and removed a necklace made from a thin piece of ribbon. Hanging on it was a lock of her hair, neatly braided and tied around the ribbon to form a small circle-like pendant. "'Tis just a silly superstition, but," she began, sounding unsure of herself as she handed it to Anton, "'tis said that it will keep you safe, as long as you keep it on your person, somehow."

Anton fingered the blonde braid and smiled as she slipped the necklace over her head and tucked it beneath the collar of her gambeson. Touching the braid where it laid on her chest, she smiled again, "I shall wear it always. Thank you." She reached for Gwynneth and kissed her, and they held each other tight for a long moment. "It's time for me to go now." Anton whispered the words regretfully as she finally broke the embrace. Gwynneth nodded and stepped back. "Come." Anton took her hand, "Let us walk out together."

Hand in hand, the Lord and Lady walked out to the central courtyard. Gwynneth's eyes warily took in the people who'd come to bid Anton and his men goodbye and wish them well. She very much wished that no one were present. She was certain she'd cry her eyes out, at the very least, which was something a Lady did not do in front of others.

Anton walked to her horses, securing the last of her gear and speaking with Richard and some of the other knights who would be traveling with them. Seeing her mother approach and come to stand beside Gwynneth, Anton instructed his squire to finish up and patted the boy on the back.

She walked toward the two women, forcing a smile for them and wiping away the sweat that had already accumulated along her brow. "Going to be a bloody hot journey, that's for certain." She

continued to smile, trying to keep a handle on the unpleasant atmosphere.

Marina went along with the idle conversation. "You'll cook yourself in that," she said, motioning to the leather surcoat and quilted doublet the Marquess wore.

Anton shrugged. "Probably. But I can't ride out with no protection at all, can I?" She glanced toward Gwynneth, who looked pale. "I'll wear my hauberk and mail later, don't worry."

At that, Gwynneth closed her eyes and bit down on her bottom lip, fighting tears that nonetheless began to leak from her eyes. The Marchioness Dowager saw the reaction and watched her daughter-in-law cautiously, wondering if the display was genuine. "How long will it take you to reach the Valley?" she asked, continuing with the small talk. Truth be known, Marina worried for Anton too, but she didn't dare show it. She had quite a lot of experience when it came to such things, unlike her daughter-in-law.

"A good two days, and perhaps two nights. Depends. If this sweltering heat plagues us all the way, we may have to slow the pace for the horses." Marina nodded and Anton glanced again at her wife, who was wiping at her eyes and looking away, obviously struggling to maintain her composure.

Phillip, the Marquess' young squire approached the trio, "Milord, 'tis all ready for you, sire."

"Thank you, Phillip." Anton nodded at the lad then turned back to the Ladies. Knowing that the time had come, she sighed. "'Tis time for us to go."

Marina forced a smile. "Yes, well...", she placed a hand on Anton's shoulder and reached up to give her daughter a kiss on the cheek. "Do take care of yourself. Return to us victorious, and safe."

"I shall, Mother." Anton turned her attention to her wife, stepping closer to the blonde. "Gwynneth?" she whispered, touching her fingers to a trembling chin.

Gwynneth closed her eyes and her face crumpled, "I'm frightened." She whispered, her voice quavering unsteadily.

Anton's heart ached for her wife. "Shh...everything will be all right." She whispered before leaning down and kissing the heart-shaped mouth that she loved and cherished so much. But the soft words did little to comfort Gwynneth, and her tears began to flow harder. Heedless of the onlookers, Anton wrapped her arms around Gwynneth and held her tight. "Shh," she soothed, "Please don't cry, dearest. I can't bear to see you cry."

Gwynneth had no words. She could only weep and hold on to her husband tightly.

Marina watched the interaction, feeling a wave of pity and compassion. She knew what it was like to watch a husband go off to battle. She knew what it was like to fear for the safety and well being of someone you cared for. Gwynneth's fears were very real, and her feelings for Anton

obviously ran deep and true. Marina watched the emotional display in front of her. *Perhaps, she thought begrudgingly, I have been wrong about this young woman. Perhaps Anton has been right all along.* Marina had to admit that it certainly looked as though Gwynneth's feelings for Anton were, indeed, as strong as Anton's feelings for her. *It seems odd, she mused, seeing Anton so enamored of someone.*

Marina knew of her daughter's predilection for women. She and Edgar had discussed it numerous times, though never with Anton. She'd never seen the need, nor the point. Anton had played the role of a man her whole life, so it seemed natural, somehow, that she be attracted to women. But having never seen her daughter so much as touch another woman before Gwynneth came along, Marina couldn't help but watch in wonderment. *As unnatural as it all may seem, the two of them plainly care for one another a great deal. Perhaps I should just be happy that they've managed to find and share something so rare.*

Anton finally broke the embrace and touched her wife's chin again, forcing her to look up. "Gwynneth, you know that I love you, yes?"

The young Lady nodded, "Yes. Just as you know that I love you."

"Yes," Anton leaned in even closer, their lips nearly touching. "Do you believe in me, my love?"

Tears streamed down her face as Gwynneth blinked her eyes and nodded, "With everything that I am."

Anton cupped her cheeks and they locked eyes. "I shall not fail you."

Gwynneth stared, absorbing the full impact of the words.

Anton reached down and clasped their hands together, "I shall not fail you," she repeated softly, squeezing Gwynneth's hands and pressing them to her lips.

Gwynneth kept hold of one hand as Anton slowly began to back away. Finally they were as far apart as they could be with their fingers still entwined. Anton gave Gwynneth one more small, sad smile before their fingers finally disengaged and pulled apart. Gwynneth's arm fell limply to her side, and tears streamed down her face. Anton could feel her heart break as she looked one last time at her impossibly sad lover. Then she turned and walked away.

Gwynneth covered her face with her hands, willing herself not to cry, but failing miserably.

The other men were waiting for their Lord, and as soon as Anton mounted her horse, they all rode out of the courtyard, through the gatehouse, and into the open countryside.

Gwynneth walked quickly to the gatehouse, watching as the band of warriors rode away. She wiped at her tears, conscious of the fact that the others present in the courtyard were probably staring at her. She wanted to appear strong and in control, not a blubbing mess. When Marina appeared beside her and placed a hand at the small of her back, Gwynneth stiffened,

unaccustomed to and surprised at the older woman's touch.

The two noblewomen continued to watch the group ride away. Just before they disappeared over a hill and out of sight, Anton turned back and held a hand up. The final parting gesture was the last straw for Gwynneth, and she could not contain herself.

The sadness that she'd been holding deep within her heart came rushing to the surface, and she finally broke down, erupting with a mournful cry. Her emotions consumed her, and she could no longer suppress them. She began to wail and sob uncontrollably, her arms wrapping around her body as her chest heaved as she gasped great convulsive breaths.

Marina empathized with the young woman but wasn't sure what to do for her. There seemed to be no end to Gwynneth's woeful release. Finally she slipped an arm around her daughter-in-law's waist. "Come, Gwynneth," Marina spoke softly, "you should lie down and rest."

Gwynneth did not resist. She allowed the older woman to lead her back inside and into her chambers, where she laid in bed for the rest of the day.

She thought, as she stared at the room's stone walls, that she truly did not care if she left her chambers ever again.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The first few days after Anton's departure dragged by listlessly, and Gwynneth stayed in her chambers, refusing to speak to anyone or take part in anything, even meals.

She passed her time as best she could. She sewed, she read, she wrote letters and composed poems full of lament and regret-filled longing. She would often sit and stare at Anton's signet ring - the ring that her Lord and husband wore; the ring that signified who was Master of Weldon Manor. Anton had placed the ring on her finger, appointing her as his representative and entrusting his kingdom to her. It was an honor and a statement of absolute confidence, but it wasn't what Gwynneth wanted. She didn't want her husband's role; she wanted her husband. The ring was a very poor substitute.

She missed Anton so unbearably that, at every raucous sound from the courtyard, she would fly to her window and eagerly peer out, hoping desperately to see her husband riding through the gatehouse. The nights were the worst. Gwynneth spent most of them tossing and turning restlessly, her mind continuously tormenting her by conjuring up terrible thoughts and visions. Sometimes she would venture up to one of the open towers and spend hours gazing at the stars, wishing on them for her husband to return to her, unharmed and happy.

Marina had been keeping tabs on her daughter-in-law through the servants and the young Lady's chambermaid, Alice. She knew full well what Gwynneth was going through, but she also remembered her promise to Anton that she would take care of Gwynneth. Her patience finally exhausted, Marina went in search of her daughter-in-law, determined to make the girl see reason.

When she reached the Lady's wooden chamber door, Marina knocked loudly. Hearing a muffled acknowledgment, she entered. The room was dark, save a single candle, which sat on a table. Beside the table, in a large stuffed chair, sat Gwynneth, her face pale and her eyes hollow. She held several pieces of parchment in her hands and as Marina came closer, she could plainly see tears glistening in her eyes.

Marina sighed and approached the blonde, reminding herself to tread lightly and be conscious of the younger woman's volatile emotions. "Are you busy writing, or reading?" she queried, motioning to the letters.

Gwynneth's hands covered the letters self-consciously. "I've finished writing, I was just...reading over them."

"Is it anything you wish to talk about or perhaps, share?" The Marchioness Dowager kept her voice soft and friendly.

Gwynneth swallowed and blinked her eyes nervously. "Well, no. They're just, uhm, poems...some silly billets-doux...that's all." Marina still eyed her hopefully. "They're rather...personal, My Lady."

Marina held up a hand, smiling knowingly. "Alright. I understand." She sat down in a chair opposite Gwynneth and smoothed out the skirt of her long dress. Folding her hands on her lap, she fixed the young blonde with a serious look. "My dear, you've been holed-up in this room for three days and nights." Gwynneth's eyes dropped. "This self-imposed exile is not good for you. I know your heart is heavy with worry and fear - mine is as well." She leaned forward, silently demanding Gwynneth's attention, "But hiding away here in your room, ignoring everyone and everything, torturing yourself by writing and reading love letters - all of this will do nothing to hasten Anton's return. You shall only drive yourself mad. Believe me, Gwynneth, I know."

With that, Gwynneth looked up, finding her mother-in-law staring at her frankly. Her relationship with Marina had been fraught with tension and unease for so long, Gwynneth wasn't sure whether or not she could trust the older woman.

"I realize that you and I have gotten off to a rather...vexatious start. You and Anton have had to overcome a great many obstacles. And, I do admit, I have not been very supportive of either of you."

Gwynneth looked at her in surprise, wondering briefly if Marina could read her mind.

"But, I should like to change that, Gwynneth. My...my son loves you. I can see that. I can see, plainly, how much the two of you care for each other." Her voice grew quiet. "It's...it's quite touching. You are very fortunate."

Gwynneth watched the expression on Marina's face as it changed from its standard look of regal superiority to one of melancholy and perhaps, even sad longing.

"I should very much like it, Gwynneth, if we could get on with one another in a peaceful, more agreeable fashion. One that is befitting of a happy family."

The young Marchioness stared long and hard at her mother-in-law, seeking out any potential untruth in the blue eyes that were so much like her husband's. She saw only honesty and sincerity reflected there. Gwynneth sighed and smiled faintly, "Yes, I should like that very much, Lady Marina."

"Good." Marina clapped her hands on her lap. "Now then...there are several things that require your attention. Anton designated you as his representative while he's away," Marina motioned to the signet ring that Gwynneth wore, "it would dishonor him if you ignored your role, would it not?"

The older woman's voice was not scolding, but Gwynneth still dropped her eyes, feeling shameful.

Marina stood abruptly, "Come my dear. I've had cook prepare a splendid meal, and I absolutely *insist* that you come down and join me."

Gwynneth looked up and found her mother-in-law smiling at her. A tiny sigh of relief escaped the young Lady's lips, and she half-smiled, "Very well. Allow me to freshen up, and I shall join you."

"Excellent." Marina smiled and turned away, leaving the room victoriously.

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Anton gripped her sword as she sat atop her war horse, surveying the battlefield as the fighting finally wound down. The war had been an intense altercation that had lasted several days, and Liam's rebel army put up a surprisingly valiant fight. In the end, however, the allied armies and knights overpowered Liam and killed him, and the battle was finally nearing its end.

The Marquess was weary and her body ached. She hadn't been hurt - only a few minor cuts and probably bruises here and there - and for that, Anton was grateful. She removed her helmet and mail coif, anxious for the fresh air to dry her sweated head. Her eyes scanned the battlefield looking for signs of her men and knights. She could see her friend, Richard, steering his horse through the carnage, shouting victorious words of encouragement to the men who were still standing. It wouldn't be much longer until they all could leave the bloodied field and head for home. The thought brought a ghost of a smile to Anton's lips. She could hardly wait to return to her beautiful wife and show her that she was alive and well.

The happy thoughts were still lingering in Anton's mind when suddenly, out of the blue, something slammed into her upper thigh and she felt an intense searing pain. She cried out loudly and grabbed her leg, her horse spinning around nervously from hearing her master's yelp. Looking down, Anton could see where the shaft of a large arrow bolt had penetrated her chain mail and was protruding from her flesh.

A bolt...a crossbow bolt? Anton thought frantically. Bolts meant crossbowmen, and in these parts, crossbowmen were only employed by mercenaries. Gerrod of Clarendon was one of the few noblemen in the realm who dealt with mercenaries, but Gerrod was here, fighting alongside Anton and the allied forces. The mercenaries, if there were any, should be with them, fighting on their side, but Gerrod had said there weren't any available to fight this day, and indeed, Anton had not seen any either. It didn't make sense. Unless Liam had hired his own mercenary crossbowmen, there shouldn't be any around. Anton didn't understand it at all and her mind whirled with pain as she tried to comprehend it. She wasn't given any time to ponder further, for as she turned her horse around and scanned the area searching for the crossbowmen, another bolt went whizzing past her head, barely missing it. She was able to discern from which direction the bolt came, and as she wheeled her horse around and saw the thicket of woods, she knew that the bastard was hiding within.

Unleashing an angry war cry, Anton kicked her horse and stampeded toward the woods, determined to find the crossbowman and place the blade of her sword against his throat.

Back on the battlefield, Richard heard the cry from his friend and turned to see Anton charging into the woods. He wondered where the Marquess was headed, but knew that his Lord was more than able to chase down a foe, so he turned his attentions back to the field for the moment.

As soon as Anton entered the woods, she found herself faced with not just one crossbowman, but a handful, all of them lying in wait for her. Someone yelled "release!" and all the bolts were unleashed at the same time. Anton could feel multiple points of impact as several bolts struck her, some piercing her chain mail and imbedding deeply into her flesh. She cried out as her horse, which had also been struck, reared up in panic and flung her off its back. Her sword fell from her hands and she landed on her side at an odd angle, a sickening crunch indicating that her ribs had failed to absorb the impact. She laid on the hard earth for only a second, determined to get up so she could face her foes. She would not go down easily. Alas, Anton was only able to struggle to one knee before her body, wracked with agonizing injuries, gave out and she collapsed.

As she lay on the forest floor, Anton was in shock. She never dreamt that she'd be brought down in such a way. She glanced over at her left shoulder and saw the shaft of an arrow sticking out. Her eyes traveled down her chest, where she saw another one protruding from her ribs. Intending to pull the blasted things out, Anton reached down and grabbed hold of the shaft in her chest. She was shocked at the horrific pain that rocketed through her body when she touched the shaft, and she jerked and cried out in terrible anguish. Her mind could hardly grasp what had happened. *How could this be? Who are these cowardly men who laid in wait for me? Who would command them to do this, and why?* She received her answer as a figure came into view overhead.

"Dear, dear Anton...my friend...my *brother*. Lord Anton, the Merciful...it appears that you have fallen in battle." Gerrod's snide voice taunted her and he grinned down at his fallen comrade, "I am so dreadfully sorry to find us in this unfortunate situation."

"Gerrod?!" Anton coughed and groaned as she tried to sit up, but she was unable. She fell back

to the ground, staring at her brother-in-law in utter confusion. "I-I don't...understand..."

Gerrod sighed. "I did not want it to come to this, Anton, truly I didn't, but you've left me no choice."

Anton shook her head, her consciousness and comprehension beginning to falter as blood slowly drained out of her body and the pain and shock of her injuries intensified.

"You," Gerrod pointed a finger into Anton's face, "You want to be noble and moral and give these lands back to the pathetic serfs and peasants. Instead of conquering lands, you wish to be benevolent and philanthropic!"

The Marquess frowned, unable to believe that Gerrod would try to hurt her over something like a disagreement about the spoils of war. "There is no glory in taking lands away from the people who live here!" Anton rasped.

"And there is no glory in walking away!" Gerrod's voice echoed loudly in the woods.

"I thought..." Anton drew in a sharp breath as a tremor of pain shook her. "...I thought you were a good man."

"I'm more than a good man. I'm a *smart* man. And I know how to get what I want!" Gerrod knelt down beside Anton and stared into his eyes, "You are weak, Anton. You do not have the heart of a conqueror. You have become a liability. Weldon is too important to have a weak leader. Just as Aldred needed to be eliminated, so you too must be eliminated." He said, his voice harsh as he enunciated each word sharply.

Anton's eyes grew large and her mouth opened in a silent exclamation of horror as Gerrod's words began to fully make their impact.

"I need to take over Weldon, my foolish, naive friend. I am meant for great things, and to do that, I must have a kingdom like Weldon under my control."

Anton gritted her teeth and grimaced, "You've lost your bloody mind!"

Gerrod threw his head back and laughed. "Ah yes, yes...that may very well be true, but it doesn't really matter. With you out of the way, I can go back to my sister and break the sad news of your demise. Then, as she struggles with what to do, I'll play the chivalrous brother and offer my assistance and guidance. In no time at all, Weldon will be under my control."

"Gwynneth will never allow you to do that!" Anton rasped, anger, pain and disbelief all mixing together and coursing through her veins, boiling her blood and igniting a fury in her soul. If only she could make her body rise and fight...she would make Gerrod pay.

Again Gerrod laughed, "If Gwynneth - or your mother, for that matter - doesn't see things my way, she can easily be exterminated as well." He leaned down further and patted Anton on the

chest. "Neither of them will really be in a position to negotiate though, will they? I'm certain they'll both see things my way." Gerrod rose and stood above Anton, looking down on him and smiling evilly. "And as for that unborn child of yours? He, or she, will be a non-issue as well. There will be no heir from your bloodline. The only future Weldon heirs shall be *mine*. After I marry Gwynneth, she shall provide me with an heir of pure Clarendon blood."

"What?!" Anton sputtered and coughed from the force of her cry. "You're mad! You cannot marry your own *sister*!"

"*Half* sister, dearest Anton...Gwynneth is only my half sister. My mother died when I was just a wee child. Father later married one of his mistresses, but only after she fell pregnant with his child, Gwynneth. So you see, a child borne of the two of us would complete the family circle quite nicely."

Anton's whole body began to tremble as another angry cry burst from her throat. "You sadistic bastard! I will *kill* you!" Using every bit of strength she had left, Anton rolled to her side and absolutely forced her body to get up. She grabbed hold of a tree and began to pull herself up, not quite able to stand before her legs gave out and she collapsed to her knees, crying out in frustrated pain. As she struggled, Gerrod merely stood and laughed, a low, purely evil chuckle that filled Anton with impotent rage.

"You're pathetic. Fearless, valiant, merciful Anton of Weldon...reduced to a bloodied, groveling fool in the forest." Gerrod mocked. "It's time to end this and move on. I have better things to do." Gerrod said as he stepped closer to the kneeling Anton. Removing his sword from its scabbard, Gerrod raised it up over his head. "Goodbye, my brother in arms..."

But the blow never came. Anton heard a loud thwacking noise, and looked up to see the tip of a sword protruding through Gerrod's upper chest. Anton raised her eyes to the young knight's face and saw his mouth opening, but no words came forth. Only a gurgling sound could be heard as blood oozed and dripped from his lips, and then the traitorous Gerrod fell to the forest floor, dead.

Anton herself collapsed completely, her body and her mind thoroughly shattered.

Soon the forest was filled with knights, urging their steeds through the trees to chase down the fleeing crossbowmen. Richard steered his horse closer to his fallen comrade. He dismounted and hurried past the body of Gerrod, glancing quickly at the sword that still protruded from him.

Richard had never fully trusted the young knight from Clarendon. He never dreamt that Gerrod would try to harm Anton in any way, but when he saw him standing over his friend, ready to deliver a death blow, he'd reacted instinctually, hurling his sword at Gerrod and spearing him squarely between the shoulders. Richard shook his head; all that could be pondered and discussed later. Right now, Anton needed him.

The knight beheld his friend lying on the forest floor, his face a ghastly gray and his body bleeding badly from multiple crossbow wounds, the most devastating of which still protruded

cruelly from Anton's chest. Richard knelt down, carefully scooping Anton's head into his hands as he shouted at some others to hurry and fashion a makeshift sled for the felled Lord.

Anton's eyes fluttered and opened and she licked her parched lips as she tried to focus on her savior's face. "Richard..." Anton rasped and swallowed hard. "Gerrod, he...he murdered...Aldred!"

"My Lord, please don't try to talk." Richard urged, "We must get you out of here quickly."

"Wait," Anton rasped, clutching at Richard's arm, "Please..." she grimaced in pain. "Please, tell my wife...tell my Gwynneth-" She gritted her teeth and waited through another shot of agony. "Tell her that...that-" Yet another searing pain gripped her and she gasped aloud.

"Shh," Richard shushed Anton. "You can tell her yourself, my friend. You're going home."

Anton squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again, gazing up at the treetops and the dark clouds that suddenly gathered above them. *Oh Gwynneth, I'm so sorry, she thought with despair, I should have listened to you...I should have stayed with you, where I could be holding you in my arms and loving you. Instead I'm lying here in a pool of my own blood, wondering if I shall live long enough to see your angelic face once again.*

Anton ached with the need to cry, but there was nothing left in her. A cold tendril of despair and finality wrapped itself around her parched throat, and soon her eyes slid shut and everything went black.

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[Continued...](#)

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~ **Second Son** ~
by [A. K. Naten](#)

**** My apologies for the horrific time lapse with posting this next section. It has not been intentional. I went on a long (and somewhat disastrous) summer vacation, only to come home and find that one of my pc's hard drives went completely up in smoke, and my laptop has been giving me random fits. Top that with off with being ill for the past two weeks, and**

you have one grumpy, frustrated writer. Wait, what am I saying? - I'm always grumpy. Anyway, begging your forgiveness, I offer you Part 11... **

For disclaimers, etc., see [The Intro](#).

PART ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Gwynneth sat in the library holding a thick book of prayers and meditations, her eyes only half reading the words in front of her. They had just concluded the evening meal and although the Marchioness was tired, she was too restless to retire to her chambers for the evening. For the past two days she'd had an uneasy feeling in the back of her mind, and she was scarcely able to sleep or even think about anything except Anton's whereabouts, and his well-being.

She glanced over at her mother-in-law who sat in another chair, reading a similar book. A tiny smile tugged at the young Lady's lips as she thought about how much Marina's attitude toward her had changed. The older woman had become gracious and kindly with her, even motherly as she inquired after Gwynneth's health and offered bits of advice when they talked about her pregnancy and the baby. Truth be known, Gwynneth was glad to have another woman - especially another mother - to talk to about the impending birth. She was nervous about it and had at least a hundred questions and fears. She was becoming increasingly uncomfortable as she grew bigger and bigger, but Marina calmly reassured her that everything would be fine.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the castle steward's knock on the library door. Both she and Marina looked up at the thin man who stood in the doorway.

"Begging your pardon, My Lady," Albert said, nodding toward Gwynneth. "There are two gentlemen here to see you."

Gwynneth frowned and glanced over at Marina, who met her gaze with equal surprise and concern. "Did they say what it was regarding?" Gwynneth asked.

"No, My Lady. Only that it was most...urgent." Albert's eyes nervously flitted over to the Marchioness Dowager.

Gwynneth's stomach immediately clenched and an intense feeling of dread seized her by the throat. Tossing her book aside, she rose out of the chair and followed Albert to the great hall, Marina right on her heels.

The two noblewomen entered the hall, finding two armed warriors waiting for them. Marina immediately recognized them as Weldon guardsmen, men who were under Anton's command, and her heart plummeted.

"Lady Gwynneth, Lady Marina," the elder of the two guards greeted as both men bowed to each

woman, "My sincere apologies for disturbing you."

Marina waved the notion off, "Quite alright. What urgent business brings you here at this hour?"

The younger man's eyes danced back and forth between the two women. "W-We bring you news of the war-

"Where is Lord Anton?" Gwynneth interrupted suddenly.

The older guardsman looked at her mournfully, "Forgive me, Milady...but...uh," he hesitated, truly hating to be the bearer of the news.

"Out with it man! Where is he?" Lady Marina spat impatiently.

"I-I'm afraid that Lord Anton has fallen in battle."

Marina gasped and brought a hand to her mouth. Gwynneth stood stock still, unable to grasp the meaning of the horrible words. Then she began shaking her head slowly. "No," she finally said, her voice low, "No, it can't be true," she rasped tremulously, "it's not possible."

"I'm so very sorry, Milady, but-" The guard began to offer meekly.

"*NO!*" Gwynneth suddenly shouted, shocking everyone in the room. Tears began to fill her eyes and she shook her head more vigorously.

Marina reached out to grab her shoulder, "Gwynneth..." she began, but the blonde angrily shook off her hand, whirling and shouting at everyone.

"No! *No!* This cannot happen! I shall not accept it! I shall *not* accept that he's *gone!*" Gwynneth cried out loudly.

"He isn't gone, Milady!" the guard interjected. Gwynneth spun around to look at him with huge eyes. "He's badly injured, but he is alive."

Tears spilled down her cheeks and Gwynneth stared at the men before bringing her hands up to cover her face, trying to reign in her feelings of devastation.

"The rest of the war party should be arriving the morrow. Sir Richard suggested we come ahead to ask you to ready your physician to receive and treat Milord's grievous injuries."

Gwynneth didn't answer, she just stood with her hands on her face, trembling and staring at the floor, trying to comprehend exactly what was happening.

Marina stepped toward her daughter-in-law and placed a reassuring hand on her back as she turned back to the men. "Thank you, good sirs. We shall make sure that everything is ready for Lord Anton's arrival."

The guards both nodded to her and bowed again as Marina directed her attention back to the stunned Gwynneth. Pausing a moment, Marina turned back to the guardsmen, "Gentlemen, would you..." she hesitated, her own emotions barely under control, "Would you please see to it that my son's transport is carried out swiftly, and with the utmost care." Her voice quavered uncharacteristically.

The guardsmen could only guess what the woman must be feeling. The elder man crossed his arm over his chest as he spoke, "You have my word, Milady," he said, bowing to her fully.

As the two men turned and left them, Marina placed both hands on Gwynneth's shoulders and gently began to steer her away. They'd only taken a few steps when the blonde's knees buckled and she collapsed, fainting dead away in her mother-in-law's arms.

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Marina stood up at the tower parapet, a brisk breeze chilling her as she watched the party of warriors and knights approach Weldon Manor from a distance. They moved slowly, the two horsemen in front carrying Weldon's flags, announcing their arrival. As they crept closer, Marina could make out a horse-drawn cart in the center, surrounded by knights. She wondered if Anton was still alive.

She had somehow managed to convince Gwynneth to stay in her room, knowing that the young Lady could not be present when Victor examined the man who was actually a woman, but also knowing that Gwynneth was in too fragile a state and wouldn't be able to handle the situation. If Anton's body was badly mangled, Marina wasn't sure that she would be able to handle it either. She did not know what to expect. Closing her eyes, Marina drew a deep breath and released it unsteadily before turning and heading down to the courtyard, determined to bravely receive her injured daughter and personally oversee her care.

When Marina reached the courtyard, Victor was already at the cart barking orders to some of the men. Richard informed Victor that they had tried to remove the imbedded crossbow arrows, but when Anton began to bleed excessively after removing the one from his thigh, Richard decided they should stop. Instead, they just broke off the ends of the wooden shafts and left the two remaining arrowheads intact. Victor responded with agreement, telling Richard that his decision was a wise one. Had they yanked all the arrows out, Anton would have certainly bled to death by now.

"When I give the word, lift altogether and place him quickly onto the stretcher, like so," the elderly physician motioned over the canvas stretcher. The four servants holding the narrow cot looked on fearfully as Victor pulled them closer to the cart. "Don't jostle him, and for God's sake, don't drop him!" Marina's sudden appearance gave Victor pause. "My Lady," the old man acknowledged as all others bowed their heads respectfully.

Marina didn't acknowledge them though. She walked around to the open end of the cart, her eyes only interested in seeking out her daughter. A soft gasp escaped Marina's lips and she raised a

hand to her mouth as she beheld her injured child.

Anton lay in a bed of straw, still dressed in her chain mail and tunic. She was covered by her cape, the bright royal blue and white material now discolored by ominous stains. It was gruesomely obvious where Anton's injuries were. Large splotches of sticky-looking dark red seeped through the material of the cape, staining the left shoulder, left side, and right thigh area. Streaks of dirt and speckles of dark red covered the cart, and the pale straw beneath Anton's body was discolored with blood.

"Begging your pardon, My Lady, but you should not be here, witnessing this." Victor gently placed a hand on her arm.

"I had to see. I had to know." Marina choked out as tears began to make their way down her cheeks. She turned to Victor, "Tell me, does he live?"

"Yes, My Lady, but barely. We need to get him inside quickly."

Marina nodded and backed away from the wagon, watching mutely as Victor calmly gave his orders and Anton's body was lifted from the cart and into the stretcher. Marina walked behind as the men carried their Lord into a chamber that Victor had readied. Settling Anton onto the bed, Victor thanked everyone and then quickly shooed them out of the room.

Marina stepped up to the bed, gazing at her daughter's ghastly countenance. She bit her bottom lip as she reached out to push a lock of Anton's dark, damp hair off her forehead. Her face was pallid and her skin cool to the touch. She had small abrasions and bruises on her chin and forehead, and a small cut on the bridge of her nose. A jagged cut marred her left cheek, the now dried blood from it having mixed with dirt to leave messy streaks across her face.

"You and I are the only ones who can treat her." Victor's voice cut through the silence. "Are you up to the task, My Lady?"

Marina turned to look at him woefully, "I have to be."

Victor nodded. "Then let us get started straight away."

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The task of removing the arrows from Anton's body was a grisly one, and it took its toll on both Victor and Marina. Anton's body was covered with numerous marks; whether all were made by arrow strikes or something else, they didn't know. Thankfully, only three arrows seemed to have completely penetrated her chain mail to do serious damage. Only three, but those three were plenty.

As far as Victor could tell, the wounds were deep, but by some miracle, none had severed any major arteries nor punctured any vital organs. The arrow bolts were equipped with short bodkin tips, meant for piercing chain mail and armor. Whoever had fired the arrows meant to injure or

maim their prey very thoroughly. Had Anton not been wearing mail, she'd have been dead many times over.

The upper thigh wound was fleshy but very deep, and it bled profusely. The shoulder wound was not as deep, but the arrow had imbedded itself in the soft tissues between the bones, and Victor feared that there could be unknown damage to the ligaments and/or nerves. The chest injury could have and should have been much worse than it was, but again, by some stroke of luck, the arrow seemed to have hit and been deflected by some of Anton's lower ribs, which stopped it from piercing her lungs or even her heart. The chest injury was complicated by several of the ribs being broken, and Victor worried that Anton's lungs may have been punctured or damaged anyway. For now, all he could do was watch the young Lord carefully and try to stave off infection as best he could. It would not be easy.

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Marina sighed as she exited Anton's room. She closed the door and leaned against it for a moment, closing her eyes wearily. She was exhausted. For two days and two nights, she'd kept vigil at her daughter's side, watching and waiting. For two days and nights, Anton hadn't made a sound nor moved a muscle. Victor warned that the young woman had lost a lot of blood, and that she may have lapsed into a coma, possibly never awakening again. But Marina refused to give in to that thought. She knew that Anton was strong - not only physically, but mentally as well - and she knew that if there was anyone who could battle back from injuries like these, it was her Anton.

Victor had sought out Sir Richard, who informed the physician and Lady Marina of the circumstances that caused Anton's injuries. Both were shocked to learn of Gerrod's treachery and betrayal, and Marina was furious. She didn't know Gerrod, but she'd never trusted him, nor did she trust his father, the Earl, and their supposed alliance with Weldon. She had already told Anton this; she had warned her not to trust the young knight, even though he was Gwynneth's brother. Now that her instincts had proven correct, she wanted to rail against someone for not heeding her warnings. If Anton were lucid and well, she would take her frustration out on her. Seeing how that was not the case, however, she knew she had to hold her fury in check. Marina told herself that the important thing right now was just to get Anton well again. She was not the type of person who prayed frequently, but as she wiped a hand across her face and gathered her thoughts, she decided that she would go to the chapel and pray. She had only taken two steps when a soft voice called to her.

"Lady Marina?" The Marchioness Dowager turned to find blue-green eyes peering at her worriedly.

Gwynneth had stayed away from Anton's room for the past two days. At first she did so willingly. She was still reeling from the shock of Anton being so terribly injured, and she felt quite sick and unwell in general. Both Marina and Victor had managed to persuade the young Lady to keep her distance, insisting that it was too gruesome and would therefore be too stressful for her. But now that a few days had passed, Gwynneth decided that she wanted to see her husband, needed to see him. She had to verify his condition for herself and find out what was

going on. She trusted Marina and Victor, but she also knew that they tended to be a little over protective.

"How is he?" Gwynneth queried, taking in Marina's uncharacteristic haggard appearance.

Marina straightened herself and affected an air of confidence and calm, despite being caught off guard by her daughter-in-law. "His condition is unchanged, I'm afraid. Still no movement of any kind. Still not awake."

Gwynneth closed her eyes and nodded. She didn't know much about caring for injuries or medical practices, but she knew that it was not a good sign that Anton had not awakened. Opening her eyes, she lifted her chin, "I'd like to see him."

Marina tensed. She wasn't prepared to let Gwynneth into the room yet. She wasn't sure that Anton was properly covered up and her body concealed. "I don't think that would be wise, Gwynneth. I don't think-"

"I know you don't think I'm prepared to handle it," Gwynneth said, "but I assure you, I am ready to see him." She looked Marina squarely in the eyes. "I *need* to see him, My Lady. Please."

The look in Gwynneth's eyes was a mixture of desperation and determination, and Marina knew that she would not be able to keep the young woman at bay. "Very well, but just for a moment." She sighed, "Allow me first to go and make sure that he is...prepared. Or rather, that there is nothing...too unpleasant..." Marina stammered as she struggled for a reason to go in and make sure Anton was at least covered. "Nothing that you don't need to witness, I mean. Just give me a moment to inform Victor." She quickly opened the door just enough to slip inside, closing it in Gwynneth's face.

Gwynneth frowned at her mother-in-law's strange behavior. It gave her an uneasy feeling and she suddenly feared that perhaps Anton was worse than Marina and Victor had been letting on. They hadn't given her a full explanation of the nature of Anton's injuries - what if he had been horribly maimed? What if he was near death and they had been hiding it from her? The young Lady didn't have time to contemplate further as the chamber door opened and Marina told her to come in.

She walked into the darkened room with trepidation. It smelled of bloody gore and stale perspiration and Gwynneth's stomach churned. The canopy drapes were partially drawn around the bed, giving her only a glimpse of Anton's body. Slowly she walked up closer, her eyes widening and her hand going to her mouth as she drew in a shaky, breathy gasp.

The man lying on the bed looked nothing like her husband. The pale, thin, lifeless looking person that she beheld was nothing like her strong, robust, vital Anton. "My God." Gwynneth whispered, her voice quavering as tears quickly filled her eyes.

Her gaze darted all over Anton's body. Though he was covered with a light blanket, it was obvious where his injuries were. His shoulders were exposed, and she could see the blood-spotted dressing wrapped around his left shoulder. Victor had the blanket pushed aside at his

right thigh as he attended to an injury there, and Anton's chest looked lumpy, indicating a probable injury or bandaged area there as well.

Gwynneth looked up to Anton's face. The face she once held so dear and youthfully handsome was now sickly gray and marred with cuts and bruises. She shook her head as tears began to slip down her cheeks, "What happened to him?" her voice was no more than a raspy whisper.

Victor and Marina exchanged looks with one another, knowing that Gwynneth was not aware of the events that lead to Anton's injuries. "He was hit with several crossbow arrows, My Lady."

The young woman frowned, "Crossbow arrows?"

"Yes, My Lady."

Gwynneth looked at Victor with wide, tearful eyes. Her emotions went from sorrow to horror as she thought about the dream she'd had so often. In her mind's eye, she'd seen Anton being shot by arrows, and now she was standing here, hearing that it had all come true. A niggling feeling of dread also stirred inside her as she remembered other aspects of the dreams as well. She returned her gaze to her husband. "Was anyone else injured like this?"

Again Victor hesitated as he flicked his eyes to Marina's. "No, My Lady. Just My Lord."

Gwynneth's eyes widened further and she turned back to Victor. "Anton was the only one injured? Are you certain?" Victor nodded solemnly and again looked to Marina for help. Gwynneth noticed and turned to regard the Marchioness Dowager. "Do they know who was responsible for doing this?" She had to know if her dream was completely true.

"Oh yes. They know." Marina stepped toward Gwynneth. "But it wasn't just one person. Anton was ambushed."

Gwynneth's eyes fairly bulged. "What?" Her voice revealed her dismay.

"Yes. Apparently the battle was over when someone began shooting at him from a nearby wooded area. He rushed into the woods and was immediately surrounded and shot to pieces by an entire regiment of crossbowmen." Her voice was hard and her eyes glittered as her anger began to rear its head.

Gwynneth's mouth opened in shock. Hearing Marina's words, she knew immediately who was responsible for her husband's dreadful injuries. She knew that her greatest fear had come true without even hearing another word. But as Marina stepped closer to her, she realized that she was about to hear the confirmation.

"Anton was intentionally targeted. He was lured into the woods, like a lamb to slaughter." Marina's eyes barely concealed her fury. "He was set up and ambushed by *your* brother, Gwynneth."

Gwynneth let loose a gasp of disbelief and she shook her head, not wanting to hear the rest.

"Yes, it's true. Richard told us everything." Marina continued, "Gerrod drew him into the woods and then instructed his own mercenaries to loose their arrows on him."

Marina's words assaulted Gwynneth's ears and she brought her hands to her mouth as tears streamed from her eyes.

"Gerrod tried to *kill* Anton." Marina's voice quavered slightly as she ground the words out through clenched teeth. She locked eyes with her daughter-in-law, her anger lashing out at the young woman. Marina knew Gwynneth wasn't to blame, but it was so difficult to reign in her feelings of hurt. She wanted to punish someone for the cruel injustice done to her daughter. "For whatever reason, your brother wanted Anton dead." She turned her eyes toward Anton's motionless body. "And he may yet succeed."

Gwynneth was speechless. She could only stare at her husband's body as Marina's words spun round and round inside her head. Only when Marina's burning eyes came back to again hold her in silent, angry contempt did she manage to find her voice. "I...I-I must go and find Richard. I must hear for myself what happened." She turned and quickly fled the room.

Once alone, Marina came and sat down on the side of the bed. Victor watched the Marchioness Dowager for a moment, weighing his words before he spoke. "You shouldn't take your anger out on her, My Lady. I highly doubt that she had any knowledge of her brother's treachery."

Marina sighed and picked up a damp cloth, dabbing Anton's forehead lightly. "I can't help myself, Victor. Her flesh and blood is responsible for this, this...butchery." her hand motioned over Anton's body. "I am only thankful that Richard succeeded in slaying the bastard. I hope he rots in Hell." She sniffed as tears made their way down her face. "If Anton doesn't live...I don't know what I'll do." The words came out in a whisper.

Victor reached out to touch Marina's shoulder, bringing her eyes to his, "I plan on doing everything in my power to save her, My Lady. But you must banish your anger and instead, have faith." His eyes gently beseeched her.

She nodded. "I am trying, Victor." She turned her gaze back to Anton. "I am trying."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Rather than go and find Sir Richard right away, Gwynneth instead retreated to her private chambers. The sight of her injured husband and the news that her brother had made good on his threat to harm him made the young Marchioness sick to her stomach. Gwynneth felt responsible, somehow, for the turn of events. She felt as though she should have told Anton everything Gerrod had divulged to her. Perhaps if she had, Anton could have done something, anything.

Perhaps he would not be in the condition he was now. She laid on her bed and cried for a long while, relenting only when her body insisted.

It was more than obvious to Gwynneth that Lady Marina was upset and angry, and although it seemed unfair for the older woman to vent her frustrations on Gwynneth, the young Lady understood. She was angry and upset also, and she wanted Gerrod to be found and punished for what he'd done. She didn't blame Marina for feeling the way she did, but she hated to think that the relationship they had been carefully building between them would now be destroyed because of Gerrod's ruthlessness. She didn't want to be at odds with her mother-in-law. With Anton being so badly injured, Gwynneth knew that she and Marina would need to help each other and pull together, not apart. They needed to concentrate on Anton, and they needed to do it in harmony.

Gwynneth needed to go and find Richard. She had to find out exactly what had happened to Anton, but she also hoped to find out whether or not Gerrod and his hit-men were being pursued, or captured, or what. If she could prove to Marina that some kind of justice was being carried out and she could show that she was in favor of Gerrod being punished, then perhaps the older woman would see that Gwynneth was on her side and that they did not need to be at odds.

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Gwynneth sent a servant boy to go find Richard and request him to come to the Manor to speak with her. A few hours passed until Richard finally appeared, and they went to one of the small sitting rooms to talk in a more private, casual atmosphere.

Richard was a little apprehensive and feared that the Lady Gwynneth blamed him for her husband's injuries, and that perhaps she had requested an audience with him so that she might reprimand or punish him in some way. Being Lord Anton's friend and his most trusted knight, Richard felt responsible for the dire situation his Liege and Lord was now in. He felt as though he'd let all of Weldon down.

The Marchioness excused the servants and directed Richard to sit, but as she sat down, Richard unexpectedly came and stood before her. "Milady, before you begin, I...I feel that I need to apologize," Richard began, his hands nervously clenching at his sides.

Gwynneth frowned up at him, "Apologize, Sir Richard?"

"Yes, Milady. 'Twas my fault that My Lord was injured. I should have been at his side, and I was not; therefore, I take full responsibility."

Gwynneth pursed her lips together, "Sir, before any kind of blame or responsibility is assigned, I think you should tell me everything that happened, alright?" She was calm and composed, wanting to make the knight feel at ease.

"Yes, Milady. Of course." Richard remained standing stiffly in front of Gwynneth. "The battle was all but over when-"

"Richard, please, sit down." Gwynneth interrupted, reaching out and gently touching his arm. "I don't wish for us to be so formal. This is not an inquisition. I just wish for us to speak openly, as friends."

The knight audibly sighed and nodded, "Yes, Milady. Thank you." He eased his tall frame down into one of the large chairs. "As I was saying, the battle was over, for the most part. We were out on the open field, assessing the carnage and looking for survivors. I heard someone cry out and looked up across the field, realizing that it was My Liege. He had his sword raised and was yelling as he charged off into a wooded area. I assumed he had spotted a fleeing enemy and was pursuing him." He paused, looking regretfully at Gwynneth, "He did not call to me to give chase, and I did not follow him. I assumed that there was not more than one person, and that My Lord would easily be in control. I know now that I was quite dreadfully wrong."

Gwynneth could feel the tears welling in her eyes, but still she nodded and encouraged Richard to continue.

The knight drew a deep breath before going on. "My Lord disappeared into the woods and I turned my attention back to the field. But then I heard...noises...a commotion. I heard the frightened whinnying of My Lord's steed...someone shouting out. I sensed that something was very wrong." Richard's gaze dropped to the floor and he spoke in a quiet, flat tone. "When I rode into the woods, I saw several crossbowmen standing at the ready, and I saw My Lord kneeling on the forest floor, arrows protruding from his body. And standing above him holding a sword, was Gerrod." Richard looked up at Gwynneth. "Your brother, Milady. He held his sword in his hands above his head, preparing to bring it down upon My Lord's neck."

Gwynneth bit down on her bottom lip and closed her eyes, tears spilling out as she absorbed the words. Images from her dreams flashed through her mind and she felt like she wanted to scream from the horror of it all.

"I reacted in the only manner I could, Milady. I had to defend My Liege." Richard's voice was unsteady. "I hurled my sword at Gerrod and speared him with it." Gwynneth's eyes flew open and she gasped. Richard nodded at her sadly, apologetically. "I slew him, Milady."

The Marchioness could not speak. The news that her brother was dead was yet another shock in a seemingly never-ending chain of horrific surprises.

Richard felt remorseful for the first time as he watched Lady Gwynneth cover her mouth with her hand and try to remain calm. "I am truly sorry Milady." Richard whispered. "I had to do it."

Gwynneth closed her eyes again, moving her hand to her chest. She could feel her heart pounding and she took a moment to gather her thoughts. "Do not...apologize for meting out a punishment that was well-deserved, Sir Richard." Gwynneth swallowed against the lump in her throat and sat back in the chair, trying hard to control her surging emotions. "Gerrod surely knew what the consequences of his betrayal were, do you not think, Sir?" she said, finally looking up at the knight.

"Yes, Milady. I'm quite sure he did. But still, he was your brother-"

"Do *not* call him my brother!" Gwynneth snapped, her eyes suddenly flashing. She closed her eyes, calming herself before returning her gaze to the steely one of the knight before her. "He tried to *murder* my husband. I disavow any blood relation who is a ruthless, traitorous, murdering heathen. I disavow them, and I demand retribution for their crime."

"Gerrod has paid for his crime, Milady." Richard said solemnly, his dark eyes holding Gwynneth's. "He has paid with his life."

Gwynneth nodded and she blinked her eyes long, trying to chase away the tears. She rose from her chair and came to stand behind it, resting her hands on the high back and gazing up at the ceiling as her mind swirled with a hundred different thoughts. "My father needs to be informed of these happenings." She finally said, almost to herself.

Richard drew a deep breath, hating that he was going to have to give the Lady even more dire news. "Ah...M-Milady," he began as Gwynneth looked at him. "Again, I am truly sorry, but..." She frowned as he hesitated. "I regret to inform you that your father passed on, some time ago." Gwynneth's mouth dropped open and the color completely drained from her face. "I had already begun inquiring about your father, you see, knowing that he would need to be informed of his son's death." Richard's voice was soft. "I was told that he died several fortnights ago, and that Gerrod had already installed himself as Earl."

The young Lady just silently stared, her hands tightly gripping the chair. It was all too much to absorb. "I...I can't believe it." she finally murmured. "How could he have died? H-He wasn't ill...I don't understand. Why wouldn't Gerrod inform me of this?" She looked up at Richard, confusion clearly written on her face.

Richard looked back at her with sympathy. "Milady, from what I could gather...I fear that Gerrod may have had a hand in your father's death."

Gwynneth's face paled again and she placed a hand on her chest, feeling that her heart was about to tear itself in two.

"I believe he intended to keep it a secret from you, from everyone." The young Lady began to sway, looking like she was about to faint, so Richard quickly came to her side, reaching out to steady her carefully. He guided her back to the chair, sitting her down and then kneeling in front of her, "Milady, there is no way anyone could have foretold these events. Gerrod was conniving and elusive. I have been told that he was responsible for putting many people in their graves, all because he was obsessed with power and control. He wanted far more than Clarendon could offer."

Gwynneth stared at the floor for a moment, "R-Right before Anton left for battle, Gerrod told me that he'd had Aldred killed." Her voice trembled as she continued to stare, her eyes not blinking. "H-He told me to keep quiet about it. He threatened me...and Anton. But I still tried to warn Anton about him. I feared Gerrod would try to harm him. ...And he did." Tears slid down

Gwynneth's pale cheeks as she began to weep.

Richard nodded. "You mustn't blame yourself for any of this, Milady. Gerrod deceived everyone." Richard took in the Lady's shocked, disbelieving face. "No one was aware of what he had been doing. I did not know. Lord Anton did not know." Gwynneth looked up. "If we had known, we would have stopped him long ago. You must believe that."

Gwynneth nodded slowly, "I do." They were silent for a long moment. "What becomes of Clarendon now?" she thought aloud. "Who was in charge while Gerrod was away?" She directed her gaze back to Richard, wondering if he had the answers.

Because Richard had already investigated the situation, he did. "Someone by the name of Percival. I believe he was Gerrod's steward."

The Lady frowned and shook her head, "I know of no one named Percival. Henry was my father's steward."

"I'm certain that Gerrod installed his own staff at Clarendon to do his bidding, Milady. Surely your father's servants are all gone by now."

Gwynneth nodded slowly. "Yes, I'm sure you are correct, sir." She sighed and relaxed back into the chair, staring off again as she contemplated the situation. Gwynneth realized that she was now the only remaining heir of Clarendon - unless of course, Gerrod had sired a son, or even a daughter, with someone - but she had no way of knowing that. Still, she knew that it would be difficult, even dangerous, for her to go there and assess the situation personally. She certainly could not go now, given Anton's condition and her very pregnant state of being. Even if she managed to secure the small kingdom and bring it under her control, she could never rule there permanently. Her home was here, at Weldon.

Turning back to Richard, Gwynneth fixed him with a grave look. "Richard, I wonder if I might ask your assistance with something."

Richard saw her serious, determined countenance and stood up. "Of course, Milady. What is it you require of me?"

Gwynneth drew a deep breath. "I cannot leave my husband's side right now and I am, obviously, in no condition to travel to Clarendon and investigate the circumstances there." Her hands swept across her protruding belly. "It seems likely that Gerrod's people will be governing it as he directed, which, I expect, is far different from the way my father would have governed. And, I also expect that his vast following of knights and mercenaries have returned there, although, now that Gerrod is dead..." She looked at Richard with question.

"I know not what became of his men, Milady. I can only imagine that Gerrod had designated someone as his second-in-command, and that this person has perhaps taken over as the leader of Clarendon. I'm certain they don't expect you to come back and attempt to make a claim on it, Milady."

Gwynneth pursed her lips and looked away for a moment. "Sir Richard," she began, looking back at the knight with determination, "would you do something for me? Something of great importance."

Richard crossed an arm over his chest and bowed slightly. "I am at your service, Milady."

"Would you take some men - as many knights and warriors as you might need - and go to Clarendon, on my behalf, and win it back for me?"

Richard stood to his full height, "Lady Gwynneth, I would be happy to bring Clarendon back into rightful hands." He bowed again, "And it would be an honor to do this for you."

Gwynneth nodded at him. "Thank you, good sir. I realize that what I'm asking of you is difficult and dangerous, but if you succeed, I promise to reward you well."

"No reward is necessary, Milady. Seeing Clarendon and its people under your control will be reward enough."

"We shall see, Richard. We shall see."

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[Continued...](#)

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~ **Second Son** ~
by [A. K. Naten](#)

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PART TWELVE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The hour was late when Gwynneth finally climbed the stairs that lead her toward her sleeping chambers. She was exhausted and her body, heavy with child, ached as she trudged slowly. Despite her fatigue, Gwynneth wanted to see Anton. She had been so overwhelmed on her prior visit, she hadn't really had a chance to be near him and touch him. And she so needed to touch him. Now that the initial shock of seeing his battered body had worn off a bit, she wanted to make a physical, as well as emotional connection with him. She was sure that if Anton were able to sense her presence in any way, he would want it as well.

Upon reaching Anton's door, Gwynneth was surprised to find that the iron latch handle appeared to be locked. She jiggled it and pushed against the heavy wood, but still it did not budge.

Frowning, Gwynneth knocked on the rough surface. "Hello?" she called out quietly, thinking that perhaps someone was inside with her husband. "Could someone let me in, please?" No one answered, and the door remained silent and still. The Lady sighed in frustration and turned away, walking slowly down the hallway toward her room. *Who would lock the door, and why?*

She was just about to turn the corner when she heard the distinct sound of hurried footsteps and the clanking sound of a key in a lock. Turning around, she saw Victor standing at her husband's door and unlocking it, his arms full of rags and medicine bottles.

She hurried toward him. "Victor," she called out.

The elderly physician jumped in alarm, abruptly pulling the door shut again and nearly dropping his armful of supplies. "My Lady, w-what are you doing here?" he asked with surprise.

"I've come to see my husband, of course." Noticing that Victor's hand was tightly gripping the door latch, she gave him a speculative look, "Why on earth did you have the door locked?"

"Er, I...I," Victor stammered helplessly, "I had to go and fetch a few things." His eyes darted away and he shrugged, appearing flustered. "I just didn't want anyone to...disturb My Lord."

Gwynneth frowned again at the physician. Sometimes she didn't understand him at all. "Well, no matter. You may unlock it now. I wish to sit with him for a little while before I retire for the night." She stepped back and motioned for Victor to open the door.

The elderly physician felt himself breaking out in a cold sweat. He had been in the midst of changing Lord Anton's dressings when he realized he needed fresh bandages and poultices. He had been leaving Anton's wounds uncovered for periods of time, wanting to expose them to the air so that they had a chance to dry out and thus begin to heal. In doing so of course, he had also been exposing Anton's body. This evening, figuring that he would be gone only momentarily and the young Lord would be safe if he locked the door behind him, Victor had again left Anton's body uncovered. And now, here Lady Gwynneth was, demanding entrance. How was he to keep her at bay and get inside to cover Anton's deception?

"Victor?" Gwynneth's voice brought the doctor back to attention. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong, My Lady, uh...it's just-"

"If nothing is wrong, then let me inside to *see* him." Gwynneth's voice had become stern. She was annoyed with the older man's reticent behavior. First Marina had acted strangely, and now Victor was being odd. She had a very bad feeling that something was dreadfully amiss with her husband, and she was sure that the doctor and Lady Marina were intentionally hiding the severity of his condition from her, or something. She made to reach for the door handle, but Victor stepped forward, blocking her with his body.

"Ah...," he stammered helplessly, "I-I'm sorry, My Lady, but you cannot see him right now."

"I beg your pardon?" Gwynneth's eyebrows crept up to her hairline.

Victor's face flushed and he dropped his gaze shamefully. "I cannot allow you entrance."

"Are you denying me access to my own husband, sir?" The young Lady's tone was indignant, her eyes flickering.

"My Lady, *please*...you don't understand!" Victor begged, shaking his head. He was frantically trying to formulate an excuse when Gwynneth suddenly gave him a shove backwards, causing him to nearly drop his armful of rags and bottles. Thinking only about the glass in his arms, Victor unconsciously released the door handle to juggle his load. Quick as a flash, Gwynneth made her move, grabbing hold of the metal latch, pushing the door open and rushing inside.

"No, My Lady! *No!*" Victor yelled out and ran in after her, causing two bottles to go crashing to the stone floor anyway.

Knowing what Gwynneth would find, Victor walked toward the bed slowly and came to stand behind the Lady. He closed his eyes, awaiting the explosion. After a long moment of silence, however, the physician opened his eyes, wondering at the strange quietness. The young Marchioness was standing stock still at her husband's bedside, and Victor inched a few steps closer so that he could see her face.

Gwynneth's blue-green eyes were wide, her mouth was agape and her face was completely drained of color. She wore a mixed expression of astonishment, dismay and appall. She did not know what to make of the sight her eyes beheld. She did not see the terrible injuries that had been inflicted on the body laid bare before her, she saw only that the body had the face of her husband, but the attributes of...a woman?

The dark brown hair was that of her husband; the dark eyebrows, straight nose, strong jaw - all were features on a face she recognized as Anton's. But the pale, exposed skin and long, lean physique of the body upon the bed was not recognizable to her. The figure was broad-shouldered with gently muscular arms and sinewy legs like a man, yet it possessed definite female attributes. There were smallish breasts that were round and firm and tipped by large, dark pink nipples. A well-toned stomach and trim waist tapered down to jutting, angular hip bones and some very

non-male anatomy between smooth but muscular-looking upper thighs.

Gwynneth could not believe what her eyes were seeing. She could not reconcile the discrepancies. Her mind whirled and whirled as she tried to make sense of the situation and grasp what was happening. This person before her appeared to be her husband - was supposed to be her husband - but that could not be possible. Lord Anton, the Marquess of Weldon, was a man. This person was a woman.

Gwynneth's feet finally moved and she took a stumbling step backward. "Wh-what...what is this?" she rasped, her voice barely a whisper as she slowly turned and gave Victor a pleading look. She was trembling, her eyes still wide with alarm and her face a ghostly white.

"My Lady-" Victor began.

"What in the name of God is going on here!" Marina's sudden appearance made Victor jump, but not Gwynneth. The young Lady just continued to stand and stare, flabbergasted and shocked beyond comprehension. "Victor! What the devil have you done!?" Marina hissed.

"It wasn't my fault! I tried to stop her, but she *forced* me out of the way!" the old man defended.

Comprehending the commotion, Gwynneth turned again, this time holding a shaking hand out to point toward the bed. "I-I don't understand...w-what is the meaning of this?" Her glassy eyes searched her mother-in-law's angry, worried blue depths, desperate for answers and explanations.

Marina ignored her. "Oh damnation!" she cursed, quickly rushing over and covering Anton's body with a rumpled blanket. She spun around and faced Gwynneth, reaching out to grasp her by the arms. "Gwynneth...", she paused, feeling a genuine loss for words. "Oh my dear, there is *so* much to explain." she said, shaking her head.

But Gwynneth didn't even look at her; she was still gawking at the now-covered figure on the bed. Marina could see that she would not have the girl's attention until she got her away from Anton. Slowly, wordlessly, she directed her back away from the bed until she could sit her down on a nearby chair. Gwynneth did not resist.

Marina sighed and held on to Gwynneth's hands, wanting to physically keep her grounded as she spoke to her. "Before you jump to any conclusions, you must first understand that none of this is Anton's doing. None of this is her fault. She only carried out the role and duty that was thrust upon her at birth."

Gwynneth finally looked up at Marina with even wider-eyed incredulity as the words '*her*' and '*she*' echoed in her head. Her head began to swim with black spots and her stomach lurched nauseatingly. She brought a hand up to her chest and scooted forward on the chair, meaning to stand up. "I-I don't...feel...well...", Gwynneth barely got the words out before her eyes rolled skyward and she slumped backwards in the chair, fainting dead away.

Marina closed her eyes and sighed, holding a hand up to her forehead. This would change

everything, and she was not prepared for that. "Victor," she barked out, "help me take her to her chambers. I shall explain things to her when she awakens."

Victor sighed wearily, "Yes, My Lady."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

It was just shy of midnight when Gwynneth slowly awoke to the feel of someone dabbing her forehead with a damp cloth. Her eyes fluttered open, struggling to focus on her surroundings and the face that hung near. She soon recognized Marina leaning over her, and realized she was in her bed, in her own chambers.

"Finally you're awake. I was beginning to worry." Marina's voice was gentle, her blue eyes serene as she spoke.

Gwynneth stared at her for a moment, recalling a strange dream where those eyes held a panicked, stricken look as the elder Lady spoke bizarre and impossible words. Thank goodness it had all just been a dream.

"Oh, Lady Marina," Gwynneth murmured, "Oh, I've just had the most *dreadful* nightmare...it was horrible and unbelievable!" She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I dreamt that Anton was...that he was really a...a *woman*." As she spoke, she saw a grave look overtake Marina's face. Her heart began to thunder inside her chest and she swallowed against the lump that arose in her throat. She sat up slowly, "Tell me that it isn't true, My Lady. Tell me that it was all just a terrible, preposterous dream."

Marina closed her eyes and sighed. She supposed she could attempt to convince the young blonde that it was all a dream, but Gwynneth's suspicions would surely remain aroused, and Marina knew that she would discover the truth eventually. When she reopened her eyes, they were sad and resigned. "I'm sorry Gwynneth, but it is true."

Gwynneth's eyes went round and wide as she stared at her mother-in-law, not wanting to believe her ears. But Marina's somber countenance told her that she was not lying. It really was the truth. Her husband was a woman.

The young Lady's stomach lurched sickeningly and she quickly scrambled off the bed, rushing to a nearby chamberpot and emptying the contents of her stomach into it. Marina rose from the bed and calmly walked over to assist her, silently handing her the wet cloth and guiding her back to the bed.

Gwynneth lay down on the bed and curled up into a ball, her eyes staring but unseeing as she reprocessed everything she thought, and hoped, she had dreamt.

Her husband was not a man. Her husband, whom she'd come to treasure, adore and love more

than anyone, was really a female. A woman. *A woman...a woman...a woman.* The words echoed inside her head, taunting her, torturing her, horrifying her. How could it be? It was inconceivable.

Her mind whirled furiously, recalling all the incredible, awful truths she'd learned in the past few days: her brother was a vicious murderer and was now dead; her father was dead too, probably killed by her brother's own hand; and her husband, who was intentionally maimed, perhaps mortally, by her own brother, was really a woman...*a woman.* Gwynneth's eyes fluttered shut and she released a small whimper as the tears began to run down her face.

"I know this must be a great shock to you, Gwynneth," Marina's voice was quiet as she sat down on the side of the bed, "but you must not blame Anton. She had no choice but to live this way, just as her father and I felt we had no choice but to make her live this way when she was born. You must understand that it was done out of absolute *necessity*, and that Anton never intended to deceive you, or anyone, simply for folly."

Gwynneth opened her eyes but continued to stare unfocused, not sure what to think or what to believe at this point. She wanted to cry; she wanted to vomit; she wanted to scream until her lungs collapsed and she lost consciousness. She wanted Marina to be quiet, but the Lady continued.

"When I gave birth to Aldred, Edgar and I were thrilled. A fine, first-born son. Weldon's future was all but secured. Of course, it's best to have several sons, so when I became pregnant again, we naturally hoped for another boy." Marina sighed and clasped her hands together in her lap. "At that time, Wesley of Rencor had come to power and taken over the throne. Every kingdom throughout the land was in turmoil. I don't know how much you knew about Wesley, but he was a most cruel and wretched man. He took young girls away from their families, claiming them as his own subjects and forcing them into a life of torturous servitude. He gave them to his sons and brothers as 'gifts', to use and abuse for their personal pleasure." Marina's voice wavered and she closed her eyes for a moment to gather herself. "Edgar swore that no daughter of his would go through a hell such as that. And he refused to marry her off to someone at a ridiculously young age or hide her or spirit her away someplace. So, he decided that it would be better for Antonia to be raised as a boy."

The use of Anton's female name finally made Gwynneth's eyes focus, and she gave Marina a look of astonishment.

"I know it all seems incredulous, but you must understand that Antonia is...well, she has always been special. Very special. Her birth was difficult. I nearly perished, as did she." Marina said solemnly. "When we were told it was a girl, we were so unhappy."

Gwynneth frowned at the Marchioness Dowager, unable to believe that parents could think such a thing about their own newborn baby.

"That may sound dreadful, but with things being the way they were, announcing the birth of a girl was the same as announcing a death sentence."

Finally, unable to keep her thoughts to herself, Gwynneth sat up. "So you just...made her into a *boy*? Just like that?" her voice was scratchy and incredulous, her eyes accusing.

"It wasn't something we just decided on a mere whim, I assure you. We agonized over it...I cried every day for a fortnight." Marina held the young blonde's accusing gaze. "Finally Edgar decided that, in order to protect our daughter and keep her close to us, we had to conceal her true identity. So, we publicly announced the birth of a son. Antonia became Anton, our second son."

Gwynneth stared in astonishment. She could not comprehend how a mother and father could force such hardship and confusion onto a little child.

Marina continued, needing to explain further. "As Anton grew, I knew that she was something special. I knew that some day, in some way, she would do or be something extraordinary. I can't explain it. I just knew. Perhaps it was because of the difficulties and challenges she faced, or maybe it was in spite of them, I cannot say for certain. I just know that she ended up being a better young man than any other young man. Even my own son, Aldred."

At the mention of Aldred's name, Gwynneth's heart skipped a beat and her expression darkened noticeably. Memories and thoughts rushed through her head, and she was struck with the sudden awareness that the child she carried inside her was indeed Aldred's, not Anton's. She had still been holding on to a sliver of hope that the child had been sired by her husband. The realization of that impossibility made her sick, and her stomach began to roil again.

The Marchioness Dowager did not miss the change in Gwynneth's demeanor. "I know how despicable and cruel Aldred was. It shames me to think that my own son could have done such terrible things, and I am truly sorry for what he did to you."

Gwynneth's chin began to tremble and she dropped her eyes for a moment. She wanted to tell Marina that it was far too late to be sorry for anything where Aldred was concerned. Apologies could not make up for the fact that she was carrying the child of the man who had raped her.

"You must understand, Gwynneth, that when Aldred died, Edgar was placed in a very difficult position. Your father still expected for us to fulfill our end of the bargain and forge an alliance."

Gwynneth looked at her with incredulity, "B-But surely...", her voice scratched as she voiced her thoughts again, "...surely Lord Edgar knew how *absurd* it was?"

"Of course he knew - he and I both knew," Marina nodded. "And Anton was against it. Completely, *vehemently* against it. She wanted no part of it whatsoever."

"Then...*why*?" Gwynneth asked, truly not understanding.

"Oh my dear, don't you see? We *had* to. Your father knew that Edgar had a second son - a very well-regarded, very *unmarried*, second son. Edgar couldn't renege on the agreement and risk making an enemy instead of an ally. He couldn't very well tell your father than Anton simply

refused to make the alliance and marry you, even though she did."

Gwynneth closed her eyes and shook her head. Hearing all this was compounding her dismay and confusion.

"I suppose, if Anton had wanted, she could have easily run away. I'm quite certain she considered it. But, as always, she remained loyal to her father and obeyed his wishes. Just as she always fulfilled her duties and played whatever roles her father asked her to play, so she agreed to play the role of husband too." Gwynneth was quiet as more tears trickled down her cheeks, and Marina allowed her to just sit and think.

So many things began to make sense to Gwynneth. Her mind churned as she began to recount the many things she'd always found curious or odd about Anton. But as she considered the revelations and truths, she also considered how many lies and falsities she'd been force-fed for so long - not only where Anton was concerned, but with her own family as well. It made her sick to think that she'd been lied to for so long about so many things. She felt her shock and dismay slowly begin to turn into hurt and anger.

"I feel like a fool...like a puppet. My life is a travesty." Gwynneth finally said, her voice a strangled whisper. "I have been deceived and lied to my entire life...about every one and every thing. I have found that I never knew my brother at all. I have found that my father died and I wasn't even afforded the chance to say goodbye to him." She wavered for a moment, sniffing as tears dribbled down her cheeks. "And now, worst of all, I have found that the one person I truly trusted...the one I truly loved...is not the man I thought he was. He's no man at *all!*" The words were mixed with a burst of tears, and she covered her face and began to weep.

Marina looked at her and felt real pity. She knew she was partially responsible for Gwynneth's distress, and she couldn't imagine what kind of impact all this must be having on the young woman. But now that the truth had been exposed, she wanted Gwynneth to know everything. And, knowing how Anton felt about Gwynneth, Marina was sure that her daughter would want the truth to be known as well. They just have to hope that Gwynneth would agree to keep the secret safe.

"Gwynneth," Marina started, but faltered, not quite knowing what to say. "My dear-"

"Do *not* call me 'dear!'" The young Lady pulled her hands away from her face and clenched them into fists, pinning Marina with intense blue-green. "You were responsible for the biggest lie of all! You created it! You enforced it! You *compounded* it by involving *me!*" her fists shook with newfound anger and humiliation.

Marina worked her jaw but held her tongue. Gwynneth's lashing out was to be expected, but Marina had to make her understand some things before she went too far. "Gwynneth, listen to me," she reached out to touch the young Lady's hands, but Gwynneth pulled away, glaring fiercely at Marina instead. The Marchioness Dowager pursed her lips, telling herself to be patient. "Gwynneth, you know that Anton cares for you a great deal. Despite everything, despite all the falsities, her feelings for you are genuine. Of this I am certain."

Gwynneth shook her head, "Well I am *not* certain. I am not certain of *anything* anymore."

"Anton loves you." Marina held the accusing green gaze, "And I know that you love her."

Gwynneth's eyes darkened and she shook her head harder, "No...*no!* I loved Anton, my *husband!* The person lying in that room is *not* my husband!" She pointed a finger toward Anton's room as her voice escalated in volume and conviction.

"The person lying in that room *is* your husband, Gwynneth! It *is* Anton!" Marina argued against the young woman's vehemence.

"No...no, no, *no!*" Gwynneth murmured, covering her face with her hands. "I don't know *who* it is in that room...I don't know *what* it is!" She flung her hands away, suddenly furious as the hurt and sense of betrayal began to intensify.

Again, Marina understood the blonde's anger, but she would not let her disparage her daughter. "I will tell you who and *what* Anton is," Marina said, leaning forward and pinning Gwynneth with her own fiery eyes. "Anton is my daughter...*and* she is my son. She is Edgar's sole heir and as such is the Marquess of Weldon. And yes, she *is* your husband!"

"But that isn't *possible!*" Gwynneth cried, again flinging her hands outward in exasperation. "We are two *women!* Two women cannot be *married!* It's *unnatural!*"

"As far as the church and everyone else knows, you are a *man* and a woman, joined in holy, sanctified matrimony."

"But it's a *lie!* We're living a *LIE!*" Gwynneth cried fretfully. "Oh my *God!* The things we've *done!* The *sins* we've committed! Oh if anyone *knew!*" she wailed, holding her head in her hands.

Marina scooted very close to Gwynneth, forcing her to lock eyes with her, "Anton has lived her whole life as a man, and she's done it successfully, with no one ever knowing the truth. Her physical constitution makes no difference. She *is* Lord Anton of Weldon - she *is* the Marquess and Master of this Manor. No one knows any different...and I expect that *you* shan't tell it any differently either."

Marina's menacing tone surprised Gwynneth. She looked at the older woman, trying to gauge her expression. Was she being threatened?

"Just as Anton must always remember her role and her duties, so *you* must remember yours as well, Gwynneth," Marina said firmly. "You are the wife of the Marquess of Weldon. And you are the mother of a future heir."

"No, I am the mother of a *bastard!*" Gwynneth spat hotly, tears burning in her eyes.

"That may be true," Marina arched an eyebrow, continuing calmly, "but again, no one knows

that, and no one *must* know that. For your sake, as well as Anton's."

Gwynneth narrowed her eyes at her mother-in-law's ominous-sounding words. "What do you mean?"

"I simply mean that it would do as much harm to you as it would to Anton if anyone were to find out that not only is your marriage an hypocrisy, but that your bastard child is the product of an illicit, pre-marital coupling with another man." Lady Marina's voice was calm, her message clear.

Gwynneth's mouth opened in shock, "Are you threatening me, My Lady?" she asked, her voice low and tremulous.

The Marchioness Dowager smiled falsely, "Not at all, my dear. I'm merely *suggesting* to you that you have as much at stake here as Anton does. As we *all* do." she emphasized her point with a stern stare. "You are carrying Edgar's grandchild. Regardless of whether or not the child is Anton's, it remains a blood heir of Weldon, and it *belongs* to Weldon."

"Y-You mean to take it from me?" Gwynneth said in disbelief, placing a hand protectively over her hugely swollen abdomen.

Marina paused dramatically, an eyebrow arching sharply as her blue eyes flicked down to Gwynneth's stomach, then back up to stormy green-blue eyes, "No. I only mean that the child must remain here to be raised and groomed to someday take over Weldon. I expect that you shall stay as well, but if you find that, after all this, you cannot bring yourself to be in Anton's presence, then some other...*arrangement* shall be made for you. Regardless, the child will stay with Anton."

The finality in Marina's firm tone was clear. There would be no negotiation; there would be no argument, and Gwynneth had none. She could not believe it. She was being told, essentially, that she did not have a choice. Not only was she married to someone who was now a complete stranger and an aberration of nature to her, but she was to be a prisoner here at Weldon as well. The child that she carried - the child that she now knew for certain was the product of Aldred's abusive sexual assaults on her - belonged to Weldon, and she had no say in any of it. She suddenly felt very nauseous.

"You must please excuse me, My Lady," Gwynneth finally whispered, touching her stomach as it churned, "I wish to lie down. I feel very unwell."

Lady Marina nodded and rose from the bed, but before she left the room, she turned back. "Gwynneth," The young woman wouldn't look up at her and Marina sighed, feeling exasperated. She hated being callous, really; her daughter-in-law did not deserve it. Oh why did everything have to be so complicated? "Gwynneth, I do not wish for us to become...enemies over this."

The blonde finally turned her head and looked at her mother-in-law, but said nothing.

Marina took a step back toward the bed, her voice calm and her eyes softened. "We never meant

for anyone to be hurt by all of this. Most especially you."

Fresh tears flooded Gwynneth's eyes and she shook her head lightly. "But I *am* hurt, My Lady. I'm hurt and I'm confused...and I'm *angry*!" Her voice wavered unsteadily and she gritted her teeth against the onslaught of tears and emotions.

"I know. And you must know that I truly am sorry for that."

Gwynneth gave an incredulous huff, "I think it's quite obvious that I don't know *anything*. I don't know what to think. I don't know what to believe. ...I don't know what to *do*."

"Everything I've said to you tonight is the truth. If you need someone to blame for the lies and deception, then blame me. Do not blame Anton." Marina said quietly. "Please...don't make any rash or fool decisions. Take some time and consider all the things I've told you."

The distraught blonde stared harshly at the older woman for a long moment, then Marina finally turned and left the room.

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Gwynneth had no idea what the hour was as she lay upon her bed. She had cried so much for so long that her head ached and her stomach hurt. Thoughts of every kind ran rampant through her mind. She felt betrayed, insulted, ashamed, and sickened. She felt as though her feelings, and indeed her very life, had been trifled with in the most horrible, humiliating way imaginable.

She brought her hand up and stared at her wedding ring...the ring that had been placed on her finger by a dashing young man...a dashing young man who, after a rocky start, turned out to be a most wonderful husband...a wonderful husband who turned out to be...a complete and utter lie. Tears again welled in her eyes as she thought about her marriage to Anton. She remembered how uneasy and edgy Anton had seemed on their wedding day. At the time, Gwynneth had thought that her husband-to-be was simply feeling nervous and overwhelmed, just as she had been. Now, of course, she knew better. She thought back to their wedding night and a shiver raced up and down her spine. She squeezed her eyes shut at the recollections.

It was one thing for a woman to masquerade as a man, but for her to actually *marry* another woman, and then have intimate *relations* with another woman...that was the most horrific thing of all.

How had she done it? Gwynneth thought, finally giving voice to the most troublesome thought of all. How had Anton made love to her if he was really a woman? For a moment, Gwynneth's mind boggled as she considered the possibilities. She supposed Anton could have used some kind of prop, but she had no idea what or how. She'd never heard of such a thing. It was outrageous. Her head began to swim and her stomach seized up as she thought about all the times her husband had made love to her, but never once took his clothes off nor exposed himself. She remembered thinking it a bit peculiar...she remembered thinking a lot of things peculiar, in fact.

That's because it was a lie...everything was a lie. Gwynneth's eyes closed again as more tears slipped out. It was all so awful...so unbelievable. So many secrets...so much deceit and deception. She didn't think she would ever be able to look at Anton again, not knowing what he was and what he'd done. She would surely go mad. Lying alone in the darkness of her room, a feeling of desperation began to grip Gwynneth as she considered how trapped she truly was. She felt the urge to flee...to run away from everyone and everything and just escape. But where would she go, and how on earth would she get there in the condition she was in? She would need help. ...*But I have no one who can help me...there is no one I can trust now...oh God in heaven, please...please help me!* Tears began to course down the young blonde's face, and her stomach again seized up painfully.

As Gwynneth cried, she began to feel very sick in her stomach. As the feeling crawled up her throat, she drug herself off the bed, reaching a chamberpot just in time. She vomited into the pot, the cramping in her stomach bringing her to her knees. As she tried to steady herself, Gwynneth began to feel pains deeper, lower, as though her whole abdomen was clenching tight and cramping. The aches stabbed deep within her womb. *Oh dear God,* she suddenly thought, *the baby...the baby is coming!*

"Oh God...oh God oh God," Gwynneth began murmuring as she struggled to her feet, her mind becoming frantic. She had to get someone...she had to get help. She staggered to the door and yanked it open. "Alice!" Gwynneth called breathlessly, "*ALICE!*" Her voice echoed off the darkened stone corridor. "Someone help! Someone please help me!"

Gwynneth's head begin to spin and everything started to fade to black. She thought she heard someone calling out to her, but she couldn't focus on it. She leaned against the wall and began to slide down helplessly, finally coming to rest on the cold stone floor. The last thing she thought before she completely lost consciousness was, ...*Save the child...let me die.*

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[Continued...](#)

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**** Re-post - corrections made ****

~ **Second Son** ~
by [A. K. Naten](#)

For disclaimers, etc., see [The Intro](#).

PART THIRTEEN

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Marchioness Dowager entered the darkened chamber room, carefully closing the door behind her. "How is she?" Her voice was quiet but clipped as she walked up to the physician.

Victor turned to acknowledge her with tired eyes. "She's sleeping. The contractions have stopped."

Marina approached the bed and gazed upon her unconscious daughter-in-law. The girl's face was pale with a few rosy smudges dotting her cheeks. Her head was damp and sweated, causing her light golden hair to stick to her face. Alice sat by her Lady's side, pressing a cool cloth to the young woman's forehead as she slumbered. Marina noticed that the ladies maid had somehow managed to get Gwynneth out of her dress and into a sleeping shift before settling her down for the night.

"I've given her a mild tonic to help her calm down and rest." Victor said quietly. Marina looked at him with alarm. "I had to, My Lady. She'd worked herself into such a hysteria that she nearly brought on labor. The poor thing was completely distraught...in a fully blown panic when I arrived. Alice performed something of a miracle in getting her quieted down." He inclined his head toward the ladies maid, who nervously shifted her gaze between the Marchioness Dowager and the doctor before returning her attention to her Lady.

Marina sighed aloud. "Will you sit with her for a spell then?"

Alice glanced up warily, realizing that the question was addressed to her. "Aye Milady, I shall."

"Good. Thank you." Marina nodded, then turned to look at Victor, "Let us leave them." She pulled the canopy drapes closed around the bed and exited the room. Once out in the hallway, Marina closed the door and turned to Victor again. "Is she going to be all right?"

Victor sighed, "I believe so, yes. The stress and shock of everything was just too much for her. The contractions have stopped, but she must not get over-excited or agitated again. It's a bit too early for delivery."

The older woman nodded. "So she'll be bed-ridden for awhile then?"

"Oh yes." Victor nodded. "I daresay that she should be restricted to bed rest for the remainder of the pregnancy."

"How long is that?"

"Mm...three, four, maybe five fortnights." Victor wiped a hand over his grizzled face, "It's difficult to predict her delivery date accurately, as you know."

"Yes, I know. It's just that she seems to be so *large*...I would think she'll deliver sooner rather than later."

"She is large, but I don't believe it's because the delivery is imminent." Marina regarded Victor with a questioning expression. "I...I believe she may be carrying twins."

"*What?!*" Marina's exclamation echoed off the stone walls.

Victor nodded. "I'm quite certain that I heard two separate heartbeats when I was examining her just now."

Marina just stared, slack-jawed with amazement. She couldn't decide whether this was good news or bad news.

"Multiple births tend to be a familial trait, passed along somehow from one generation to the next. So...who in your family carries such a trait, My Lady?"

Marina shook her head slowly, "N-No one...no one has twi-oh no...no, wait..." She frowned as she thought for a moment. "Edgar." She looked up at Victor, amazement in her eyes, "Yes, Edgar had a sister...a twin sister...she died shortly after their birth. He told me about it once, long ago...I had forgotten. My God...I never thought..."

"Well then, that explains it. The trait has carried through from Edgar to Aldred. I'm not absolutely positive about this, mind you, but, I think there's a good chance." Victor nodded at Marina, a look of concern still on her face. "If there aren't two babes in there, then that young woman is going to have one enormous baby, and that isn't good."

"Having twins isn't necessarily good either, Victor. She's a small girl, she'll have a rough time either way. It concerns me greatly."

"Yes, of course it's a concern, but it would be better if there were two small babes rather than one large one." Victor raised his eyebrows suggestively. "Just think, she could give you two grandsons."

"She could give me two granddaughters as well." Marina instantly replied.

Victor smiled slightly, "Would that be so terrible, My Lady?"

Marina sighed. "At this point, Victor, I just want Gwynneth and the baby, or babies, to survive." She looked up at the doctor, her weariness evident. "...I just want everyone to survive everything,

and I want life to return to normal...that's all I want."

The physician smiled gently, "I am in complete agreement with your sentiments, My Lady."

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The days after Gwynneth's collapse seemed to drag on painfully. The young Lady was very uncommunicative, and both Marina and Victor wondered about her mental state of being, as well as her physical one. At first, Gwynneth obediently stayed in bed, but it was obvious after several days that she was starting to chafe at her forced confinement. She began getting out of bed and walking the halls, often late at night, like a restless spirit. She never spoke to anyone, and she never asked about Anton.

Marina did not know how to handle the turn of events. She tried talking to Gwynneth a few times, but the young woman would not even look at her. Even when Marina joyfully told her that Anton had awakened and was speaking, Gwynneth gave no reaction whatsoever.

The Marchioness Dowager held herself somewhat responsible for Gwynneth's state of mind and wished she could do or say something that would bring the young blonde out of her trance. Marina felt badly for the veiled threats she had made, but she didn't know how else to convey the point that Gwynneth had to stay at Weldon and keep quiet. They would still be living under false pretenses, and the lies would persist, but Marina hoped that Gwynneth would be able to see that it was necessary. She also hoped that perhaps, after Gwynneth had a chance to think things over thoroughly and settle down, she would come to realize that being at Weldon wouldn't be such a bad existence after all. Gwynneth had cared deeply for Anton, just as Anton cared deeply for her. Marina would just have to hope that some aspect of those feelings remained and that it was strong enough to save them all.

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Marina quietly entered Anton's candle-lit chamber, two ceramic bowls in her hands. Although the young Lord had awakened, she was still very weak and incapacitated, and she continued to fight fevers. As Marina reached the bed, she pulled the canopy back and gazed down at her sleeping daughter, her mouth quirking into a small smile.

Anton's wounds were healing quite slowly, hampered by the complications of infections. Thanks to Victor's skill with medicines and poultices, however, the inflammations were being warded off one by one. Still, Anton's recovery was slow and painful. She had lost weight and muscle tone, and her ravaged body showed the effects of her debilitation. Victor tried to reassure everyone that in time, she would be well again, and her strength would return.

Marina sat the bowls down and reached into one, withdrawing a wet cloth. As she began to carefully dab the cloth over a pale, perspiration-dotted face, Anton's eyes fluttered and opened. "Hello my darling." Marina whispered, smiling as she bent to bestow a soft kiss on her daughter's forehead. "Every time I see your beautiful eyes open, I am thankful."

Anton gave her a dazed look and tried to say something back, but she was too hoarse to make any noise.

Marina patted Anton's cheek. "Don't try to talk, dearest. Just let me see to you, hmm? Look, I've brought you some warm broth," she said, picking up the other bowl. "Let's see if we can't sit you up a bit so that you can drink it." A disagreeable noise escaped Anton and she frowned. "Come now, don't fuss. You know you need to eat in order to regain your strength. You're so very weak, love," Marina put the bowl aside and reached out to help her daughter. The young warrior grimaced as she struggled to move, surprised at the pain and effort involved in merely scooting upright.

Finally arranged into a comfortable position, Marina sat on the side of the bed and began slowly spoon feeding Anton, making a tscking noise when the young woman wrinkled her nose in displeasure.

"Tastes bad," Anton rasped in-between mouthfuls, her voice scratchy and rough from disuse.

Marina smiled faintly, "I know this, but you must take some nourishment. Indulge your mother a little, alright?"

Anton frowned as another spoonful was pushed toward her. "Have you seen Gwynneth today?" The Marquess finally asked after a moment.

Marina pursed her lips together, wishing that Anton didn't always ask after Gwynneth, but knowing why she did. Over the past few days, Marina had told Anton everything that'd happened since she'd been gone. Everything from the time she'd left for battle until the time she'd awakened from her unconscious state. Despite being told about the terrible turn of events, it was clear that Anton worried about her wife, still. Despite knowing that Gwynneth had found out her deep dark secret and had nearly gone berserk over it...despite being told that Gwynneth would not speak with anyone and wanted nothing to do with her...despite all of that, Anton still cared about the young blonde.

"Has she spoken to you yet?" Anton's glassy eyes silently pleaded.

Marina sighed. "No, darling, she hasn't. She's still as silent as the night sky, and seemingly just as dark too."

Anton frowned and turned her head away from the spoonful of broth her mother held out for her. She hated that Gwynneth had discovered her deception in such a rudely shocking way, and yet part of her was secretly relieved too. It was bad enough living a lie and keeping secrets from everyone, but to have to hide it and withhold the truth from the one you love...that was a special kind of hell. Anton had hated hiding who she was from Gwynneth, and now that the blonde knew, Anton couldn't imagine what Gwynneth was going through. *It was no wonder the poor thing went into premature labor; she must feel as though she's going insane.* Anton thought. She worried about the younger woman terribly.

Even though Marina had said that she'd explained everything to the young Lady, Anton wasn't sure that her mother's version of "the truth" was what she would have told Gwynneth herself. Anton knew her mother...she was almost certain that Marina had probably mixed in several harsh, blunt words along with her explanations. Her mother had a tendency to do that when put on the spot or placed under pressure.

Anton wished that she could see Gwynneth. One look into those expressive blue-green eyes would tell her everything she needed to know. If she just had a chance to talk with Gwynneth, perhaps she could convince her that things were not as bad as they seemed. And right now, Anton was sure that things seemed utterly dreadful and dire to the young Lady.

"I want to talk to Gwynneth." Anton said, voicing her thoughts out loud.

Marina sighed. "Oh Anton, I know you would, but I don't believe she'll come to you right now."

"Well then, perhaps I should go to her."

"Oh dearest," Marina sat the bowl aside and reached out to clasp her daughter's hands. "I know you feel that you need to see her and talk to her, but you can't be up and about just yet. And even if you could, I don't think that having a huge confrontation with Gwynneth would be wise. Heaven knows what she might say or do. She's still very upset and troubled."

"All the more reason for me to speak with her. I need to reassure her and explain some things." Anton grimaced as she leaned slightly forward. "Please, Mother. Please try to convince her to come to me. Tell her that I need to see her..." She paused and coughed, her dry throat unaccustomed to talking so much.

"Anton, stop; you mustn't get yourself upset-" Marina began to protest.

Wincing as a jolt of pain shot through her body, Anton ignored her mother and continued, her blue eyes pleading. "*Please*, just tell her...tell her that her Lord requests an audience with her...*demand*s it! Make her understand that I won't take no for an answer!" She began to cough again.

Irritated, Marina reached out and gently pushed Anton's shoulders back until she slumped against the bed's headboard. Sighing, Marina looked at her daughter, determination clearly reflected in eyes so much like her own. "I shall tell Gwynneth these things," she said as she rose from the side of the bed, "But I can make no guarantees. Gwynneth has been very willful and unreceptive. I doubt she will listen to anything I say."

Anton nodded. "I understand, but please...please try."

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Marina knocked on the heavy wood door of Gwynneth's chambers. As usual, there was no reply, and as usual, Marina entered anyway.

The room was quiet and dark, save a solitary candle that was nearly burned down to nothing. Gwynneth was curled on her side, her cloudy eyes half-lidded as they stared unblinking into the blackness. A tray of untouched food sat on small table beside the bed.

Marina drew a deep breath and released it slowly, girding herself for another one-sided battle of wills. She began walking around the room, helping herself and lighting a few more candles as she went. Alice appeared to be keeping things tidied up, which pleased the older Lady. *Now if only she could prod Gwynneth into talking, then I'd be duly impressed*, she thought with a twist of her lips.

The Marchioness Dowager fiddled with the last candle, trying to formulate some way to goad Gwynneth into talking. She wondered if perhaps the direct approach would be best; it was what she preferred, of course. She saw no need for dancing around the point, which was, in Marina's mind, that Gwynneth needed to emerge from her self-imposed exile and return to her role as Lady of Weldon Manor.

Turning toward the bed, Marina cleared her throat. "You need to eat, Gwynneth. If not for yourself, then at least for the child." She got no response from the lump on the bed. She walked up to the side. "Anton is asking for you. He would very much like to speak with you." Still no reply. Marina sighed impatiently, "You can't hide in here and pretend to be a deaf mute forever, Gwynneth. You've had ample time to recuperate, now you need to rejoin the rest of us."

Marina's voice was grating to Gwynneth's ears, and she closed her eyes, wishing the older woman would just go away. For days, her mother-in-law had been popping in to check up on her, always talking at her and prodding her, never offering support or reassurance in any way, and never ever being silent. In Gwynneth's mind, the agreeable relationship she thought she'd been building with Marina had dissolved into nothingness. The woman was apparently back to being her foe rather than her ally, and she was obviously intent on continuing her verbal barrages until she got a response. Hearing Marina refer to Anton as 'he' made her frown. She wondered how the woman could let the improper gender slip from her mouth so easily. *Years of practice*, she thought, feeling a slight flare of anger. Sighing, Gwynneth expelled a long breath and reopened her eyes. She supposed she was going to have to talk to her mother-in-law sooner or later.

Unaware of Gwynneth's thoughts, Marina continued her tirade. "It's certainly understandable that you've needed time to think and rest. Lord knows we all did." she turned and began to walk around the bed. "Victor says that you're doing much better, and that you've been up and about." She stopped at the foot of the bed and looked squarely at Gwynneth. "I daresay that your lying-in period should cease, Gwynneth. You need to get back into the flow of things. You are the Lady of this House, and it is time for you to return to your duties and roles."

Gwynneth finally sat up and sighed again before looking up at Marina. She held the older woman's gaze for a moment before clearing her throat. "I've been thinking that perhaps I should not continue in the role of Lady of the House." Her voice was quiet and tentative, but Marina's brow raised with obvious surprise. "I think that perhaps I should just...leave."

The two women locked eyes. Marina was nearly speechless. She couldn't believe that Gwynneth would actually consider leaving. "You can't be serious."

Gwynneth stared back at her, "Yes, My Lady, I am. Very much so." She hesitated for a moment before explaining, "Sir Richard is in the process of securing and restoring Clarendon on my behalf. After the baby is born, I can go and live there." Gwynneth's voice trembled slightly. She wasn't sure what kind of reaction she'd get from Lady Marina, but she knew it wouldn't be pleasant. When the older woman just stared at her, she continued somberly, "I think, at this point, it would be the best thing."

"Best for whom!" Marina snapped.

Gwynneth was expecting anger, at the very least. She drew a deep breath, steeling herself for battle. "For everyone." She looked up at Marina, "I cannot stay here, My Lady. Surely you were expecting this. Surely you are not surprised."

"Yes I *am* surprised!" Marina walked closer to the blonde. "I am surprised that you would abandon your child! I am surprised that you would turn a coward's cheek and run away! I am surprised that you would give up so easily!" She glared harshly, "I must say, I am disappointed in you, Gwynneth. I thought you would fight harder."

Gwynneth looked back at her in stunned dismay. "What is there to fight for? A situation that I don't understand? A child that will not be mine? A mate whom I don't even *know*? A life that I don't *want*?" Her voice began to grow louder as her dismay quickly turned to anger. "You've made it clear that this child will not belong to me...you've made it clear that if I stay here, I must live a lie. Well I *cannot* live a lie, My Lady! I cannot find *comfort* with it the way you and your *'son'* apparently have!"

Marina lunged forward, leaning menacingly close, "I have already explained the reasons for the lie! You will *not* sit there and accuse us of weaving a web of deceit simply for folly or self *comfort*!" She nearly screamed the words as anger filled her. Gwynneth shied away from her and Marina backed off, taking a moment to compose herself again before she completely lost control.

Once she had calmed, the older Lady continued, her voice quiet but stern, "You look at me, and you tell me that you never, *ever*, loved Anton."

Gwynneth opened her mouth to protest, but knew that she could not, just as Marina knew she could not.

"He loved you, Gwynneth, and you loved him." Marina spoke the words slowly, but her fiery eyes held the blonde firmly. "And now, suddenly, you think that love is simply...gone? Now you think you're prepared to leave here without trying to sort through things? Without giving Anton a chance? Without even *speaking* to him?" Gwynneth just continued to stare as Marina paused and drew away further, standing to her full height. "How dare you." Her voice was low and biting. "How dare you stab him in the back and desert him, just when he needs you the most!" Gwynneth's mouth dropped open at that. "He has given you *so* much...he has taken care of you

and treated you with nothing but love and kindness, and this is how you repay him? By turning your back and running away? Shame on you!"

Unable to remain quiet, Gwynneth exploded, "Shame on *me*?!" she squirmed to the edge of the bed and hopped off, standing defiantly before Marina, "I am not the one who *lied*! I am not the one who concealed and pretended and *deceived*! You stand here and continue to say 'he, he, *he*' and persist with the lie, *still*! Shame on me? ...I think *not*!"

Both women stared at each other for a moment, caustic thoughts and words tumbling around inside their anger-filled minds. Finally Marina lifted her chin and glared at the blonde, "You know, if it were up to me, I'd let you go." Gwynneth narrowed her eyes at the Lady. "I'd strip you of your titles and dowries and send you far away from here with nothing but the clothes on your back. Such lack of gratitude...such selfishness and ignorance. If it were up to me, I would see to it that you had *nothing* to do with Weldon whatsoever."

"I don't *need* titles and dowries, and I don't *want* anything to do with Weldon!" Gwynneth retorted angrily.

"Oh you'll want it. When you're struggling to put food on the table and make ends meet at Clarendon...when you're getting invaded and attacked by raiders...then you'll think differently. Then you'll realize how easy you've had it here."

"Nothing about my life here has been easy, My Lady...*nothing*."

"Leaving won't be easy either, my dear." Marina smirked with superiority and arched an eyebrow high, "As I said, if it were up to me, I'd gladly let you go. But it isn't up to me, you see. It is up to Anton." she stared hard at Gwynneth, "And Anton will *never* let you go."

Gwynneth's anger doubled. She could feel her ears burning red with rage. She'd had enough of the Lady's threats. "We shall *see* about that." She fairly growled before turning away from Marina and marching out of her bedroom chambers.

Once Gwynneth had left the room, Marina expelled a deep, exhausted breath. Once again, she'd had to play dirty, and once again, she'd hated it. However, it had worked. By goading Gwynneth into a heated argument and pinning her back against a wall, she'd spurred the young woman into action at last. It was easy for Gwynneth to think dire thoughts and make abrupt decisions when not confronted by Anton, but once she saw Anton awake and lucid, Marina was sure Gwynneth would change her mind. Unless she had misjudged the young blonde terribly, Marina felt certain that Gwynneth would not have the heart to leave Anton, no matter what truths she knew. If Gwynneth's love and devotion was as strong as Marina suspected, her resolve to run away would crumble once she'd seen and spoken to Anton.

At least, this was what Marina was banking on. If her strategy failed, she would have one very unhappy daughter on her hands.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Gwynneth stood outside Anton's door for several moments. Her mind had been so filled with angry thoughts; she hadn't considered that she would actually be face to face with the woman who was her husband. Now that she was here, she wasn't sure she was prepared for it. As much as the Lady Marina had infuriated her, Gwynneth was forced to admit that some of what the older woman had said was true. *I've got to face Anton. As much as I'd prefer to simply run away, he does deserve more than that.* She frowned for a moment, ... *'He', or 'She'?* She shook her head, *God above, I don't even know how to think.* Drawing in a deep breath, Gwynneth willed herself to be calm as she slowly pushed the heavy wood door open and stepped inside. Closing it behind her, she took a moment to look around.

The room was dark and dreary, a few burned-down candles providing little light. The canopy drapes were partially drawn around the bed, and Gwynneth could not see much. Biting her bottom lip, she stood and contemplated indecisively before finally forcing herself to walk toward the bed with stiff steps. Nearly paralyzed with anxiety, Gwynneth held her breath as Anton fully came into her view.

The Marquess was asleep, his eyes closed and his mouth parted slightly. Gwynneth unsteadily released her breath and closed her eyes. When she reopened them, all she could do was stare.

Anton's face was ashen and gaunt. Cuts and bruises marred the skin, and dark circles lurked beneath both eyes. One arm rested across a sunken stomach, and Gwynneth was shocked at the bony hand and pallid skin tone. *My God...so pale...he's so pale and frail,* Gwynneth thought, her mouth opening but remaining silent. At that moment, it was difficult for her to think of her husband as a woman. Standing there looking at the figure on the bed, Gwynneth could only see the man she thought she once knew. *And thought I loved,* she considered. *Why...why did this have to happen?* The young Lady's mind began to race. *Why did all of this have to happen?*

Tears began to fill her eyes as they strayed down to Anton's hand. Noticing that something was clasped in his fingers, Gwynneth bent down to get a closer look. It was the necklace - the necklace with the locket of her hair which she'd given to Anton before he left for that fateful battle.

"Oh!" The quiet cry unexpectedly escaped Gwynneth's lips, and she quickly clapped a hand over her mouth. Tears began to gush from her eyes and she stepped back away from the bed.

She had come to Anton's room feeling like a tormented captive, ready to do battle with her so-called husband and demand freedom from a situation and a life she could not tolerate. But now, looking at Anton's pathetic, frail countenance, and seeing how he literally held on to the memory of what they once shared, Gwynneth felt her resolve waver. She continued to cry as she stood back from the bed, feeling more confused than ever.

As she stared at Anton, Gwynneth began to ask herself the same questions again. *How could he*

be a 'she'? How could I not have known? How could I not have seen it? Not have felt it? How could he have done this to me!

She wanted to blame someone. She wanted to be angry with a person on whom she could unleash her despair and get it out of her system. She wanted to blame Anton, but now, watching as the young Lord lay sick and motionless on the bed, Gwynneth knew that she could not direct her fury toward him. Calming herself again, Gwynneth approached the bed, this time carefully sitting down on the side. She began to consider things, her eyes never leaving Anton's ashen face as she recalled Marina's many words and explanations.

It hadn't been Anton's fault; he'd had no control over it, really. His parents had forced his destiny upon him. And the marriage had been forced too; Anton had not wanted to marry. He had fought against it, according to Marina. But despite that, Gwynneth considered, Anton had been good to her. He had treated her fairly, gently, behaving more like a lover than a husband. Gwynneth felt her cheeks flush at the thought of what a wonderful lover Anton had indeed been. She could not deny that. Gwynneth closed her eyes, thinking yet again, *but how could I not have known?*

Gwynneth had to marvel at how Anton managed to pull off such a lie so well, and for so long. She gazed at Anton's youthful face, sharply etched cheekbones and perfect lips. She remembered the smoothness, the softness, and how amazed she'd been every time she'd brushed her lips against her husband's. She thought about how Anton never removed his clothes, nor had he encouraged or allowed Gwynneth to do so. Of course it all made sense now, but Gwynneth couldn't help but wonder how and why she didn't question it at the time. How could she have been so blind?

Because I loved him, she answered herself immediately. I loved him, and I trusted him. He was my husband, and although I was uncertain at first, I did fall in love with him. It seemed impossible now, yet as the memory of the feelings began to come back to her, Gwynneth knew she could not deny how she had felt. He loved me too. We cared for each other, deeply...we were happy...we were so happy. Why did things have to turn out this way? It isn't fair!

She drew a deep breath and released it slowly. She suddenly felt deeply weary and immensely sad. Shaking her head, Gwynneth closed her eyes as more tears trickled down her cheeks. When she opened her eyes again, she ran her eyes all over Anton's figure. A small surge of warm intensity rushed through her, and she could not refute that somehow, in some way, Anton still affected her. *But how could that be?*

She began to wonder if it was possible for her to still care for Anton. Could his gender not make a difference, as Marina had suggested? Could it just be a biological matter of physical constitution, and nothing more? Gwynneth shook her head and closed her eyes again. *I don't see how that could be possible. I know he's a woman...how would I ever get past that!*

Opening her eyes again, she gazed at Anton's face, so serene and innocent looking. Gwynneth remembered all the sweet, considerate things he'd done for her. How he doted on her, so attentive and protective. He'd been good to her, truly. It would have been so incredibly horrible if she'd ended up with Aldred. Gwynneth shivered at that thought. Anton had turned out to be everything

that Aldred wasn't, in many, many ways. She remembered being so frightened that first night, when they were wed. She was so afraid that Anton would be like Aldred: hurtful, rough, uncaring and cruel. But Anton wasn't like that. He was calm and gentle...and passionate. Gwynneth felt her cheeks flush again and she shook her head in an attempt to forget her rampaging thoughts, but alas, she could not escape them.

Memories filled her head. She thought of Anton's eyes whenever he came to her with passion on his mind. The dark look of arousal in her husband's beautiful blue eyes would fill Gwynneth with such overwhelming feelings. And she loved his touch upon her flesh. He was so gentle, careful and solicitous. His touch could make Gwynneth feel a hundred different things, all of them wonderful.

Gwynneth recalled their mutual passion the night before Anton left for war. It had been so amazing and beautiful. Anton had touched her and made love to her with more intensity than ever. But then, Anton always made love; it was never just an abrupt sexual coupling. He never used her or rutted against her harshly without feeling, like so many men did. With Anton it was real and true. It was really quite ironic...and yet Gwynneth could not deny that she had loved it. She loved the feel of her husband's touch; his mouth and body upon her, his arms around her, and his hands and fingers on her and in her. Gwynneth's face grew hot as she recalled just how much she enjoyed what her husband did to her and with her. She remembered how they kissed and how Anton held her and smiled at her and told her how beautiful she was. At first Gwynneth had thought it incredibly unusual for a husband to say such things to his wife. But of course, it all made sense now.

Anton was not a man. A man would never treat her the way that Anton did. A man would never love her the way that Anton had. And Anton did love her. Gwynneth remembered her husband's face when he'd said the words to her that passion-filled night before he left for battle. He'd been so sincere, and she had been too, when she'd said it to him. *I did love him...I did.* Gwynneth closed her eyes as more tears ran down her face. *But now...?* She was so confused.

She recalled more of that night before the battle. She remembered the dread and fear she'd felt, and she remembered the two of them talking about hopes and secrets: *"...If I could, I would tell you everything, my beloved. Every detail...my whole life story...one day I truly hope that I am able to lay everything at your feet. Please believe that..."* Anton had said to her. Gwynneth shook her head as she recalled the pained look on her husband's face when he'd spoken those words. *Had he really wanted to tell me the truth?* She could only wonder.

Gwynneth's eyes flickered all over Anton's body as she thought about how badly he had been injured. It truly was a miracle that he had survived, and she was thankful for that. Her feelings were mixed up, but she was sincerely grateful that her husband was alive.

My husband, she thought, *can he be my husband if he is really a she?* Gwynneth drew a deep breath and released it. Staring at Anton's face again, she bit her lip and hesitantly reached out to finger a lock of dark hair. Her fingertips brushed Anton's forehead, and her heart clenched as she felt cool, clammy skin. A shiver of horror raced through her and she realized, quite suddenly, how sick Anton still was, and how easily he could take a downward turn.

Gwynneth remembered how much she had feared something happening to Anton, and how absolutely devastated she was to hear that he had indeed been injured. She had thought once that if he died, she would surely die too - she loved him and needed him that much. Gwynneth closed her eyes, feeling further confusion.

Thinking about Anton's wounds, she recalled not only how horrible they were, but who was responsible for them. She shuddered to think that her own brother had actually tried to kill her husband. *Not just my husband, but a woman!* It seemed extra horrific, somehow, that Gerrod tried to murder a woman - not that he, or anyone, knew that Anton was a woman, and not that Anton was helpless or weak in any way - quite the opposite, really - but to think that a group of men would so brutally maim a woman just seemed extra inhumane in Gwynneth's mind.

How could anyone intentionally try to harm Anton? Anton, who has been so good to me when he had every right to be anything but. Gwynneth shook her head, thinking about Anton's true identity, *She's a woman who's been forced to live life as a man...forced to live a lie, and then forced to marry and live another lie. How has he kept from going insane? How has he kept from hating everyone around him?*

Gwynneth wondered if perhaps Anton would hate her now, now that she knew the truth. Their relationship could never and would never be the same. Everything had changed so dramatically, so irretrievably. She couldn't even fathom what the future might be like.

For a fleeting moment though, she felt the urge to reach out and stroke Anton's face and touch his soft skin. She missed touching her husband. She even thought that she felt an urge to lean down and kiss him. *What would it be like? Would it be any different now that I know the truth?* Suddenly realizing what she was thinking and feeling, Gwynneth blinked her eyes and shook her head, trying to chase the uninvited musings away.

A quiet moan and some slight movement from Anton halted all of Gwynneth's thoughts. She froze instantly, fearful that Anton would awaken. She suddenly realized she wasn't ready for that, not yet. She still had too many unresolved feelings to sort through.

As soon as Anton stilled, Gwynneth slowly rose from the bed. As she stood, she again looked down upon her husband. The bruises and cuts on his battered face made Gwynneth's heart ache. Anton never deserved this. *...And he doesn't deserve to have you abandon him, either.* Gwynneth bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut as they began to burn with still more tears.

Having resolved nothing and feeling even more conflicted, Gwynneth abruptly turned away and walked to the door. Jerking it open, she fled the room quickly, not yet ready to confront the woman who was her husband.

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[Continued in Part 14](#)

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Feedback? a_k_naten@yahoo.com

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~ Second Son ~

by [A. K. Naten](#)

*** Yes, I know, it's been too long, and I'm not even going to try to explain. I'm back to writing, and that's what's important, eh? You might want to go and read the re-post of Part 13. I've made a few corrections, plus it'll refresh your memory a bit. Thanks for hanging in there with me; I really appreciate it. ***

For disclaimers, etc., see [The Intro](#).

PART FOURTEEN

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Anton dreamt of her. She could sense her presence; a warm, loving sensation that filled her with peace. She could smell her scent; the light, pleasant lingering of lavender and wildflowers that always clung to her soft skin and golden hair. She imagined her voice; the smooth, soothing tones and melodious ripples of her girlish laughter. She pictured her face; so gentle and innocent, so open and friendly, as though she constantly kissed everyone she spoke to. And her eyes...so deep and revealing. One look into those beautiful oceanic eyes always told Anton everything Gwynneth was thinking.

...I need to see her.

Anton slowly opened her eyes, wishing fervently that her wife would be standing at her bedside. But alas, as her vision cleared, she found that she was alone. It was still dark, and only the soft howling of the wind could be heard in the silence. She sighed, feeling frustrated, and lonely.

The Marquess was beginning to get stir-crazy. It was driving her mad to lie here in her room, immobile and unaware of anything outside her chamber door. She received 'reports' from her mother, but she was tired of that. Her mother repeatedly dodged her questions about Gwynneth, giving only excuses instead of answers. The only thing she would say is that the young Lady was dreadfully unhappy and wished to leave Weldon, which saddened Anton greatly.

Even though she realized Gwynneth had to be extremely upset, Anton still found it hard to imagine that the young woman would really and truly want to leave. She supposed Gwynneth's confusion and anger were great, but she was pregnant and due with a child at any moment; surely she couldn't expect to just pick up and move away? Her mother had said that Gwynneth remained sullen and uncommunicative, but were things really so bad that the young Lady felt she needed to leave everything and everyone so urgently? Anton didn't want to believe it, didn't want to believe what her mother told her. So, she decided she would no longer trust what she could not see with her own eyes nor hear with her own ears. She would not believe what her mother told her about Gwynneth; she would only believe it if she heard it herself.

I can no longer live in a world of make-believe, Anton thought. And I can't be a fool any longer. I can't rely on what others tell me.

Her fingers massaged the tiny braid of Gwynneth's hair, still miraculously in her possession, as she considered how foolish she'd been.

I have been naive and careless, and I have trusted too much. I put faith in false allies and silly superstitions that said a snippet of hair would keep me safe and make everything all right. I believed I could live a lie and get away with it. Now everything is ruined. The happy life that I once had is gone. Anton's eyes welled with tears and she closed them. I must get out of this bed...I must see Gwynneth...I have to convince her that we can work things out.

She drew a deep breath and released it as she began to mentally devise a plan that would allow her to get out of bed long enough to see her wife.

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Marina marched down the long corridor, her brisk footsteps taking her directly to her daughter-in-law's chambers. With no preamble, she burst through the door, startling Gwynneth, who was sitting at her writing table, her inked quill poised in mid-sentence.

"Well, I hope you're *satisfied*." Marina angrily snapped as she came to stand in front of the surprised blonde.

Gwynneth frowned, annoyed with the rude intrusion and the woman before her. "Whatever are you talking about?"

"In a ridiculous attempt to get out of bed so that he could come and see *YOU*, Anton took a dreadful fall!"

Blue-green eyes widened and Gwynneth's mouth opened, but no sound came forth.

"Because you have refused to go and speak to him, he got it in his mind that *he* had to come to you. And now he's re-injured himself. So...I hope you're *satisfied*!" Marina's voice was snarling.

Gwynneth's temper flared and she tossed her quill aside. "What would *satisfy* me, My Lady, is

for you to stop attacking me and leave me *alone!*"

Marina stepped closer, "This is what you have to say for yourself? I tell you that your husband has been badly hurt, and all you can say is 'leave me alone'?" her voice was incredulous, "What kind of person are you! What kind of *wife* are you?!"

Gwynneth bolted out of the chair, "I am the kind of person who will *not* be blamed for people and things which are out of my control! And since it seems to have slipped your mind, let me remind you that *nothing* around here is within my control, My Lady - *NOTHING!*" Her voice echoed loudly off the room's stone walls and Marina actually took a step backwards. She had not expected such vehemence from the little blonde.

The two women stared at each other for a moment until Gwynneth could no longer stand. She shook her head and collapsed back into the chair, tears immediately flooding her eyes. Covering her face with her hands, she began to weep.

Marina closed her eyes, bringing a hand to her forehead. Things just seemed to keep getting more complicated and more dreadful. Her hand slid down to her mouth and she opened her eyes, looking upon her daughter-in-law's pathetic, sobbing form. As much as the older woman hated to admit it, what Gwynneth said was true; nothing was within anyone's control, it seemed.

She felt for the young woman, truly, but things didn't have to be as bad as Gwynneth made them out to be. *If only she would heed my advice and listen to reason!* Marina thought. It frustrated her beyond belief that she could not control or dissuade Gwynneth's actions and reactions. The little blonde was infuriatingly willful and surprisingly resilient. She confounded Marina, which only served to fuel her frustration.

Marina was angry that Anton had been so brutally attacked; she was angry that their grand secret had been exposed; she was angry that Gwynneth was being so retaliatory, and she was angry that she could do nothing about any of it. If she were honest with herself, Marina would have to admit that this was what really had her most distressed: that she was not in control. In a sudden burst of lucidity, she realized that she and Gwynneth were upset about the very same thing: Neither one of them had control. A wave of sad irony washed over Marina, and she suddenly felt as though she might burst into tears as well.

But she knew that she could not give up on the situation. Marina remained convinced that Gwynneth still loved Anton. She just needed to help her realize it. The older woman decided that a change of tactics was in order. Gwynneth obviously was not going to respond to force, so perhaps a softer, more emotional approach would work. The two women had been friendly before; maybe Gwynneth would respond if Marina simply dropped her defenses and appealed to her with honesty, as a friend, and a mother.

The Marchioness Dowager drew a deep breath and released it noisily, gathering her calm and her nerve. Finding another chair, she pulled it over and sat down beside her distraught daughter-in-law. Marina sighed, "Gwynneth," she began quietly, "this insanity must cease. The way you and I have become with one another...it's so unpleasant. I detest it. I detest it, and...I apologize for it."

Marina watched the blonde carefully, but got no response. She sighed unsteadily, her hands twisting in her lap as she continued, "I have blamed much of this dilemma on you, and I have released my frustrations upon you. This is wrong of me...I know it. I...I must apologize to you."

Gwynneth finally dropped her hands away from her face and looked at Marina with wary, red-rimmed eyes.

"Anton means everything to me...*everything*. I'll do whatever it takes to protect him...to protect *her*. I always have, and I always shall. She is my *child*, Gwynneth. She was special before, but she is *extraordinarily* special now, because she is all I have left." Marina's voice wavered uncharacteristically and tears quickly flooded her deep blue eyes. "Can you understand that?" A droplet broke free and dribbled down her cheek, "Can you?"

Gwynneth still eyed Marina, her eyebrows furrowed with suspicion. "I do understand, My Lady, but you'll forgive me if I don't entirely trust your tears."

Marina gave a rueful snort and nodded, "I know this. I know I have been *dreadful* to you...inexcusably dreadful." She looked squarely at the blonde, "But I do apologize. I have no explanation except to say that my fierce need to protect Anton clouded my mind and skewed my judgment where you were concerned." Gwynneth still regarded her silently. "I realize that the one who should take the blame is me." Marina shrugged her shoulders. "Anton was injured, and in my mind, you were adding to his injuries by denouncing and denying him...by saying that you wanted to leave him. My reaction was purely instinctive. I could only see that you did not care."

Gwynneth's eyes began to fill again. "I did care," her voice wobbled, "and I care now, I just...I just..." Her mouth opened but the words would not come. She had no voice for her thoughts when it came to her convoluted feelings about Anton. Tears spilled from her eyes and she whispered pathetically, "...I *do* care."

Marina reached out and touched her arm, "Then don't *leave*." Gwynneth drew a shaky breath and look at her mother-in-law. "I don't blame you for feeling confused and angry, Gwynneth - truly I do not - but don't just give up. Don't turn your back on Anton. *Please*."

Marina's eyes held her beseechingly, and Gwynneth felt her walls of strength weakening further.

"He *needs* you. He needs his wife."

Gwynneth exhaled sharply and closed her eyes, "But I don't know if I can be a *wife* to...him." The words nearly stuck in her throat. "I don't think I can live the lie that you want me to live!" The strength of her voice increased as her conviction rose, "Anton deserves to have someone who can make him *happy*." Gwynneth stared at Marina, shaking her head slowly, "And I don't think I can be that someone." More tears clouded her vision and she fought to keep them at bay. "If I were to leave, perhaps...perhaps he could find someone else-"

"Anton doesn't want you to leave."

"He may think so now, but what happens when he realizes that I can no longer devote myself to him? He will grow weary of me, and there will come a time when he will wish to replace me with someone who can fulfill his...needs." Gwynneth's cheeks reddened as she stumbled to express her intimate fears.

"That time will never come." Marina shook her head, "*You* are the one who fulfills his needs. No other could take your place."

Gwynneth dropped her eyes and shook her head, "I don't think I shall be able to *fulfill* anything, My Lady." She glanced up again, "And when Anton realizes this, I do not expect that he will want me still." Her voice dropped lower, "I do not expect that he will love me still."

Marina leaned forward and touched her arm again, "Don't you think you're making decisions a bit prematurely, dear? You haven't given anything, or anyone, a chance just yet. You're making far too many assumptions and judgments." She leaned in further, forcing Gwynneth to lock eyes with her, "Anton *loves* you, Gwynneth...he'll continue to love you, just as he always has. Just as *you* loved him."

Gwynneth squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head, "No...whatever love I felt is *gone*. Don't you understand? It's gone, along with the *man* I thought I married!"

"But that man *isn't* gone, Gwynneth; he is still alive! Alive and well inside Anton's heart and soul!" Marina searched the young Lady's face. She could see that Gwynneth was uncertain and torn. She had to press onward. "It is true that he is not a man, physically, on the outside, but it is not true that he is someone different on the inside. He is the same person he always was. You are the one who thinks differently, Gwynneth. You see Anton now with different eyes, but he sees you just as he always has. His feelings for you have not changed."

Gwynneth looked at Marina with doubt, shaking her head. "*Everything* has changed, My Lady. Everything is different now, whether he cares to accept it or not."

"It is different only in a physical sense, Gwynneth. If you would only look beyond Anton's body...if you would look inside him, into his heart, you would see that the same person you loved still resides there...waiting for you."

Tears spilled down Gwynneth's cheeks and she shook her head again and turned away. Her emotions teetered dangerously on the brink of utter collapse. She pushed herself up off the chair and regarded Marina mournfully, "I...I can't, My Lady. I just...*can't*." she whispered, tears continuing to spill from her eyes as she turned and began to walk away.

Marina shot up from her chair and quickly reached out to grasp Gwynneth's arm, turning her back to face her, "I find it so terribly tragic that you seem to feel you must pull away and punish Anton, and yourself, just when the two of you need each other the most." Gwynneth's mouth dropped open and she stared as Marina continued, "When you feared that your beloved husband had been killed, you broke down, nearly losing your mind as your heart was plucked from your chest and torn asunder! Do you remember?" Gwynneth could only blink her response. "And

then, by some miracle, we found out that Anton was alive. He came back to you...*for* you! How can you even *think* about stabbing him so brutally in the back?"

Gwynneth twisted her arm out of Marina's grasp, "I am thinking no such thing!" Her voice was tremulous even though she tried to look assured.

"Liar," Marina sniffed. "You plainly speak of leaving - if you do, you'll drive a stake right into his back and straight through his heart. Such an injury would do more damage than any battle wound ever could. You will *destroy* him, and you know it." She glared at the younger woman, but Gwynneth's eyes held firm. "The way you've been behaving makes me think that you're trying to destroy yourself too. I wonder if perhaps you wished for your body to lie rotting in a grave, like your brother's."

"I wish nothing of the kind!" Gwynneth finally snapped, her eyes flashing, angry and incensed. "And don't you dare speak to me about my brother! He was a villainous traitor! A soulless killer with a black heart! I am *nothing* like my brother!"

"No, my dear, you aren't." Marina's voice calmed and quieted. "You have a beautiful heart. A kind, loving, compassionate heart. What a pity it is that you should allow it to turn black and barren."

Gwynneth scowled at the older woman, her voice indignant, "You stand here and speak to me as though you know my heart. But how could you? You only see a heart as something to be lied to and bandied about like some sort of play-thing. Well it *isn't!*"

"No, you're right, it isn't. But it also isn't a lifeless corpse to be buried deep within the ground." Marina gently laid her hand over Gwynneth's heart, which beat rapidly. Gwynneth gasped slightly in surprise, her eyes widening at her mother-in-law's unexpected touch. "How alive your heart is, Gwynneth," Marina said softly. "How alive and full of love, understanding and forgiveness." She looked at the young woman pleadingly, "Will you not give it a chance? Will you not give Anton a chance? Or will you simply allow your beautiful heart to become empty and withered?"

As the older woman's words struck a chord within her, Gwynneth's eyes welled with hot tears. "The only empty place I have is the one that weeps for my husband's loving touch," she said, her voice quiet and unsteady.

Marina shook her head, regarding her daughter-in-law incredulously. "But that touch *still* exists, Gwynneth! It is waiting to bestow itself on you, if only you'll allow it. If you could just look past the physical disparities and peer inside...you would find that things are the same. Nothing has to change!"

Gwynneth squeezed her eyes shut as the tears began to course down her face again. She shook her head, bringing her hands up to hold her head in surrender. "Enough...enough, please! I am tired of this torment...I am *so* tired!" Her voice was an anguished whisper, and Marina's heart constricted with sympathy.

The Marchioness Dowager's sigh was deep and sad. She brought a hand up to rub at her forehead, supposing that she would have to concede defeat. ...But only momentarily.

Leaning in close, Marina whispered in Gwynneth's ear, "Go to Anton...speak with him...give him a chance...give yourself a chance. That is all I ask." She didn't wait for a response as she turned and left Gwynneth in the solitary silence of her room.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

For several days and nights, Gwynneth drove herself mad with thoughts. She considered everything Marina had said, she considered the past, she considered the future, and still, nothing made any sense to her. She found herself staring at her wedding ring quite often. She would often sit and stare at the smooth, polished metal, spinning in around her finger, even taking it off now and then, imaging what it would be like if she went away and simply disappeared.

She had to admit that the idea of being on her own was quite frightening. She had come to love Weldon and its people; her leaving would be from necessity only. But, she continually asked herself, would it be absolutely necessary? What if things didn't turn out as terrible as she'd been imagining? What if she could make amends enough to arrive at some kind of understanding with Anton, and life returned to near-normalcy? Could that even be a possibility? Could they perhaps attain some sort of amicable, platonic relationship and continue to live together at Weldon - or would he insist that she continue to serve as his wife, in every way? This was what troubled her most. Would Anton demand things from her that she could not give? She didn't want to believe that he would, but she really had no way of knowing. The future held so many uncertainties. The only way she could get some answers was to speak to Anton, and that thought unnerved Gwynneth to her very core.

She had snuck in to see her husband several times, however, she'd made sure each time that he was asleep before entering his line of vision and approaching the bed. She didn't touch him or sit beside him as she did before; she would simply stand and look at him for a few silent moments, thinking, remembering and wondering before turning and leaving as quietly as she entered. Gwynneth supposed it was cowardly of her to sneak around in such a way, but she just wasn't ready to speak to Anton. Not just yet. Really, she wasn't even sure if the visits were doing her good or harm, for after every visit, she felt no clarity or resolution. The only thing she ever seemed to feel was uncertainty and lingering sense of betrayal.

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Night fell swiftly as a rainstorm blew in, enshrouding the manor in damp darkness and vibrating the walls now and then with a deep rumble of thunder.

Gwynneth sat in her room, reading by the light of a few flickering candles. She had been looking back through her journals, reading what she'd written about her life and her husband. Looking

over things now, with newly changed feelings and an altered perception, Gwynneth was surprised at how obvious she had been about her devotion to Anton. She had written freely of her happiness and her love for him...and she'd written of her fear of losing him. Reading over the latter entries, when Anton had gone off to war, Gwynneth recalled her terrible worries and fears. And, she remembered the pain and madness she'd felt when she learned that she'd nearly lost him.

One journal entry in particular was especially painful. She'd written it after she'd learned that Anton had been hurt, yet did not know whether he lived or died. The way it read made it seem like a heart-wrenching elegy, and Gwynneth's heart constricted as a wave of sad recollection washed over her.

Another entry was about the troublesome dream she'd had over and over. After reading it, Gwynneth realized how strangely prophetic that dream had been. She had dreamt that Anton had been killed, but she'd also dreamt of a ghostly, spectral woman - a woman, perhaps, who symbolized Anton's true self. It left Gwynneth feeling perplexed, just as it had before, and she found herself wondering: had she somehow suspected, perhaps subconsciously, that Anton was a woman all along? Had she suspected, but pushed it aside, denying and refusing to even give it one moment of conscious thought? She knew she had found Anton peculiar in some ways, but had she ever had doubts about his sexuality? She didn't remember ever thinking that. Was it possible to deny and bury a doubt so thoroughly that you couldn't even remember having it? She didn't know.

Sighing aloud, Gwynneth felt her eyes fill with tears of frustration again. She squeezed them shut, feeling a trickle of wet warmth dribble down her cheeks. It seemed as though her confusion would never end. She didn't know why she was reading through her journal; it seemed like she was just torturing herself. But really, Gwynneth knew that she was searching - searching for a way to convince herself or prove to herself that she still felt something for Anton...that she could still love him.

Every time she went to visit Anton, she'd stare at him, waiting for some great flood of emotion to overwhelm her and wash away the anger and doubts she had. But that never happened. When she looked at him lying on his bed, covered up with clothes or blankets, she saw her husband. But, beneath the fabric, hidden from view, was someone different. Yes, Anton was still the same person on the inside, of that Gwynneth was certain - It was the person on the outside that she had difficulty coming to terms with. It was the image of a female body that lingered in the back of her mind, rekindling her uncertainties and reminding her of the betrayal.

Gwynneth sniffled and wiped at her eyes, resolving to stop crying and calm down. It was dark and she was so tired. She returned the letters to their hiding place, thinking that she should just go to bed. Hearing a distant rumble of thunder, she wondered if Anton was awake. Her husband always awoke when it stormed, and she remembered him remarking once that he loved the sound of rain and thunder. She smiled softly as she recalled the times when the two of them would lie awake in bed, holding each other in tender silence while listening to the pattering of the rain. Those quiet times had been some of her favorite moments with him.

She wondered if she could sneak in and see Anton before retiring for the night. *Perhaps just for a moment*, she thought as she turned and exited her room.

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Anton's room was very dark when Gwynneth entered. She closed the door as quietly as possible and crept further inside. Hesitantly peering around the partially open canopy, Gwynneth saw that Anton was asleep. She stood for a moment, her eyes taking in and absorbing each and every detail, as she always did.

The Marquess was still quite pale and frail looking. Remembering how much blood he'd lost, Gwynneth wondered if he would ever fully regain his health. It was such a shame. Anton had been one of the most active, healthy, robust people she knew. And now, knowing that Anton was a woman, Gwynneth was even more amazed at Anton's strengths and abilities. What a tragedy it would be to see such vitality wither away.

Gwynneth's gaze drifted as she pondered, and she was unaware of the eyes that fluttered and opened before her. When Anton's head moved slightly, Gwynneth looked back, gasping in surprise and jerking backward just a bit. Her instinct was to turn and flee, but for some reason, she couldn't make herself move. Something in those glassy, empty depths held her there, and she could only hold her breath. Anton's light blue eyes were so pale they appeared almost silver in the dim light of the room, and his expression was one of mild confusion as the two of them stared at each other for a moment.

Slowly, Anton's mind began to register that she wasn't dreaming; Gwynneth really was here with her. She blinked her eyes and her mouth fell open, but no words ushered forth; she could only stare. Gwynneth glanced away for a moment, unnerved by Anton's wide-eyed appraisal. The discomfort in Gwynneth's countenance was obvious, but Anton still found her lovely. Lovely, but weary, for the Lord couldn't help but notice her wife's washed-out, hollow-eyed appearance. The thought of Gwynneth suffering in any way pierced Anton's heart, and she immediately wished she could just hold the younger woman and soothe her troubles away. But she knew she couldn't do that; Gwynneth's troubles were because of her.

Still averting her eyes, Gwynneth cleared her throat, "It's raining," she whispered, her voice so quiet Anton almost didn't hear her, "and I found myself wondering if you were perhaps lying here, listening to it." She finally brought her gaze back to meet Anton's, "I didn't mean to wake you."

Anton's throat tightened with emotion as Gwynneth spoke. She had missed her so much. To see her standing there, looking so uncertain and speaking so timidly nearly broke her heart. Still, she managed to whisper back, "I was listening to it...then I must have dozed off."

Gwynneth nodded, letting Anton's soft, raspy voice wash over her. Despite her anxiety, hearing that voice again was comforting, and it surprised her. She wasn't sure, but perhaps because of what she now knew, she expected a different tone or a changed pitch, or something. But it was no different; it was still Anton. "Well," she began after a moment's hesitation, "I shall go so that

you can rest."

But just as she made to turn away, Anton called out. "No, wait...please don't go." Anton didn't quite know what she was going to say, but she definitely didn't want Gwynneth to disappear so quickly.

Gwynneth stopped, her eyes closing as she began to fear what Anton might say or do. She wasn't ready for this, not yet!

"I...I've wanted to see you...wanted to speak with you. Can't you stay for just...just a moment...?" Anton stumbled as she tried to push herself up into a sitting position.

Gwynneth turned in time to see Anton grimacing and struggling to sit up. A wave of compassion swept over her and she found herself stepping up and placing her hands under her husband's arm and elbow, helping him scoot back against the head of the bed and get situated.

"Thank you," Anton whispered once Gwynneth had relinquished her gentle grip. Their eyes flickered over each other again, the awkwardness still palpable. Anton drew a deep breath and released it slowly, garnering her courage. "How are you feeling, Gwynneth...are you well?"

The Lady pursed her lips, "Yes, I'm...I'm as well as I can be, I suppose."

Anton lowered her eyes, again feeling entirely responsible for her wife's troubles. "Gwynneth, I...", she hesitated, guilt and nervousness seizing her. "I want to apologize to you." She looked up, finding her wife's blue-green gaze regarding her steadily. "I know you're angry and upset, and I don't blame you, but please...*please* believe me when I say that I *never* meant to hurt you." Gwynneth's eyes closed but Anton continued, "I never wanted to lie to you about who I was, Gwynneth, but I..." Anton hesitated, shaking her head slowly, "I *had* to."

The young Lady opened her eyes and looked at her husband, thinking and feeling so many things. Sighing softly, Gwynneth sat down on the very edge of the bed. "There are so many things I don't understand, so I shan't pretend that I do." Gwynneth started hesitantly, her mind a tumult of emotions. "I have so many questions for you...I don't even know where or how to begin," she said, her voice a near whisper.

Anton nodded, "I know, and I'll try my best to explain things to you. I'll tell you everything, if that's what you want."

"I don't know what I want anymore." Gwynneth closed her eyes and sighed, pressing fingers against her temple. "I've been told so many things...I don't know what to do or what to think."

"I can only imagine what my mother has said to you and told you...I'm sure there are numerous clarifications that need to be made."

Gwynneth gave a small huff, "Oh yes...", she said, her voice becoming bitter sounding, "your mother has *explained* several things to me. Mostly she's made it quite clear that I must keep my

mouth shut and carry on as though nothing has changed."

Anton sighed, "Don't listen to my mother." She looked pointedly into her wife's uncertain eyes, "She may posture and threaten all she wants, but she does not speak for me." Gwynneth averted her gaze, but Anton could see that she still needed reassurance. She moved her hand toward Gwynneth's thigh until her fingers made contact. Gwynneth's eyes flew down to the touch, then up to meet her husband's piercing gaze. "I pledged myself to you, Gwynneth...I promised to provide for you," Anton said, looking into watery blue-green eyes. "Despite everything...I still care about your well being, and I won't let any harm come to you." Gwynneth suddenly looked as though she would burst into tears at any moment, and Anton hated that she was responsible for more sadness. She softened her voice, "Don't fret over my mother and whatever menacing words she's spoken to you. I shall see to her. And...I shall see to you too...if you'll allow me."

Gwynneth's chin began to tremble and she didn't know what to say. She could only nod her head dumbly and look away, fighting to regain her composure. She was tired of being angry and confused, yet she still felt the need to protect herself and guard her feelings. But being here speaking with Anton and hearing his soothing voice was slowing undoing her. It would be easy to resist her husband if he were a cad or a brute. If he were rough or cruel and didn't care for her in the least, then it would be easy to run away. But Anton wasn't a brute. He was loving and gentle and treated her with the same care and ease as before. Gazing into his apologetic eyes and listening to his soft words, Gwynneth thought for a moment that it would be easy to forgive and pretend nothing had changed, that things were as before.

Gwynneth's head began to throb from the intensity of her thoughts. "I...I'm confused, Anton," she finally said, her voice tremulous. "I still care for you, but..." she shook her head, "I feel so uncertain...I just don't know what to do about any of this." A tear broke free, dribbling down her cheek.

Anton moved her hand up to rest on top of Gwynneth's thigh. "You don't need to do anything," she whispered. "Just take care of yourself...and the child." Gwynneth just nodded and glanced away, swiping at her eyes.

They fell silent as they sat together on the bed, the storm outside providing the only noise. Gwynneth was still turned away from Anton, and the Lord took the opportunity to really look at her wife. She appeared pale and tired, and her hugely swollen abdomen made her look so small. Anton thought that the baby surely must be coming any day. Glancing back to Gwynneth's face, Anton ran her eyes over every detail; her soft cheeks, dainty nose, rosebud lips. Her small ears were exposed and her thick golden mane of hair was pulled back and twisted behind her head. Anton thought she was still as beautiful as ever. Recollections of what they used to be like together filled her mind, and she closed her eyes, allowing the pleasant memories to wash over her.

Sensing Anton's stillness, Gwynneth turned back to find him resting silently, his eyes closed, his hand still touching her thigh. She stared at him, considering the things he'd said, and the look in his eyes when he said them. She believed his apologies, and she believed that he had not meant to hurt her. He wasn't that kind of person, Gwynneth knew. Anton had only ever been kind and

loving toward her. Even now, he still wanted to take care of her, still wanted to be chivalrous and protective.

Gwynneth closed her eyes, acknowledging that yes, she did still care for him, and...and she probably still loved him. The question was, could she be or do anything beyond this admittance?

Opening her eyes, she stared at Anton's face, looking at the angles of his cheeks and chin and thinking that he was still handsome, despite his gaunt appearance. Her gaze wandered down to his lips and she remembered how soft they were. She wondered what it would be like to kiss them now.

Oh my God, She felt herself flush. I still care about him, but things could never be the same with him again...could they? ...I just don't know! She brought a hand up to her face, covering it as tears began to run freely down her cheeks. She shook her head, wishing the tears would cease. Sniffing, she dropped her hand and reopened her eyes, surprised to find pale blue eyes looking at her with worry.

"Gwynneth...I'm so sorry-"

The Lady held up a hand, "No, don't...don't say anymore, please."

Anton gave her a sad frown. There was so much more she wanted to say to the upset blonde, but she wouldn't push it.

"I should go. I'm tired, and you need to rest." Gwynneth stood, but before she turned away, she looked straight into Anton's eyes. Without warning, she suddenly bent down and kissed her husband soundly on the lips. Breaking the kiss abruptly, she didn't back away. Instead she looked at Anton strangely, staring deeply into his eyes, wishing she could peer into his soul, wishing he had all the answers to her questions and all the quells for her fears.

Anton could see that Gwynneth was trying to work something out, so she just gave a weak smile and said nothing. She had no idea if Gwynneth was going to slap her, spit on her, or kiss her again. The anticipation made her nervous and she sat very still, looking at her wife softly, wanting and hoping to show her openness and acceptance of whatever Gwynneth decided to do.

Slowly, hesitantly, Gwynneth reached out and touched Anton's face. She traced a line down his cheek, carefully grazing over the blemishes and bruises that were still evident. She frowned slightly as her fingertips trailed over a healing cut on his chin, then ended her exploration by tracing a path around his lips.

Anton's heart leapt at the possible implications of the quiet, strange little moment of intimacy, and when Gwynneth leaned in to press their mouths together again, Anton's hopes soared.

The kiss was a gentle meeting of lips, which Gwynneth was comfortable with. But when Anton brought a hand up to curl around the back of her neck, the young Lady faltered and pulled away.

Dammit...too much too soon. Idiot! Anton scolded herself and held her breath as Gwynneth straightened, looking flushed and embarrassed.

Giving her husband a quick nod, Gwynneth simply whispered, "Goodnight, Anton."

"Goodnight, Gwynneth."

Anton watched with a heavy heart as his wife turned and exited the room.

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Gwynneth lay awake in her room that night, unable to sleep due to the strangely intense meeting she had with her husband.

She'd gone to his room intending only to look upon him again; she hadn't thought that they would talk, and she certainly hadn't thought that she'd feel compelled to kiss him. She wasn't entirely upset by what she'd done, only surprised. Surprised at the feelings that still resonated within her.

The feelings she was experiencing were real; the overwhelming pull and the strong emotional bond she still felt was not simply because she thought Anton was handsome or because she pitied him. She was drawn to him because of something deeper; something inside him...and inside her. *But now that I know he's a woman*, Gwynneth wondered, frowning, *can I be drawn to him still? Can I be...physical with him?* She blushed as she considered the possibilities.

She began to think about Anton's lips and what it felt like to kiss them again. Then she thought about his shoulders and arms, and she remembered how it used to feel to have him hold her and how his body had always felt against hers; strong, secure, warm. She thought about the muscles of his back and how they felt in her hands when she clutched him tight. She closed her eyes and recalled holding his hips within the vee of her thighs as they made love, and she pictured his face as he rose and fell against her with intensity, whispering words of love and adoration as they climaxed together.

Oh my God...we had such passion...such passion, and it was between two women...how could that be? And now that I know the truth, would it make a difference? Should it make a difference? I still think of him as my husband, as a man, but he isn't...he's a woman...I'm attracted to a woman!

Gwynneth knew that if she were honest with herself, she would have to admit that it shouldn't be such an incredible shock. If she were honest with herself - *really* honest - she would admit that she'd never really had an interest in men; she had never been attracted to them, physically or sexually. Anton had been the first. *Good Lord*, she worried, *what does that mean?*

She knew what the church and society thought about relationships between people of the same sex, and that thought made her wonder further: was Anton really attracted to women rather than men? Or was their physical relationship just a further extension of the male role he had to play?

Gwynneth remembered wondering why Anton didn't have other lovers on the side, as most men did - could it be because he didn't really *want* a woman? Was he only with her because he *had* to be with her? *Oh my God...no, that can't be!* Gwynneth cringed in fear and her eyes burned with the threat of tears.

Her mind immediately flashed back to their intimate moments together. They were so compatible and had an undeniable chemistry, both in and out of the bed chambers...their lovemaking was so beautiful and perfect...their feelings genuine.

Something like that can't be feigned, she considered. *Our feelings were real...are real. ...Oh God, I do still love him.*

Gwynneth suddenly felt exhausted, as though she couldn't possibly have any more tears left to cry nor any sorrow left to flow. She didn't know if she'd solved any problems with her soul-searching tonight, but somehow, in some way, she thought she felt a little more at ease. She could only hope that it would last.

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Anton was awakened by noises. At first her ears were greeted only by the sound of the thundering rainstorm outside her window, but soon she picked up on other unusual noises as well. Murmuring voices, opening and closing doors, and hurried footsteps traveling back and forth could be heard above the storm.

Wrapping herself in a robe, she struggled out of bed, grabbed the cane she was just learning to use, and hobbled out into the hallway. As she walked further down the corridor, the door to Gwynneth's chamber opened and Alice came out, carrying some bloody linens.

"Alice!" Anton called out, "What the devil is going on?"

The maid looked frightened, "My Lord," she bowed awkwardly, "Lady Gwynneth...she's giving birth, and tisn't going well!"

Anton's eyes grew huge and her heart plummeted. She hadn't seen nor spoken with Gwynneth for the past two days and she had not inquired after her, figuring that the young woman just needed some time alone to think. Now she wished she had checked on her. Reacting instinctively, Anton quickly began to push past Alice, toward Gwynneth's room, but the maid grabbed her arm.

"Oh my Lord! No!" she shook her head and dropped her hand quickly, aware of the inappropriate way in which she'd touched her Lord. "I'm sorry, sire, but you must not go in! 'Tis bad luck for the father to be present!"

"But I'm not-" Anton stopped abruptly before she said too much. Frowning, she covered her mistake, "...I'm not afraid of a silly superstition. I must be with her!" She turned away from the maid and pushed through Gwynneth's door.

As soon as she entered the chambers, Anton's senses were assaulted by the smell of blood, sweat and other odors she couldn't identify. It was difficult to see and the only thing she could hear was someone panting in pain and the soothing murmur of another's voice. She walked toward the bed, pushing the canopy curtains aside when she reached it.

Marina was sitting on the bed, gently dabbing Gwynneth's forehead with a wet cloth as she spoke hushed words to her. Gwynneth lay slightly propped up on the bed, her face pale, her hair completely saturated with sweat. She was covered by a light sheet, which was also wetted by sweat. Her eyes were closed and her mouth hung open as she heaved great groaning breaths.

Anton's heart almost broke at the sight before her. "Mother," she whispered softly.

Marina looked up in surprise, "Anton, what are you doing here!" her voice was harsh.

Anton shook her head slowly, "I...I heard the commotion." She gazed down at Gwynneth's ashen face. "Is something wrong?"

"No. Nothing's wrong." Marina snapped. "You shouldn't be here. Go back to bed."

"But I-"

Gwynneth interrupted with a sobbing sigh. Her body tensed and she cringed with agony, clutching at the bed clothes and moaning loudly as another pain began.

Marina quickly grasped the young woman's hand and began to murmur more words of reassurance and encouragement while a midwife pushed the sheet aside to peer between Gwynneth's legs.

Another woman approached the Marchioness Dowager. "Milady, the physician's been alerted. He's on his way."

"Thank god. Has Alice returned with more cloth and fresh water?"

"No, Milady, not yet."

Marina's eyes flashed in annoyance, "Well go and find her. We need that water!"

"Yes'm." The woman scurried away quickly.

Anton watched the events with wide-eyed fear and worry. She felt utterly helpless and terribly afraid.

As the pain came to an end, Gwynneth's body visibly relaxed. Her eyes remained closed and she returned to panting softly. Marina dabbed her forehead again before standing. "Sit with her a moment, will you?" she asked the midwife, who nodded.

Marina walked around the bed and slipped an arm around Anton's waist, tugging her toward the door. "Come, Anton. You must leave."

When they reached the hallway, Anton turned to the older woman, "Mother, why do you need Victor?"

Marina wiped at her face and sighed wearily. "We believe there are two babies, my dear."

Anton's eyes bulged. "*What? Two!*"

"Yes, twins." Marina tried to smile weakly. "And as wonderful as that is, it makes it that much more dangerous for Gwynneth. She's a small girl, and the babes are in a poor presentation, so I want Victor to be here in case..." Her voice trailed off and Anton gave her a horrified look. Marina's expression became grave, "If things do not go well, I fear one of them, or even all three of them, may not survive the night."

Anton's heart plummeted and she shook her head slowly, "No...no, that won't happen. I won't let it happen."

"There's nothing you can do, Anton." Marina rested a hand on her daughter's shoulder. "Go back to bed...say a prayer." She touched her cheek, "I'll keep you apprised of things as best I can, I promise." She turned and disappeared back into Gwynneth's chambers.

Anton watched her go, feeling her heart clutch in terrible, desperate anxiety. Indeed there was nothing she could do, and she hated that. Instead, she would do what her mother asked; she would go back to her room and she would pray. She would say a hundred prayers if it saved the life of her beloved Gwynneth and the babies.

Reaching her room, Anton sat down on her bed and let her head drop into her hands as she felt the first sting of tears in her eyes.

It was going to be a long, sleepless night for everyone.

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[Continued in Part 15](#)

Feedback? [a k naten@yahoo.com](mailto:a_k_naten@yahoo.com)

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~ Second Son ~

by [A. K. Naten](#)

** Once again I must apologize for the huge delay in posting this. You might want to go back and re-read Part 14 to refresh your memory. To those of you who've continued to support and encourage me, I thank you very much. I really appreciate your patience. Although it's taking me a lot longer than I'd hoped, I vow to finish this thing! **

For disclaimers, etc., see [The Intro](#).

PART FIFTEEN

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The Marquess sat in a chair in the library, resting and pretending to read. It was mid-afternoon now and still there had been no word on whether or not Gwynneth had given birth. The young Lord didn't sleep all night and spent a restless morning wandering around the Manor, hobbling along on her cane, attempting to get some exercise while trying to keep her mind off the events that were unfolding in her wife's chambers. It would soon be nightfall again, and Anton was beginning to fear the worst. She got up off her chair and walked over to the fireplace, leaning against the mantle as she stared at the burning embers. She was going to go insane if she didn't hear some news soon.

As though answering her thoughts, the library door opened and her mother entered. Marina looked exhausted, her eyes red-rimmed and watery. A white apron tied around her waist was spotted with blood.

Anton's heart leapt into her throat and she began to tremble. "...Mother?"

"Anton," Marina whispered as she approached slowly. She could see the fear and anxiety in her daughter's widened eyes. "Congratulations, darling. You have a fine son and a beautiful daughter."

Anton's mouth dropped open and tears immediately flooded her eyes. Her face broke into a relieved smile and she laughed lightly, "My God...a boy *and* a girl?" Marina nodded and smiled back. Anton laughed again, but only for a moment. "Gwynneth...how is she?" Marina's smile quickly dissolved and she pursed her lips tightly. "Mother?" Anton repeated, desperation in her voice. "*Tell me.*"

Marina sighed. "She...she lost quite a lot of blood, Anton. It was a difficult birth for the poor thing."

Anton reached out and gripped her mother's shoulders tightly, bracing herself for the worst. "Does she live?" Anton's voice was barely a whisper.

Marina cupped her daughter's cheek, "Yes my dear, she lives."

"Oh *God*...oh thank *God*!" Anton squeezed her eyes shut and brought her hands up to her face as tears flooded her eyes and began to streak down her cheeks.

Marina reached out for her and they hugged, comforting and reassuring one another with the action.

After a few moments, the Marquess regained her composure and broke the embrace, her thoughts still on Gwynneth. "May I see her?"

"All right, but only briefly. She's completely shattered and not fully lucid."

Anton nodded, "I understand."

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Anton climbed the stairs quickly, eager to confirm her mother's reports and see for herself that Gwynneth was alive and well. Not wanting to appear too shaken, she paused for just a moment to calm herself before opening the chamber doors.

The room still smelled of strange odors and was shrouded in partial darkness. Anton stepped inside, noticing that the canopy was pulled around Gwynneth's bed, concealing her. As soon as she closed the door, one of the midwives appeared.

"Milord," the short woman whispered, curtsying briefly. "Congratulations to you, sire."

Anton smiled, "Thank you," she said, feeling a little awkward at accepting the sentiment. "I should like to see my wife."

"Of course, Milord." The woman turned and motioned toward the large bed. "She's sleeping at the moment."

The woman turned away, leaving Anton standing alone at the side of the bed. Reaching out to pull the canopy back, Anton held her breath. When Gwynneth's still, prone form appeared, she released the breath unsteadily.

The Marchioness looked pale, her eyes sunken and shadowed with dark smudges from the stress and strain she'd been through. Her blonde hair was damp and matted from sweat, and her normally plump, rose-colored lips were dry and drained of color.

Anton reached a hand out and gently caressed Gwynneth's cheek, needing to feel for herself that her wife was well. The soft skin was warm to her touch, and Anton breathed a sigh of relief,

happy and thankful that the young woman had indeed survived her ordeal.

"Don't disturb her, Anton. She needs to rest."

Marina's sudden appearance made Anton flinch, and she reluctantly removed her hand. Both of them stepped back away from Gwynneth's bed and Marina took hold of Anton's arm.

Turning her around, Marina smiled and whispered, "Come and meet your son and daughter." They walked to the corner of the room where two midwives were fussing over two little bundles wrapped in fine linens. Marina reached out and picked one up, turning around and holding it out to Anton. "May I present your son, My Lord."

Anton's mouth opened but she could say nothing as she looked at the tiny babe before her. She sat her cane aside and allowed the baby to be placed in her arms. She could only stand there and hold it awkwardly, feeling completely awestruck as she stared at the dark tuft of hair and pink, splotchy face. Finally the baby yawned and opened its large eyes, looking up at her and blinking.

"My God," Anton murmured, a slow smile spreading across her face, "so small...so beautiful...it's...it's a miracle." She looked up at her mother, tears welling in her eyes as she felt her emotions begin to swell.

Marina smiled and nodded, "Yes, a lovely, lovely miracle." As she watched Anton lean down and kiss the little boy on the forehead, her eyes filled with tears.

"Milord, would ye like to hold your daughter as well?" Another midwife asked, holding the other bundle out to Anton.

"Yes, yes," Anton sniffled, handing the boy to her mother and taking the other baby into her arms.

The little girl was wide awake, her tiny tongue poking out of her mouth and her dark blue eyes lively as she blinked and looked up at Anton.

Anton smiled, "Oh, God," she whispered with reverence as she held the child. "So precious...so sweet," she cooed, leaning down to kiss the baby's cheek, "sweet, pretty little girl." She was overcome with emotion as she gazed at the child, and she closed her eyes, tears leaking out unashamedly. "Thank you," she said aloud, to no one in particular.

A shrill little cry soon pierced the silence, and the emotional moment ended. Anton looked fearfully at the whimpering little boy, wondering what was wrong.

"He's hungry," Marina said as she began to rock the boy in her arms. "Have you secured a wet nurse?" she asked, turning to the midwives.

"Yes, Milady-"

"No..."

The soft, raspy voice stopped everyone abruptly. They all turned toward the Lady's bed.

Gwynneth was awake, having observed and listened to the small gathering of people for several minutes. It took her a few moments to comprehend that Anton was actually here, in her room. The last time she'd seen him, he was still bedridden. It made her wonder just how long she'd been incapacitated from the birth of the babies. She wasn't sure what she felt as she watched Marina and Anton hold her children. Part of her felt joy, but another part felt uncertainty; an instinctual maternal urge, perhaps, to protect the babes and keep them by her side at all times. She *was* certain, however, that she did not want them to be nourished by another woman. Even if it killed her, she would feed them herself.

"No wet nurse," Gwynneth said softly.

Marina walked closer to the bed, "Don't be silly, my dear. You can't properly feed both these children right now; you're much too weak and exhausted. All new mothers use a wet nurse. It's perfectly acceptable."

Gwynneth blinked long, "No wet nurse," she repeated a little louder, reiterating her wishes.

Anton walked closer, looking at the woman she still loved so dearly. Though Gwynneth was pale and obviously drained, she saw a glint of determination in her eyes. And so, she found herself in a dilemma. Protect Gwynneth's health and persuade the Lady to acquiesce to her mother's very reasonable advice, or back Gwynneth's wishes and show her that she would stand up for her, just as she promised she would. As the young Lady shifted her gaze to Anton and they stared at one another, the Lord made her decision.

"I believe we should allow Gwynneth to do as she pleases, Mother." Anton said, her eyes never leaving her wife's.

"But she can't-" Marina began.

"Gwynneth knows her body's limitations," Anton interrupted, turning to the older woman, "if she finds herself overwhelmed, she'll say so."

Marina knew what she was being told, and she knew why. She decided not to argue. "Very well." She said simply. Turning to the midwives, she handed the baby boy to one of them. "You'll help her and show her." The women bowed slightly and walked away while Marina turned back to Anton and Gwynneth. She wasn't angry, but she felt conflicted. The older woman didn't like being overruled, but she understood the point Anton wanted to make with Gwynneth. Giving a small sigh, Marina said, "I'll come round later to check on things," and quietly left the room.

Turning back to Gwynneth, Anton found herself held by uncertain blue-green eyes. She gave a slight smile and walked closer, sitting down carefully on the side of the bed, her precious cargo

still in her arms. The little girl was still awake and she made little noises as she squirmed and blinked her large eyes.

Anton looked at the baby, "She's beautiful, Gwynneth," she whispered before looking up at the blonde and smiling, "they're both absolutely beautiful."

"Yes, they are." Gwynneth said quietly, watching as Anton held the little girl and looked at her adoringly. The Marquess looked and sounded proud, but Gwynneth wondered what Anton really thought and how he truly felt about these children. These children who were not his.

Since discovering the truth about her husband, Gwynneth had often thought back to those awful moments when her pregnancy had first been discovered. Anton had been so furious, accusing her of being an unfaithful harlot and lying with another man, because he knew that the children weren't his - couldn't be his. Eventually, once he knew how they came to be, he accepted the circumstances. So now that the children had been born, would he come to accept them once again? Would he truly accept and acknowledge his brother's bastard children as his own? And, would he be content with only having one son? Would he disregard the girl in favor of the boy? Gwynneth knew that she would love both children equally, but she also knew how vitally important it was for a nobleman to have numerous sons. It was a wife's primary duty to provide those sons; but for her, that could never be. She would never provide more heirs for Anton of Weldon.

As she fretted, Gwynneth's eyes filled with tears until a fat bead broke free and dribbled down her cheek.

Hearing sniffing and looking up to see her wife wiping at her eyes, Anton's heart clenched with worry. Her mother had warned her that the young woman would probably be overwhelmed and emotional for awhile. Her instinct was to reach out and envelope the blonde in a comforting, protective embrace, but she wasn't sure how her touch would be welcomed. Instead, Anton scooted closer and simply laid a hand on Gwynneth's arm. "Are you all right, Gwynneth?" she whispered. "Do you need Victor?"

Gwynneth shook her head, feeling a little embarrassed. "No, no." She wiped at her face, her eyes flicking up to see her husband staring at her, his face full of concern. "I just..." she struggled to express herself without appearing pathetic, "I'm just a little emotional. Forgive me."

"Nothing to forgive," Anton answered. "It's to be expected, I'm certain." They locked eyes again, silent words and thoughts filling the air for a moment before Anton finally reached up and brushed a lock of hair away from Gwynneth's forehead. "I was so terribly worried about you," she whispered softly, "I'm so thankful you're all right...and that the children are all right."

The Lady's heart began to pound as Anton cupped her cheek with his hand and leaned in to gently touch their lips together. She had not forgotten her feelings for him, and even though she was still uncertain about a great many things, the thought of being intimate with Anton made her head spin. The exchange was so soft and sweetly timid that Gwynneth nearly began to cry from her swirling emotions.

"I feel as though you have given me the rarest of gifts," Anton said in a hushed voice. "Something I thought I would never ever have." She stared deeply into Gwynneth's eyes, "...Thank you."

Before Gwynneth could answer, an impatient wail cut through the quiet moment, and one of the midwives appeared behind Anton. "Beggin' yer pardon, Milord, Milady," she bowed slightly, "but I'm afraid the wee one cries for nourishment."

Anton held Gwynneth's eyes for just a moment longer before rising and handing the baby girl over to the other midwife. She reached down and caressed her wife's cheek, "I'll come back later."

Gwynneth nodded and watched as Anton turned and left the room. When she looked back, the midwives were smiling eagerly at her. "May we assist you with the nursing of the babes, Milady?"

Gwynneth drew a deep breath and expelled it unsteadily, "Yes...you may."

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

It was evening when Anton finally returned to Gwynneth's room to check on her and the babies. She'd found it difficult to occupy herself during the day; her thoughts continually revolved around her wife and the newborns.

Entering Gwynneth's chambers, Anton was surprised to find it quiet and dark. A midwife sat in a chair busying herself with some needlework. She looked up at the Marquess and nodded, then smiled as she brought a finger to her lips. Anton smiled and nodded back in understanding then walked quietly over to the two brand new cradles in the corner of the room. Peering into them, a huge grin erupted on her face. Both little babies were sound asleep and covered with blankets, their tiny hands balled into fists and held beside their cherubic faces. Anton still had trouble believing that they were really here, and that there really were two of them. Their smallness astounded her. Though her mother assured her that it had been a good thing for Gwynneth that they were so small, Anton was still concerned that there was something wrong with them. She'd never seen such little human beings before.

Refraining from the urge to reach out and touch the babies to make certain they were all right, Anton straightened and looked over at the midwife, who smiled at her again. Walking closer to the woman, she bent down and whispered, "How is the Lady this evening?"

"Still very weakened, Milord. I tried to get her to partake of a meal, but she was much too tired and disinterested."

"Mm-hmm." Anton frowned and nodded. She knew the importance of eating to help regain

strength and health having just experienced it herself. Thinking for a moment, she looked back to the midwife, "I wonder if you would go find me some fresh bread and butter, and bring it here to me."

The midwife immediately dropped her sewing, and nodded vigorously, "Yes, Milord, at once." She hurried out the door, her skirts whooshing behind her.

Anton walked over to Gwynneth's bed and carefully sat down. The young Marchioness was still quite pale, and she breathed in shallow, barely-discernible breaths. Anton sat and watched her for a long time, thinking, wondering, remembering. It was a long enough spell that the midwife soon reappeared with a loaf of warm bread and a small crock full of butter.

"Ah, thank you," Anton said with gratitude as she took the food from the older woman. As soon as she spoke, Gwynneth stirred and opened her eyes. The Marquess looked at her wife and smiled. "Good evening, My Lady. How are you feeling?" she asked, her voice low and soft.

Gwynneth blinked and blinked, "Fine." As her eyes adjusted and her mind became aware of her surroundings, she fancied that she smelled the aroma of warm bread. Licking her lips, she closed her eyes again, feeling her stomach stir in reaction.

Anton smiled and glanced back to the midwife, "You may leave us for awhile."

"Yes, Milord." The woman bowed and quietly disappeared from the room.

Turning her attention back to Gwynneth, Anton placed the butter crock on the small table beside the bed. "I've got something nice for you," she gently teased, remembering how the blonde had once been quite fond of warm bread. "Fresh bread and butter." She tore the loaf open and ripped a bite-sized piece off, smearing it with some butter. She leaned in close and held the piece to Gwynneth's lips, "Eat."

The Lady looked up at her husband and saw the gentle but determined look on his face. She really didn't feel like eating, but was obviously going to have to. She opened her mouth and ate the bread slowly. It tasted wonderful; better than she could ever recall. She didn't protest as Anton sat and patiently fed her piece after piece.

When nearly a quarter of the loaf was gone, Anton eased off. "There now, that's better, isn't it?" She asked as she brushed crumbs away.

"Mm, yes. Thank you." Gwynneth felt shy and a little embarrassed that her husband had found it necessary to make her eat, but she was grateful nonetheless.

Anton's voice remained quiet, "You must make sure that you eat to regain your strength, Gwynneth. I'm told this is doubly important for ensuring that you're able to nurse the children as well."

"Yes, I know this. The midwives have given me more than adequate instruction in that arena, I

assure you." Gwynneth said, sounding rueful.

Anton half-grinned, "Well good. Then I don't have to worry about you taking proper nourishment, hmm?"

Gwynneth smiled slightly and lowered her eyes, "No, My Lord, you don't."

"Good." Anton smiled and reached out to touch a finger to Gwynneth's chin, bringing her eyes back up. "I'm proud of you, Gwynneth. The children are so beautiful and healthy. You've done a wondrous thing, truly."

Tears began to gather in the Lady's eyes as she stared at her husband, wondering if he really meant what he said. Wondering if he was merely being polite and saying appropriate words rather than heartfelt ones. How could he be proud of her, the mother of bastards?

Anton was confounded as she watched the tears leak from her wife's eyes. Had she said something wrong, or was this just another one of those emotional outbursts her mother warned her about? "Gwynneth? What's wrong?" she asked, but the blonde could only sniffle and shake her head. "What is it?"

Gwynneth shook her head, "I...I don't know, I just...I'm confused."

"Confused about what?"

Watery blue-green looked up, "How can you say that you're proud of me...that you're proud of these children?" Anton frowned, giving her a puzzled look. "They're not your children, Anton...they're *bastards*! And one of them is a girl! Not only have I given you bastards, I've only given you one son!" Gwynneth was crying harder, her voice loud, "How can you claim pride in that?"

"Shh, shh," Anton reached out and gently pulled Gwynneth into an embrace. She didn't want to frighten the fragile young woman with the contact, but she could no longer stand to not hold her.

The two of them sat in silence for a moment before Anton pulled back. When she spoke, she made sure she was looking squarely into her wife's eyes. "These children are my brother's children, and as such, are my flesh and blood, Gwynneth. It matters not how they were begotten," she added, her gaze dropping for a moment. "They are still of *my* blood."

Gwynneth searched her husband's eyes and face, desperate to believe in what he was saying.

"It doesn't matter if they're girls or boys; they are both heirs to Weldon, and they are the only ones we will have. Ever. That makes them even more precious." Her voice was quietly forceful, and Gwynneth finally began to believe.

"And so you shall accept them, just like that?"

"Yes, I shall. ...I have." Anton said, the look in her eyes a testament to her sincerity.

They were quiet for a moment before Gwynneth finally took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "I'm sorry, Anton." She shook her head, feeling foolish. "I didn't mean to doubt you or insult you, I just...," she glanced back up, "I just feel so strange...this is all so...so confusing." She covered her face with her hands, wishing she could just disappear.

"I understand." Anton reached out and gently tugged her wife's hands away so they could look eyes. "Truly I do," she added before cupping the blonde's cheek. "Please...please don't pull away from me, Gwynneth." Anton's voice was a mere whisper. "I need you...you need me...the children need us both." Tears began to stream down Gwynneth's face again. "I want us to be a family," Anton leaned in close so that their faces were a mere inch apart, "I want us to try, all right? Can we try, Gwynneth?" her voice wavered with emotion.

Gwynneth reached up and covered Anton's hands with her own, "Yes," she nodded her head and closed her eyes as she cried, "Yes, we will...we will try very hard!"

The two of them sat for a long while, silently holding on to each other, and hope.

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The days following the birth of the babies drug on slowly, but soon the days began to turn into weeks. Everyone was surprised at Gwynneth's determination to breastfeed the children herself, but the little blonde managed to do it somehow. The wee babes were thriving and though they sapped their mother's strength and stamina, everyone was thrilled.

Anton did her best to keep the visitors to a minimum while Gwynneth remained in her lying-in period. She played the part of gracious host and proud father, but she was always eager for the times when she herself could visit with Gwynneth and the children. Being around babies was a brand new experience for the Marquess, but it was one that she was beginning to thoroughly enjoy.

Gwynneth had to admit that she was pleasantly surprised by Anton's attentiveness, both to her and the babies. She'd had no idea what to expect from her unique husband, but clearly his patient doting with both her and the children was a surprise to everyone.

The Marquess visited her regularly, often bringing her meals and personally seeing to her needs. And he held and cuddled the children frequently too, much to the shock of the midwives who attended to the Lady. Anton would even walk the halls with the babies when they fussed or whined. Everyone remarked that such behavior from a father was most unusual, but Gwynneth could only smile inwardly, knowing full well the reasons for her husband's unusualness. Still, she couldn't help but marvel at Anton's willingness to care for the children. Despite his inexperience, Anton was proving to be quite good with the babies, and it endeared him to Gwynneth even more.

Gwynneth's feelings about Anton and who he was were still convoluted, but she began to feel

herself softening more and more every time she watched him with the babies. Every time he came to her and sat and talked with her...every time he touched her so reverently...it all made her realize that she did indeed still love him. She loved him, but how far beyond that could she go? She examined her feelings quite a lot, but she never came up with conclusive solutions to her many questions and fears. She could only hope that things would become more clear as time went by.

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It was late in the afternoon when Anton finally had an opportunity to break away and go pay a visit to Gwynneth and the children. She hadn't seen them all day, and she was eager for her 'fix'. Reaching Gwynneth's door, she opened it and entered with a smile already on her face. She was a bit taken aback to find Gwynneth alone, sitting upright in bed, her breasts exposed as she nursed the little boy. She'd never encountered her wife in such a state, and she felt surprisingly dumbfounded.

"Oh, uh, I...I'm sorry, uhm..." Anton stammered.

Gwynneth smiled at Anton's fumbling; she felt unusually at ease herself. Then again, she had become so accustomed to the midwives constantly coming and going in her room, it didn't really faze her to have someone present when she nursed.

"Uhm, I can come back later..." the Marquess mumbled, backing toward the door.

"No, it's all right. Come in."

Anton stood indecisively for just a moment, then turned and closed the door. A hundred thoughts raced through her head, ranging from how beautiful Gwynneth looked in her glorious nakedness to how inappropriate the timing was for her to be thinking such things. Forcing all lustful thoughts from her mind, Anton made herself calmly walk over to one of the chairs and sit down.

The two of them sat silently for a long moment. Gwynneth pretended to be absorbed with feeding the boy, but she could feel Anton's eyes on her. It was equal parts thrilling and unnerving, and she felt her skin involuntarily erupt in gooseflesh.

Anton felt invasive, yet she couldn't help but stare at the scene before her. Once she got over staring at her wife's large, lovely breasts, she focused on what was really happening. She'd never seen Gwynneth nurse the babies, and she realized that it was quite amazing.

Gwynneth lifted her head and the two of them locked eyes. Anton smiled, but before either of them could say anything, the little girl began whimpering in her cradle.

"She's growing impatient," Gwynneth said with a soft laugh.

The little girl let out a louder wail and Anton got up and retrieved her from her cradle. "What's the matter, my love? Are you hungry?" Anton cooed to the baby. She turned and walked back

toward the chair, gently rocking the girl in her arms. "Maybe you're just jealous that your brother is getting Mummy's attention, hmm?"

Gwynneth smiled and watched with fascination as Anton sat down with the now-quiet baby.

"Mummy can't feed you both at the same time, now can she?" She dipped her head and kissed the little girl's forehead, "You need to be patient, dear heart."

Gwynneth's own heart swelled at Anton's soft words and affection. Watching him now, she dared to think that perhaps everything would be all right...perhaps they all would be all right.

When the little boy was finished, he began to doze. Gwynneth eased him away from her breast and looked over to Anton. "If you'll hold him, I can nurse her." She whispered, pointing to the little girl.

"Yes, of course," Anton said, glad to be of help. They carefully exchanged babies, Anton watching with fascination as Gwynneth settled the girl at her other breast and she began to eagerly feed.

Gwynneth looked up, smiling softly at the look of wide-eyed wonder on Anton's face. He seemed to be so awe-struck that he didn't even realize he was holding the boy at an odd angle. "Uhm, you should probably help him to pass air," Gwynneth whispered.

"Hmm?" Anton queried, bringing her eyes back to her wife's.

Gwynneth nodded toward the boy, "You need to help him release the air from his stomach so that it doesn't ache."

"Oh, yes, right," Anton answered quickly, realizing that she'd been caught staring. She slid her hands beneath the boy's body, but felt uncomfortable, not knowing what to do. "Uhm," she hesitated, "how do I do that?" She gave Gwynneth a sheepish look.

The Lady smiled, "Lift him up to your shoulder and pat his back gently."

"Ah, yes...very good." She brought the boy up to her shoulder, fumbling slightly but finally resting his little head in the crook of her neck. She gave Gwynneth a nervous glance as she began to softly pat his back, "Like this?"

Gwynneth nodded, her smile widening at her husband's adorable clumsiness. After just a few pats, the boy let loose an impressive belch, and Anton's eyes widened as he looked at Gwynneth in amazement. The Lady couldn't help herself, she finally erupted in a giggle, amused with Anton's reactions and touched by the sweet humor of the moment.

As Gwynneth returned her attention to the nursing baby, Anton settled the boy back into her arms and came to sit down on the side of the bed. Watching Gwynneth and the little girl, she couldn't help but feel spellbound.

The girl's dark blue eyes were wide open and she kept them riveted to her mother as her jaw worked and she suckled greedily. The tiny fingers of one hand gripped her mother's index finger, and she blinked as Gwynneth smiled and cooed softly to her.

The whole scene was so amazing to Anton, she was nearly moved to tears. It was more than just an age-old tradition of a woman feeding her child. It felt as though she was witnessing something magical, yet totally natural; the formation of the most intimate bond between a child and its mother. Anton was awed by Gwynneth's loving, nurturing instincts, and she thought it to be the purest, most wonderful sight in the world. She felt deeply moved, thinking that she had never witnessed anything quite so beautiful before.

When Gwynneth looked up, she could see tears forming in Anton's eyes. It touched her that he was so obviously moved, and she felt her own eyes well with tears.

Anton shook her head, astounded by her feelings. "It's...", she hesitated, not quite knowing how to express herself. "It's all so wonderful...so incredibly beautiful." They locked eyes, "*You're beautiful, Gwynneth.*"

Gwynneth felt herself grow warm as Anton's words washed over her, and a single tear trickled down her cheek, "Thank you," she whispered, her voice quavering. As Anton leaned in toward her, Gwynneth's eyes fluttered shut.

The kiss was brief, and Anton immediately backed off so that she could look at Gwynneth's eyes and measure her reaction. The Lady's cheeks were flushed, her body tingling from the intensity of the moment.

Wanting to show more of her feelings, Anton decided to press on and leaned in for another kiss. Gwynneth breathed in sharply, but did not pull away. Anton brought a hand up to slide into blonde hair and kissed her long and deep before breaking apart at last. The Lady's mouth was parted and her eyes were wide. She licked her lips but said nothing. Anton could not tell by her expression if she was pleased or displeased. Gwynneth just let out a shuddering breath and closed her eyes, a pleasant blush still coloring her cheeks.

It would be so easy to press further, but Anton didn't want to shatter the tenuous bond they were rebuilding. She wanted to take things slowly. "I should go." She finally said.

Gwynneth didn't look up, she merely nodded her head in mute agreement.

With no more words, Anton rose and placed the now-sleeping boy in his cradle. She turned and walked to the door, glancing back at the Lady before exiting quietly.

Once she heard the chamber door close, Gwynneth released a deep sigh. She had not expected any of the preceding events, and her mind and heart were aflutter with reaction and emotion.

The deep kiss had been neither strange nor unpleasant; in fact, if she were honest with herself,

Gwynneth would have to admit that it was every bit as nice as it used to be.

Perhaps I can do this, she thought. Perhaps things can be the way they used to be.

She watched her daughter for a moment before closing her eyes and leaning back to rest against the bed cushions.

As soon as the little girl finished, Gwynneth placed her in the cradle and crawled back into her bed, immediately falling fast asleep.

Emotional turmoil was so very draining.

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[Continued...](#)

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~ Second Son ~

by [A. K. Naten](#)

** Okay, I know I keep apologizing for the gigantic delays in posting this, but I really don't mean to leave you all hanging. I've been kinda side-lined by a stupid sports accident, both my parents have been ill, and real life has just been a massive drain on my creativity, in general. ANYWAY, I promise you that I will finish this sucker as soon as I can. In the meantime, you might want to go back and re-read [Part 15](#) to refresh your memory. To those of you who've continued to support me, thank you from the bottom of my heart. I continue to be grateful for your patience. **

For disclaimers, etc., see [The Intro](#).

PART SIXTEEN

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Now that Gwynneth's lying-in period had ended, the time had come for the babies to be properly

christened in a formal ceremony. However, what normally should have been a pleasant experience was turning into a dreadful one for the young Lady.

The Lord and Lady hadn't really discussed names for the children. They spoke of it only one time, briefly, with Anton saying that he'd like the children to be named after their ancestors. Gwynneth assumed that he meant his ancestors, as was the custom, but when she timidly said that she'd always wanted to name a daughter after her late mother, Anton merely smiled and nodded in apparent agreement. Gwynneth was overjoyed, however, it did not last for long.

One evening, as she was walking the halls, the young blonde overheard Anton and Lady Marina arguing. Forgoing her manners, Gwynneth had leaned toward the door and eavesdropped.

The Marchioness Dowager was obviously unhappy. She scolded Anton for waiting to christen the children in the first place - a complete sacrilege and disgrace, in her opinion - and now the older woman was insisting that Anton stick to tradition and name the children after Weldon ancestors. At first Anton laughed, telling Marina that everything he did was a sacrilege that went against tradition. Then he stated that he was satisfied with the names as they were. But, as Marina continued to sputter and say disparaging things about the House of Clarendon, Gwynneth got the distinct impression that her daughter would end up being named something altogether different.

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The morning of the christening arrived quickly and everything proceeded smoothly. The ceremony was long and drawn-out, and the babies fussed mildly as the chaplain droned on. Gwynneth watched with apprehension as the chaplain went through each ritual: breathing upon each baby's face to exorcise evil spirits, signing the cross upon their bodies to symbol redemption, and placing blessed salt in their mouths so that they might receive wisdom. Both babies were crying in earnest by then, and when the moment arrived for the chaplain to ask for the names, Gwynneth closed her eyes, preparing herself for disappointment.

The little boy was held up, first to receive ablution. Anton murmured the name to the chaplain as the older man began to pour water on the boy's head. "I bless thee and christen thee Edgar Joseph." The child wailed aloud as the chaplain continued, "In the name of thy Father, and of thy Son, and of thy Holy Spirit...Amen."

The little girl was then lifted up for the process to be repeated. Anton again gave the name, his soft voice drowned out by the sound of little Edgar's cries. The chaplain proceeded, "I bless thee and christen thee Anna Catherine." Gwynneth's eyes flew open as she heard her mother's name. "...In the name of thy Father, and of thy Son, and of thy Holy Spirit...Amen."

White veils were placed on both infant's heads and the chaplain held his hands above them, reciting the final blessings as everyone murmured their Amens. When the candle was finally lit and placed in Anton's hand, tears began to stream down Gwynneth's face. "May The Lord bless thee and keep thee. Go in peace. Amen." The chaplain said in finality.

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Gwynneth was exhausted. It had been a long day, and it was the first public outing for her. So many people had approached her, congratulating her and telling her how wonderful she looked and how lovely the children were. It was pleasant, yet tiring. She climbed the stairs slowly as she headed toward her room, her legs still shaky, even after much bed rest. As she neared Anton's chambers, she thought that perhaps she'd stop and speak with him. They hadn't really had a chance to be alone since the ceremony, and she wanted to thank him for giving little Anna her mother's name.

As she neared the door, she could hear a voice, specifically, Lady Marina's voice. Certain that the older woman was chastising Anton yet again, Gwynneth inched closer and shamefully eavesdropped once more.

"...Several people asked me if something was wrong with the two of you, for heavens sake!" The Marchioness Dowager's voice was scolding.

"I don't care if people think something's wrong." Anton answered flatly.

"Well you *should!*" Marina squawked. "You both looked terribly awkward. You *acted* awkward!"

"It *was* awkward, Mother! For Gods sake!" Anton finally shouted. "There were dozens of people there milling about, staring at me, staring at Gwynneth, staring at the *children!* People I don't even know were congratulating me and calling me 'Poppa!' It was *very* uncomfortable!"

"Well it *can't* be uncomfortable, Anton! You must be the father and portray yourself as happy and comfortable! Not disenchanted or indifferent!"

"I'm tired of *portraying*, Mother!"

Marina sighed and rubbed her temples in frustration, "I know you are, dear, but we don't have much of a choice, do we?"

Gwynneth strained to hear Anton's reply, but heard only movement and rustling.

"You and Gwynneth must act *normal*. You must act as happy and contented as you were before. People's tongues are wagging as it is."

"What do you mean?" Anton's voice was sharp.

Marina sighed loudly again. "People are gossiping, you know how they do, saying that you're unhappy with Gwynneth. Saying that you no longer need to play 'happy couple' and pretend to dote on your wife because you've gotten your heirs."

"What?" Anton sounded genuinely incredulous.

Outside the door, Gwynneth's heart clenched in a mixture of fear and anger.

"Oh come now, Anton, don't act so surprised. You know that people are just assuming that you'll do what most noblemen do. Once the wife has produced heirs, most men move on and find other women to dally with. It's just what men do."

"Well it's not what *I* do!" Anton shouted. "I am not like those noblemen dogs!"

Gwynneth pressed her ear against the door, eager to hear everything. She could hear furniture being pushed or shoved as someone, most likely Anton, moved about angrily.

Marina sighed again, "Yes, dear, *I* know that you aren't, but others don't. Others expect you to behave the way most men behave."

"And is that what *you* expect, Mother!?"

"No, I-" Marina began to protest but was cut off.

"Because I don't *care* what others expect! And I don't care what others think! I refuse to abandon Gwynneth, and I refuse to push her into something she isn't prepared for! If it takes some time for our relationship to warm, then so be it! If we appear ill at ease in the meantime, then so *be* it! I don't give a *piss* what anyone says or thinks of it!" The Marquess slammed a fist down onto her writing table, "Damn all those blasted gossiping fools! I hope their wagging tongues rot away and fall out of their vicious heads!"

"Anton, for Gods sake, calm down!" Marina admonished. "You needn't get yourself so worked up. Why don't you let me go and fix you a warm brandy."

"No...thank you." Anton sighed deeply and rubbed her face. "Just...just leave me, please. I'm very tired."

Gwynneth decided that was her cue to leave. She pulled herself away from the door and scurried down the hallway toward her own room, glad that she was not discovered.

Once inside her room, the Lady laid down on her bed, her emotions jumbled and swirling. A part of her felt angry that people were so catty as to gossip about her relationship with Anton. Who were they to judge? They had no idea the hell the two of them had gone through in the past months. It had been enough to test any relationship.

On the other hand, Gwynneth couldn't help but feel a little guilty about the rumors. She blamed herself for the obvious lack of affection between her and Anton. She was the one who was hesitant; she was the one who failed to be demonstrative, not Anton. She couldn't help but wonder if indeed Anton might seek out another lover. Though he told his mother that he wouldn't, the notion filled the Lady with insecurity.

As the winter winds whistled and gusted outside, Gwynneth started to cry. She cried for herself, she cried for Anton, and she cried for the conflicts between them that seemed to never end. As her eyes grew heavy and she began to drift off, she vowed to make up her mind about her husband and their relationship. She vowed to stop waffling and decide whether or not she could, and would, truly be a wife to Anton.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Weeks and weeks droned on until at last a glimmer of Spring slowly began to appear, thawing the snow and warming the air around Weldon. Inside Weldon, things were steadily growing warmer as well.

The Lord and Lady had been rebuilding their relationship slowly but successfully, moving things from a sort of casual friendship to a point where they were becoming emotionally and physically closer. They were getting reacquainted with one another, almost as if they were courting. Lately, however, their times together did not end with a simple peck upon the Lady's hand. Lately, things were ending - and sometimes even beginning - with tender caresses and increasingly passionate kisses.

It was often quite maddening for Anton. As the kisses became more heated and urgent, and the touches more frequent and tantalizing, she found herself tempted to push further. If Gwynneth would just give her a sign or say the word, she would gladly bow down and worship her whole body and soul. But she didn't want to move too quickly, lest she frighten the younger woman away for good. She knew Gwynneth still felt hesitant, and she knew why. Even though the blonde seemed to be comfortable with their increased kissing and touching, Anton still didn't want to push too far too fast. Oh but it was difficult.

For her part, Gwynneth was enjoying the close bond that was developing between them once again. At times, she was able to forget the past and imagine that things were as they used to be, and she was none the wiser. She enjoyed the way the two of them made time to be with one another, strolling the manor grounds together and walking hand-in-hand like they used to, or sharing a quiet, intimate meal, often by candlelight. They would sit in the study and read to one another or talk about all sorts of things, steadily moving toward being personal and open with each other rather than stilted and formal. Gwynneth felt as though Anton was wooing her, and she was thoroughly enjoying it.

Even the more physical aspect of their time together was slowly becoming enjoyable to the Lady. Though she was still hesitant and unsure of herself at times, she was learning to let herself go and simply enjoy the kisses and simple touches. She was determined to relax and relish in the pleasure of being close with another human being, rather than remain fixated on how unusual a situation it was. Gwynneth had, for the most part, come to grips with the fact that Anton was who he was, but she nonetheless fretted about the heightened intimacy and potential physical direction of their relationship.

Through all their prior intimacies, Gwynneth had never thought they were anything other than a man and a woman. Once she discovered the truth, however, the Lady had difficulty getting past the notion that their couplings - and indeed their entire relationship - would be considered greatly unnatural and unconscionably sinful. If anyone knew the truth...if anyone knew that they had been two women loving each other all along...what would people say? What would become of them if they were discovered?

Gwynneth felt badly whenever she considered being with Anton as sinful or unnatural, because in her heart, she never truly felt that way when she and Anton were together. Even though she now knew the truth about her husband, Gwynneth could not deny the deep feelings that still dwelled inside her heart. Unnatural or not, she could not deny that she was still drawn to Anton in the most emotional, spiritual, and physical ways.

She was a little ashamed to admit that she was frightened by the mere idea of being sexually intimate with another woman. Being with a woman was not only absolutely forbidden by the church, it was also a completely foreign concept to her. When they had been together before, Gwynneth thought Anton was a man because he had functioned completely as a man. But what would he do now? Would it be like before; would he still want to be with her as a man? Or would he at last reveal his true self to her? Would she finally be allowed to touch and feel the *real* Anton...the Anton who was - a *woman*? And what on earth would they do? What could two *women* do together? And then there was the worry that if they were to come together, as two women, would God strike both of them down for such a sacrilege? For knowingly committing such a terrible sin?

Thus far, Gwynneth had been able to convince herself that being close to Anton and rebuilding their relationship - even kissing and touching him - was not such a wretched crime. However, when things became heated, when the touching and kissing veered into sexual territory...that's when Gwynneth's fears stirred. That's when she felt the twinges of guilt over who they were and what they were doing.

It wasn't her fault that she felt these conflicts. She had been raised and taught that sex was something a man and woman did only for necessity; only for purposes of procreation. Being the weaker and more inferior of the two sexes, women were the ones who tended to revert to their most primal, animalistic urges. They succumbed to lust and arousal, desiring sex simply for pleasure. They were easily tempted and seduced by the devil, willingly falling prey to the more wicked nature of sex. It was the duty of the men, the husbands, to ensure that the wicked woman was properly chastised and kept under thumb. Any woman who felt lust or sought pleasure was evil and full of sin. These were the beliefs and teachings of the church; this was the stuff that had been pounded into Gwynneth's head all her life. Until she met Anton.

With Anton, sex had been pleasurable...perhaps not initially, but in time. Anton showed her that sex was not a bad thing; he encouraged her pleasure, and she eventually enjoyed it a great deal. Initially, Gwynneth did feel guilty and sinful; but over time, those feelings eased until she nearly forgot them. She was happy with Anton, and the feelings of desire and pleasure easily went hand in hand with that happiness. They had loved each other, and Gwynneth had decided that it could

not be wrong to enjoy sex with a husband you loved.

But things were different now. Desiring a woman...knowingly having sexual relations with a woman...that was very different. It was a much greater sin than simply enjoying sex; it was extraordinarily blasphemous. Gwynneth knew the position of the church in such matters; she supposed she could once again try to forget, but it would not be easy. Though Anton was still her husband, she now knew that physically, he was a woman. Having sex with Anton could never be for procreative purposes; it could only be for pleasure. It was unnatural. It was a sin.

So, Gwynneth's dilemma was two-fold: could she ignore the preachings of the church and overcome her guilty feelings enough to willingly be intimate with a woman? And, did she dare tempt the probable reprimand of God by knowingly committing such a sin? Did she love Anton enough to do these things? The worries and questions overwhelmed the young woman and made her head spin.

Sometimes Gwynneth fantasized about tempting fate and God by acting impulsively and just throwing herself at her husband. She fancied going to him and sitting herself upon his lap, kissing him lasciviously while running her hands through his dark hair. Or just reaching out and embracing him, telling him that she cared so much for him still and wanted very badly to show him. ...If only she had the courage to try...if only she knew what to do.

The Lady knew that it would be up to her to take the next step or give an indication that she was ready to move forward. Anton was clearly waiting for her; she just needed to work up the nerve to do or say something. She was sure that Anton must be frustrated, and she hated feeling so ambivalent. Things had definitely become more heated between them, and although Anton always remained polite and restrained, his burning kisses and tender caresses were slowly breaking down Gwynneth's walls of doubt. She hated that she faltered as soon as they became too passionate. She did not want to falter. She did not want to feel guilt - about anything.

Gwynneth told herself over and over that she was a fool to worry about sinning and being unnatural. They really had been unnatural all along, and they had already committed sin numerous times - she simply hadn't been aware of it. She wondered, then, if perhaps they had already been punished by God. Couldn't Anton's terrible battle injuries and all their trials and tribulations have served as penance for them? Hadn't they paid a price with their turbulent relationship? Had they not suffered enough? Gwynneth wanted to believe that God was loving and merciful. She wanted to believe that He would not overlook the fact that she and Anton genuinely cared deeply for each other, and were good to each other. Surely a benevolent God would not fault two people for truly caring and loving one another, no matter what their gender.

The Lady told herself that she should forget about the possibility of sin or no sin, and just make a decision. She just hoped that if she managed to work up the gumption to do something, Anton would take the lead and be as gentle and understanding as he always used to be.

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The dawn broke sunny and unusually warm. Anton arose early and decided, after strolling

through the gardens, that it would be a perfect day to take a ride through the western valley and have a picnic along one of the creeks that bordered Weldon.

The Marquess chose not to tell Gwynneth where they were headed nor what they were doing. The young mother had a tendency to fret and worry about the children if she were given too much advance notice, so Anton was learning that she had to take the blonde by surprise if she wanted to get her out of the castle. After speaking with several ladies maids, she successfully arranged for the children to stay at home and be attended to, then she sent word for Gwynneth's maid to prepare the Lady immediately for an outing on horseback.

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Though she wasn't overly keen on leaving her children for an extended period of time, the Lady was grateful that her husband arranged some time away for the two of them. Anton often surprised her with little pleasantries, and as they trotted along on their horses, she looked over at him and smiled, thinking how sweet and considerate he really was. They chatted lightly about various things until they reached a quiet little creek that meandered lazily through a grassy meadow. A wide watering hole formed at one of the bends, and once they'd unloaded the horses, Anton lead the beasts over to the hole to drink and rest.

Gwynneth spread the blanket out on the grass and began to snoop through the baskets and satchels, eager to see what goodies Anton had secretly packed them for the picnic lunch. Sweetbreads, cheeses and fruits were laid out, and the Lord and Lady sat back and thoroughly enjoyed themselves amid the burgeoning flowers and crisp country air.

They talked while they ate, discussing everything from the weather to politics. When the subject of the children came up, Gwynneth finally decided to express thanks to her husband. They were still seated on the blanket, Anton lying on his back, his hands clasped behind his head while Gwynneth sat beside him.

The Lady felt a tiny rush of nervousness as she cleared her throat, "Anton, I wanted to give you my thanks."

Blue eyes rolled over to look at her, "For what?"

"The christening," Gwynneth said. When Anton gave her a puzzled look, she continued. "For naming Anna Catherine after my mother."

Anton smiled, "You don't need to thank me for that. It was what you wanted."

"Yes, but..." she hesitated, "well, it wasn't what your mother wanted. And perhaps it wasn't what you wanted either..." she trailed off uncertainly.

Anton frowned and sat up, scooting closer to the blonde. She reached out and took the small hands in hers, locking their gazes together. "Gwynneth, what my mother wants isn't important. I want you to have what *you* want, and I strive to give it to you because I want you to be happy."

Tears immediately sprang to Gwynneth's eyes, "Thank you, Anton." The words strained against the tightness of her throat and she smiled faintly, trying to maintain her composure.

Anton moved even closer, her voice low and soft, "Are you happy, Gwynneth?"

The Lady looked up into eyes of sky blue and felt her heart flutter.

"After everything that's happened...are you happy here with me?"

Gwynneth heard the uncertain question in the soft voice and read the multitude of feelings in the clear, light eyes. Worry, fear, anxiety...they were emotions she knew well; she just never figured that Anton was feeling them too. She didn't want him to feel that way. She didn't want either of them to feel it. She wanted them to be happy, and in truth, she was. She lived very comfortably on a lovely estate; she had two beautiful children who were healthy and thriving; and she had a husband who was good to her, and the babies. Even though Anton was not the typical husband and their relationship was not what it used to be, Gwynneth decided that, yes, she had much to be happy about.

She reached up to cup Anton's cheek and gaze into his eyes, "Yes, Anton, I am. I am happy."

The heartfelt words touched Anton deep inside. A warm feeling of gratitude, as well as a sense of relief, washed over her and she smiled. Sliding a hand around Gwynneth's neck, she drew her toward her and leaned in, gently touching their lips together.

It felt as though the words they'd shared served to strengthen the connection they'd been rebuilding. Both of them felt it; felt undeniably closer.

Again their mouths met, the kisses slow and purposeful. Gwynneth closed her eyes and made herself relax to absorb the contact and relish the closeness. She reached up and ran her fingers through Anton's dark hair, moaning softly when she felt herself being lowered onto the blanket. Anton leaned over her and pressed their mouths together more firmly, their kisses becoming deeper, more passionate.

Gwynneth felt her lips and tongue being suckled and she moaned again, feeling a spark of desire flare. It surprised her, but she was determined to let herself go; determined to give free reign to her tentative feelings. She kissed Anton back, suckling his lips, exploring and tasting him, her pulse racing as they kissed with more urgency. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, feeling a rush of sensations fill her as she opened her legs beneath her skirts and his body came to rest between them. A hot shiver raced through her as she realized that she could feel her husband's manhood, or whatever it was, pressing against her intimately. The Lady felt her face flush and she nearly faltered with her kisses, so taken aback was she.

Gwynneth was well aware that Anton must wear some kind of 'prop' to give the appearance of being a man. She had noticed his manly appearance before, but of course didn't think much of it. Not until she came to know the truth. Now the realization that this 'prop' was suggestively

pressing against her left her feeling a little unsettled. What was it, exactly? What did it look like? Would Anton permit her to see it? Touch it?

At that thought, Gwynneth blushed furiously and released a soft groan. She felt Anton answer back with a gentle push of his hips, the unknown bulge pressing against her even more intimately. Despite her disconcert, Gwynneth felt her desire roar forth again, nearly taking her breath away. She was overwhelmed with sensation and emotion and finally whimpered as she faltered at last. Pulling away from the kisses, Gwynneth broke the delicious but unsettling contact.

Anton let her forehead fall to the blanket, her breathing ragged. She had been so aroused that she had failed to restrain herself, letting her desire get the best of her. Apparently it went too far for Gwynneth. It certainly seemed that the young woman was enjoying the heated exchange, but perhaps the increased physicality was too much, or maybe not wanted at all? Lifting her head up, Anton gazed down upon her wife. The pale face was flushed, cheeks tinged a pleasant pink. Rosebud lips were parted and Gwynneth was breathing raggedly, her blue-green eyes glazed as she raised them up to her. Anton could tell that Gwynneth was as moved as she was; it was obvious that she was aroused. So why did she stop? If the younger woman was excited by their activities, then her hesitation must be due to something else. *But what?*

Anton worried that she would never know when, or if, her wife might be ready to be sexually intimate with her. She didn't want to be frustrated, but she couldn't help but feel it. She needed to know what the future held before she went insane.

Gwynneth felt that she should say something, explain her hesitancy, but she could not find a voice for what she was feeling. She could only stare up at her husband, taking in the planes of his face, his kind eyes, his gentle expression. He was such a beautiful soul; why couldn't she just forge ahead and show him how she felt? She felt the sting of tears behind her eyes and she reached up to touch Anton's face, wanting to tell him that she was sorry...wanting to tell him that she did love him, but that she needed his patience and understanding.

Anton shifted her hands so that they held Gwynneth's head. She stroked the blonde hair gently, aware that the younger woman was near tears. "Gwynneth," Anton whispered, their lips nearly touching, "if I ask you a question, do you promise to answer it truthfully?"

Gwynneth blinked in surprise, "Yes, of course." She rasped, her throat tight with unshed sorrow and a slight feeling of dread.

Anton stared at her then closed her eyes. She whispered, her heart in her throat, "If I were to come to you and ask you to be with me..." she paused, hesitant to speak her want, "to lie with me, as my wife...as my lover..."

Gwynneth's eyes widened. Her chest constricted and her stomach began to churn.

Anton opened her eyes and looked at Gwynneth, "...what answer would you give me?"

The two of them stared as Gwynneth tried to formulate an answer. She licked her lips and swallowed, her heart pounding beneath her ribs. She could not deny that she had been aroused, but she was also afraid to proceed further. She was still uncertain, and she knew she had to be honest about it.

"I...I cannot deny that I enjoy being close with you, Anton, and I feel very...drawn to you, still." Anton quirked a small smile. "I just..." Gwynneth paused and blinked long, "I...I'm..." she stammered and shook her head, looking for the words, "I'm afraid." The words came out as a shameful whisper.

Anton's eyes dropped and her heart sunk. *Afraid? Of what? ...Of me? ...Of being with me?* She thought hard for a moment. *Or perhaps of what it would mean for us to be together now that she knows the truth?*

Anton had long ago become accustomed to going against convention and the teachings of the church. She was able to ignore all thoughts and perceptions of sin; she had to in order to survive. But, she realized, Gwynneth probably did not feel that way. The young Lady had been raised quite differently, and even though Anton felt as though she'd made strides with convincing Gwynneth to feel and act more freely, their unusual situation might be too much. It was one thing to unwittingly go against convention and commit a sin, but now that Gwynneth knew the truth, she might feel differently.

The Marquess closed her eyes and sighed quietly, trying to hide her dejection. Gwynneth's response was not a complete turndown, it was just an admission. Anton supposed it was an understandable one; still, she couldn't help but feel a stab of hurt. *She's afraid to be with me because of what I am.*

Gwynneth saw her husband's reaction and felt badly. She didn't want to hurt Anton. She loved him. *I do*, she thought, sudden clarity gripping her, *I do love him.*

Before another word could be spoken, Anton moved off of Gwynneth and rolled to her side. Staying close, she leaned in and touched the blonde's face, bringing their eyes together again. "Gwynneth," Anton began in a low whisper, "I do not mean to tempt you into something you perceive as...shameful or unnatural. And I certainly would not force you to do anything you're not comfortable with."

Surprised at her husband's perceptiveness, Gwynneth shook her head and opened her mouth to deny his words, but Anton held a finger to her lips, quieting her.

"Just know this - I love you, and I desire you. If that makes me the most wretched kind of sinner, then so be it. I do not care whether or not I am judged. I cannot prevent my feelings, nor will I try to."

The Lady's face flushed with shame and her heart thudded so loudly she was certain the noise could be heard across the entire meadow. Why couldn't she be as brave as Anton? Why couldn't she just forget what others thought and follow her heart?

Anton leaned in closer, "I miss you, Gwynneth...I miss what we had together." With that, she leaned in and kissed Gwynneth deeply, passionately, wanting to deliver her message loud and clear.

They broke apart and Gwynneth stared into smoky blue eyes, a rush of emotion and excitement coursing through her.

"I shall wait for you. If you decide that you are ready to move forward, I shall be here." Anton gently trailed her hand across Gwynneth's face then moved away. She stood up and brushed her pants off, her gaze pointedly kept away as she spoke again. "We should be getting back. I'll fetch the horses."

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[Second Son 16](#)

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~ Second Son ~

by [A. K. Naten](#)

*** Well, here it is, completely finished, as I promised so many of you for so long. Hard to believe, right? As always, you should probably re-read [Part 16](#) to refresh your memory - hell, you might have to re-read the whole friggin' thing! It's been THAT long! Again, I apologize for that. To those of you who stuck by me and kept me afloat through my accident and then my Father's passing, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I am so very grateful for everyone's patience and support. Thank you, thank you, thank you. ***

For disclaimers, etc., see [The Intro](#).

PART SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

As night fell upon the castle one eve, Gwynneth decided to climb the tower and have a quiet moment to herself. The burgeoning Spring was proving to be warm, but the evenings still held a

chill, and the Lady pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders, glad that she thought to bring the garment with her.

As she looked up at the bright stars, Gwynneth thought about how much her life had changed in the space of just a year. She had come to Weldon a simple, innocent girl, naive and unwise in the ways of life and love. So much had happened since then. The girl she had been was long gone. In her place now stood a woman...a wife...a mother. And nothing was simple anymore...everything was complicated.

Nearly a fortnight had passed since the Lord and Lady had confessed their feelings in the meadow, and Gwynneth felt the weight of her fear and indecisiveness grow greater every day. Anton had not touched her since. He remained cordial and polite, but it was obvious that the Marquess was saddened, or worse - disappointed. To know that she was the cause filled Gwynneth with great distress.

Anton had said that he missed her, and more importantly, that he still loved her. Gwynneth did not doubt the sincerity of his words, nor did she think that he'd said them merely as a cheap attempt at seduction. He said he loved her and she believed him. Anton's tender honesty, and the fact that he made it clear he was willing to wait for her to make up her mind melted her heart. Gwynneth was torn.

She looked up at the stars, wishing things could be different, in many ways. She wished she could simply devote herself to her babies and not worry about the vexing situation with Anton. She wished she could just forget temptations of the flesh altogether and simply disregard things like love, passion, and desire. But...she could not. When she lay down in her bed at night, all she could think about was Anton...his fiery kisses, his tender caresses, the longing in his beautiful eyes. Gwynneth shook her head and sighed. Though her mind was at odds with the situation, her body was not, and she feared that it was not strong enough to continue to resist temptation. Her eyes began to burn as a surge of tears filled them.

If only she could convince her mind to simply throw all care and caution to the wind. It would be so wonderful; to take Anton in her arms and just love him, just forget that anything was different and be with him as a lover. How glorious it would be to just pretend that nothing had changed and simply act on her wants and desires. Deep down inside, Gwynneth knew that was what her body wanted to do, what it craved to do. If she were to go to Anton's chambers right now and find him there, looking at her with those soulful blue eyes, she knew she would give in to her wants. She fancied it would be sweet relief to simply let him take her.

A tear broke free and rolled down Gwynneth's cheek as she looked heavenward, hoping and wishing that the starry sky held an answer for her.

"If I go to him willingly, knowingly," she began aloud, her voice a quavering whisper, "if I let him love me...if I give in to my wants and desires...does that make me wicked and sinful? Will we be punished for being unnatural and loving one another?" Her voice broke with anguish, "God above, if you hear me, tell me what to do!" Tears streamed down her face, but the sky remained silent.

Gwynneth was not surprised. She really didn't expect an answer to such a complicated dilemma.

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It was late one afternoon when a courier brought a letter to the Manor. Anton was in the library reading when a servant brought it to her. Assuming it was for her, the Marquess broke the seal, opened it, and began reading. As her eyes devoured the words, the words began to devour her heart.

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Lady Marina was sitting in her chambers quietly working on her needlework when a sharp knock sounded at her door.

"Come," she called out. Anton entered and the Lady smiled, returning to her sewing. "Oh, good evening my dear." When she received no answer, Marina looked up, realizing something was amiss. "What's the matter?"

Anton walked forward, her face tight, her body radiating anger. "We've just received a letter from Sir Richard." Marina looked at her expectantly. Anton held up the piece of parchment, "He states in it that Clarendon has been fully secured and restored and is ready for Gwynneth's '*occupation*'."

Marina's eyebrows lifted upward, though she said nothing. Anton walked closer, coming to stand in front of the older woman.

"Do you know anything of this, Mother?" she demanded, angrily tossing the scroll onto Marina's lap.

Marina calmly dropped her needlework and picked up the parchment, reading it quickly. "I knew that Gwynneth had, at one time, stated that she intended to leave here and go live at Clarendon, if that's what you're asking." Marina replied evenly.

"You knew?" Anton accused.

Marina frowned at the inference in her daughter's voice, "Yes, and so did you, Anton. I told you some time ago."

"Yes, but..." Anton hesitated for a moment. She vaguely remembered her mother telling her about this, back when she was still bed-ridden and Gwynneth was in seclusion. However, so much had happened since then, she did not think that it remained so. "Well, *some time ago* is much different than *now*! She can't wish to leave now! Not after we've spent so much time rebuilding things between us and growing close again!"

Anton spat the words out quickly, crossly. She really didn't want to reveal too much to her

mother. She wasn't sure if the older woman knew just how close she and Gwynneth had become - or rather, were trying to become - and she certainly did not want to get into a discussion about it now.

Marina studied her daughter's angry, distraught expression. Anton had obviously forgotten about Gwynneth's declaration to leave Weldon once the children were born and Clarendon was ridded of all Gerrod's minions. Obviously the Lord thought that the Lady had changed her mind...about many things. In truth, Marina had hoped it too. Hoped, but not assumed, like Anton had done.

"You assumed she'd be staying now that tensions have eased between the two of you. Is that it?" Marina queried carefully.

"Yes, I...I suppose I did." Anton sighed loudly, running a hand through her hair, "It just never occurred to me that she would wish to leave, still." Her voice dropped in intensity as the hurt began to take over. "And Richard...? Of all people, *Richard* is assisting her with her abandonment. ...How could he betray me so?"

Marina watched as Anton's face and body began to slump with dejection. She truly hated to see her daughter distressed and unhappy yet again. It seemed as though things had been going well with the young couple; that they were repairing the damage between them and steadily rebuilding their relationship. The idea of Weldon enjoying some happiness actually seemed attainable. If Gwynneth left now, Anton would be crushed, and the children would most likely bear the brunt of the misery that would overwhelm the Manor.

Marina's thoughts were interrupted by Anton abruptly turning and walking toward the door. "Where are you going?" she asked anxiously.

Anton looked back, "To speak to Gwynneth, obviously." Her voice was again terse, her demeanor stiff.

The Marchioness Dowager sensed an imminent explosion behind her daughter's darkened eyes. She hated the idea of more turmoil and misery. "Anton, wait," she said, rising out of her chair and quickly walking toward the Marquess. "Take a moment to reflect before you do or say something you may later regret."

"Tch," Anton sniffed angrily as she snatched the parchment out of the older woman's hands, "Odd advice coming from *you*, Mother. I should think you'd be happy to see Gwynneth go."

Marina's mouth fell slightly open, not expecting the harsh sling from her daughter. But, instead of snapping back, as was her instinct, she remained perfectly calm. "Perhaps I have realized the error of my ways." she said evenly. "Perhaps I am able to look beyond my likes and dislikes enough to realize that Gwynneth is a good wife and a good mother." She looked at Anton gravely, "Perhaps I have come to realize that there *are* some things that are worth fighting for."

Anton regarded her with a frown, absorbing her words and their meaning. She was surprised at her Mother's admissions; still, it did not erase the crushing hurt she felt. Her voice was small

when she finally spoke, "I cannot fight for someone who does not want to be fought for."

"How can you be sure she doesn't want you to fight for her?" Marina offered, smiling gently.

"She *knows* how I feel." Anton snapped. "If she truly wishes to leave, I'll not stand in her way."

Marina shook her head, "Don't let go of her so easily, Anton. Perhaps Gwynneth's mind is not made up just yet. Perhaps you can change it." She reached up and cupped her daughter's cheek. "If you want her, *fight* for her."

Anton frowned again, her expression darkening, "She knows that I want her! If she does not want *me*, the fight is pointless! I'll not humiliate myself any more than I already have!"

Marina closed her eyes and sighed. *How can I make her see reason when her mind is so closed.* "Just take a moment to reflect before you confront her, Anton. Things are not always as they appear. This you know better than anyone."

Anton stared at her Mother for a moment before turning and exiting the room. Once she left, Marina released a long sigh of frustration. She wondered if life at Weldon would ever be harmonious.

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Anton strolled through the gardens for hours after leaving her Mother, her mind a maelstrom of thoughts. She re-read the letter, thinking that it did indeed sound as though Gwynneth still intended to carry out her plans for desertion. In Anton's mind, it also seemed to shed light onto why the Lady repeatedly hesitated being physical and shied away from her. Gwynneth claimed that she still cared for her - was she lying? Playing with her emotions? Maybe getting back at her for her own deception? Anton didn't want to think that her sweet wife would do such a thing. She wanted to think that her Mother was right; that Gwynneth's feelings had changed and, as her Mother said, things were not as the letter seemed to indicate.

But what if they aren't? Anton's heart constricted at the thought. *What if Gwynneth has finally come to the conclusion that she is too ashamed to be with me, to be intimate with me? What if she's decided she'd rather be with someone else...someone like Richard?* Feeling greatly depressed, Anton sat down upon a bench and stared up at the darkening sky, her eyes stinging and her heart aching. *Still, how could Gwynneth leave the children? ...It doesn't seem possible that she'd be willing to do that.* Knowing she'd never get answers by herself, Anton finally gathered her nerve and headed inside to confront her wife.

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As Anton approached Gwynneth's chamber door, she cautioned herself to be calm. She did not want to be harsh with the Lady, but the feelings of hurt and betrayal were still simmering inside her. Drawing a deep breath, Anton knocked. A soft voice bade her to enter, and she stepped inside quietly.

Gwynneth had both children lying on the bed with her, appearing to have just fed both of them. A white kerchief was still laid across her lap and the front of her chemise was untied. Her hands rubbed and tickled the babies gently while she murmured soft, playful words. Giving Anton a sidelong glance, she smiled at the babes and said in a sing-song voice, "Here comes your Poppa to play with you."

Anton almost turned around and left. Seeing Gwynneth with the babies just twisted the knife in her heart and caused a fresh wave of pain.

Wondering at Anton's silence and distant stance, Gwynneth looked up. She felt a chill race down her spine, knowing immediately that something was amiss. Anton had a strange, somewhat fierce look on his face, not soft and adoring as usual. He held a crumpled piece of parchment in his hand. "Anton?" Gwynneth queried softly, "What is it?"

Girding herself, Anton walked closer and thrust her arm out, tossing the piece of parchment onto the bed. "Richard sends word that Clarendon has been secured and is ready for your *occupation*."

The words were clipped and spoken sharply; Anton was obviously upset. All color drained from Gwynneth's face as she quickly realized what was going on.

The Marquess stepped even closer, the feelings of betrayal swiftly resurfacing, "Is that what you're planning to do? To leave Weldon? To leave me, *and* the children!"

Gwynneth blinked nervously, her mind refuting the accusations, but her tongue stumbling with the words. "I-I didn't...I don't-"

Anton interrupted, "Know this, Gwynneth, if you *are* planning to leave, you shall be going alone; the children shall stay with me." She glared at the blonde, daring her to argue. "And I would request that you leave immediately, before the children become attached to you in any way."

Gwynneth was shocked at Anton's harshly spat words. She placed a hand over her chest, acutely feeling a stab of pain. The abrupt turn of events had rendered her speechless.

Anton hated the stunned, bewildered look on Gwynneth's face, and she could feel her own heart breaking, but she could not waver. She had laid the ultimatum before Gwynneth as she had to. Now she had to walk away. She would deal with her feelings later.

Turning on her heel, Anton briskly stepped away, her mind racing and her heart conflicted. She reached the door and began to open it, but suddenly, she stopped.

She just could not give up so easily. She had to have some answers. ...She had to know the truth.

The loud slam of the door made Gwynneth jump and the babies' eyes went wide with surprise. She watched with fearful trepidation as Anton banged his fist against the door then slowly turned around to stare at her with an unreadable expression. Memories of another time when Anton

exploded with fury replayed in the Lady's mind, and a wave of fear rippled through her body.

Anton blinked long and drew a deep breath, determined to control her emotions and speak calmly. She approached the bed slowly, her expression changing from one of anger to one of sorrow. Looking down at Gwynneth, she spoke quietly, "You said you were happy."

The words came out so soft and sad and heartbroken that Gwynneth's heart clenched tight. She was filled with new feelings of anguish, and tears immediately began to flood her eyes.

"Why?" Anton continued, her voice nearly cracking, "Why could you not tell me the truth? Why could you not tell me that you wished to *leave*?"

"I-I..." Gwynneth fumbled with an explanation. "I changed my mind about it," she finally managed.

The Lord frowned, "About what? About leaving Weldon in favor of Clarendon, or leaving *me* in favor of Richard?!" The feeling of jealousy reared its ugly head, making her soft words become hard again.

The Lady gasped, "Richard? No, I-"

Anton forged on, "Is that why you have repeatedly spurned me? Because you simply can't bear the thought of being with a *false* man when you have a *real* man waiting for you at Clarendon! Is that it?!"

Gwynneth was horrified at Anton's line of thinking, "What?! Anton, no-"

"Don't *LIE* to me, Gwynneth!" Anton's voice boomed suddenly, loudly, her fury instantly erupting. Frightened by the ruckus, both babies began to cry.

Somehow Gwynneth found the fortitude to quickly speak her mind instead of shy away, as she'd done before. She knew that she had to make Anton see the truth, or all would be lost. "I am *not* lying to you!" she said with conviction. "Richard is but a *friend* to me, that is all!"

Anton stared at her, demanding explanation, his eyes radiating fire and rage.

Gwynneth took a deep breath, trying to steady herself, "After Gerrod was killed, I asked Richard to take some troops and secure Clarendon. I wanted to make sure none of Gerrod's filth remained there." She drew another deep breath, "Then, after I...after I found out about...about you," she stammered uncomfortably, "well, I began to think that perhaps it would be best if I went away...to Clarendon."

Anton frowned at her, "But why?" she stared pointedly at the blonde, "Did I repulse you that much?"

Gwynneth shook her head, "No! No, Anton, it was just...just..." she blinked rapidly, struggling to

express herself, "I was just so *confused!* So bewildered! You can't imagine!" Tears and emotion began to choke her and she couldn't think or speak clearly. The babies wailed louder, sensing their mother's distress.

Anton wanted more answers, but it was obvious that it wouldn't be possible with the babies, and Gwynneth, becoming so distraught. When she leaned in closer to Gwynneth, the blonde shied away slightly, and Anton felt ashamed. Backing up a step, she stared at the Lady and spoke quietly, "I'll only say this to you one time...after this, it shall be up to you."

The words were calm, but the Lady held her breath anxiously, her eyes wide.

"I ask you *not* to leave. I ask you to stay here with me, with the children." Anton pressed on, her feelings jumbled, "Perhaps with time, you might come to love me...but, if you cannot, then...I shall learn to live with that." She nearly stumbled over the words, but continued on, "Please, Gwynneth...please don't abandon the children. Don't leave them without a mother."

Gwynneth could only stare, dumbfounded. They held each other's gaze for a moment, then the Marquess turned and abruptly exited the room, leaving behind two crying babies and a shell-shocked Lady.

Carefully gathering up both children, Gwynneth held them in her arms and closed her eyes, rocking gently as she began to cry along with them, "You don't understand, Anton," she whispered mournfully, "You don't *understand!*"

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The Marquess was hiding in her room, numbly watching the dancing flames of the fire as it burned bright. She had poured herself a brandy and sat uneasily in a chair as she contemplated what she could do about her wife.

A rap on her chamber door interrupted her misery. Opening it, Anton was surprised to find Gwynneth standing there looking small and nervous, her eyes red-rimmed.

"You have had a chance to speak your mind, My Lord, now please allow me to speak mine."

Anton stared at her for a moment. She hated it when Gwynneth addressed her so formally. It was a clear indication that the blonde was ill at ease with her, and Anton could hardly stand that. Still, she was surprised that Gwynneth was brave enough, and perhaps determined enough, to come and speak to her. Not very long ago, the young Lady would never have done such a thing. Anton said nothing; she simply opened the door wider and bade the Lady entrance.

Gwynneth was trembling as Anton closed the chamber door. She followed him over to the fireplace where they both sat down facing one another. Swallowing several times, Gwynneth finally worked up the nerve to talk. "Firstly, allow me to say that I never meant to play you nor fill you with doubt about any of my intentions." Anton just looked at her, expressionless. Twisting her hands nervously in her lap, Gwynneth forged on. "At first, I will admit, I did not

think it would be possible for me to stay here. I thought that I should just leave. But I have long since changed my mind."

The Marquess seemed to relax at that, but only slightly. Still, Gwynneth saw the subtle reaction, and felt that she could speak more openly. Her voice softened, "You must understand how incredibly overwhelmed I was, Anton. Finding out your true identity was so...*unbelievable* to me."

Anton's gaze fell away as she felt a twinge of guilt.

"It was all so unreal, so incomprehensible. I felt so terribly betrayed."

Again the Lord felt guilt and she closed her eyes as the feeling began to crawl up her throat, threatening to choke her. It hurt to hear Gwynneth say these things aloud.

The Lady continued on, "I felt as though it would be impossible for me to stay here and live with you. I was distraught and confused, and I didn't think I would ever get over it. I didn't think I could accept the situation...or you." She ended in a shameful whisper.

"And so you were simply going to leave? Just like that? Without speaking to me about it?" Anton's voice was soft, but strained.

The Lady looked down, blinking as moisture began to fill her eyes and her throat constricted with emotion. This was so difficult, but she was determined to continue. "I couldn't talk to you...not at first. I didn't know how." She looked up, meeting Anton's frown, "I...I felt like I didn't know who you were anymore, and I..." she hesitated, hating the thought of stirring up more pain, but she needed to get the truth out. She closed her eyes and a tear rolled down her cheek. "...I didn't think I wanted to know you. At the time, I was sure that the best thing was to simply leave and get away from you. I didn't think it would hurt anyone; I didn't think anyone would really care." She opened her eyes and locked gazes again, "I realize now that it was heartless and cowardly of me to think those things."

Anton remained quiet for a moment, thinking as she watched the tears run down her wife's tense face. She thought about what her Mother had said about fighting for what she wanted. But, based on what Gwynneth was saying, she still wasn't sure that she had anything to fight for.

Sky blue eyes studied blue-green ones intensely until Anton finally spoke. "I am truly sorry, Gwynneth, for so many things. I regret that I lied to you about who and what I was. I regret that I filled you with such a sense of worthlessness that you felt no one cared about you." Gwynneth frowned but Anton continued, "I'm sorry if you felt you couldn't talk to me. I'm sorry that I am no longer who or what you want, and I apologize if you feel trapped or imprisoned here."

Tears continued to trail down Gwynneth's cheeks and she shook her head, opening her mouth to refute Anton's words, but the Marquess held a hand up to silence her.

"Do not misunderstand me when I say that I wish for you to stay here and remain my wife. I

know you do not want to live a life of lies and false pretenses. I assure you that I do not want you to feel obligated to be anything nor do anything more than appear as my wife publicly, and be a mother to the children. As I said, I shall learn to live with the reality that you cannot function as my wife in private, and I will grant you as much freedom as I can without arousing too much suspicion-

Gwynneth quickly slipped out of her chair and clasped Anton's upheld hand, instantly silencing the Lord. "You haven't allowed me to finish, husband." Her voice warbled with emotion but she was determined to speak her mind as she knelt in front of him. "I wish to stay here with the children and with you, and I wish to be your wife, in every sense of the word."

Anton's heart leapt into her throat. Gwynneth's voice was soft and her face, though streaked with tears, was open and sincere. She held her breath as the blonde continued.

"If I have insulted or humiliated you with my hesitation, I am truly, deeply sorry. I am sure that you must be frustrated and angry, and if you cannot bear to be with me right now, I shall not blame you." She hesitated before adding, "But, please understand that I *do* wish to be with you."

Anton did not want to give herself away by reacting too strongly, and it was difficult to hide her feelings of surprise and relief. She felt like she would burst with emotion. Her throat was closed tight and her eyes began to burn with unshed tears...tears of hope and joy that were pleading to let loose. She blinked her eyes rapidly as she glanced away, fighting to control herself.

Gwynneth could see that Anton was trying very hard to hide his feelings behind a mask. It made her feel a little more certain that she could say what she wanted to say. She gathered his hands in hers, holding them securely. "With everything we've been through, Anton, you have remained true to me; you have been my anchor and my guiding light through all the storminess." Dropping her gaze for a moment, the Lady continued, "I know that things can never be as they were before, but that doesn't matter. I have come to realize that my feelings for you have not changed, and I know now that deep down, you are still the same person." She paused, clutching Anton's hands tighter, "I still love you, Anton," she whispered, "and I want to be with you, as your wife...and as your lover, if you will have me." Looking up again, she saw Anton's eyes brimming with tears. "If you are willing to be with me...to go slowly with me," she hesitated, her face coloring slightly with embarrassment, "If you could show me how to please you," she blinked long and swallowed against her dry throat, "If you will teach me, I am certain I can be what you want."

Anton squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head a little, not quite able to believe what she was hearing. "Gwyn," she finally responded, "Oh my Gwyn." She leaned forward and reached out cup the blonde's face, "I am the one who should be asking all these things of you!" Drawing the Lady closer, she spoke quietly, with great emotion. "I want to be with you more than anything. You have always been what I've wanted, what I've needed." No longer able to contain her feelings, a tear escaped down her cheek. "I will do whatever you want; I will give you whatever you need, and we shall go as slowly as you command." She bent and brought their lips together in a soft kiss. "I just...I don't want you to do this out of some sense of duty or obligation-

"No," Gwynneth interrupted, shaking her head. "It is not out of obligation. I do this of my own

free will, because it is what I want." She reached up and placed her hands on top of his, "*You are what I want.*"

Sky blue eyes desperately searched jade ones, still finding the words hard to grasp. Anton clutched both of Gwynneth's hands in hers and squeezed them, "You have been so uncertain for so long...why the sudden change?"

Gwynneth smiled gently, assuredly, "I love you. I never stopped loving you, I was just afraid. Afraid to go against convention and follow what my heart was telling me." she whispered.

"And you're not afraid now?"

She smiled wider, "No." She wrapped her arms around her husband's neck. "You allay my fears. You always have. I want to be with you, Anton. I *need* to be with you."

Anton wanted to weep as she bent and pressed a kiss against tender lips, "My love, you have no idea how long I've waited for this." Again they kissed, then Anton pulled back to look deeply into her wife's eyes, "I just don't wish for you to do something you shall later regret. I want you to be certain."

Gwynneth stared deeply into his eyes, "I am certain, and I shan't regret it." She returned the kiss, pressing a little harder. "I love you. You are my husband, my dearest friend. I want to show you how much you mean to me."

Anton sighed and closed her eyes. Leaning forward, she touched their foreheads together and whispered, "Thank you, Gwynneth...thank you." She opened her eyes and they looked at each other intently, "I love you so very much, my wife."

"I love you too, my husband."

They smiled at one another before joining their lips together again and again, their renewed passion arising slowly, but certainly.

Breaking apart, Anton cupped Gwynneth's face, "Stay the night with me." The Lady's eyes widened. "Just to lie together, that's all," Anton quickly added. "I just want to lie next to you and feel you in my arms."

Gwynneth relaxed and closed her eyes, smiling, "Yes...that would be wonderful."

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

For several nights the Lord and Lady slept together in the same bed. Gwynneth would strip down and change into her chemise and Anton into a long sleeping shirt. Determined to go slowly and

not rush one another, they went no further than kissing and caressing. They simply laid in each others arms and enjoyed the feeling of their renewed connection and warmth.

It was almost a fortnight until things began to change. The kisses started to become deeper, the caresses bolder. They both knew they were at the precipice of consummating their revived love. It was just a matter of someone taking the initiative and making the first overture.

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The Lady stood in the bathing area, waiting for the servant girls to finish filling her tub with hot water. As the girls hustled and bustled around the room, the blonde's mind was adrift with thoughts...thoughts that mostly centered around Anton and their rejuvenated feelings.

Gwynneth felt certain that she was ready to fully rekindle the intimacy that she and Anton had once shared. Through their nights of kissing and nestling together, she realized how very much she'd missed her husband's touch. Anton made her feel safe, loved and aroused like no one else ever could. Gwynneth could not deny that she was excited at the prospect of finally making love, though she still wasn't sure what two women could do together. She assumed that Anton knew and could tell her.

Gwynneth constantly wondered if Anton would be ready and willing to give himself completely. She wondered how he might go about it. Would he only wish for her to doff her clothing, as they'd done in the past, or would he at last doff his clothes as well? Would he allow her to see and feel all of him?

"Yer bath be ready now, Milady." The servant girl's voice pulled Gwynneth away from her thoughts. "Shall we attend ye?" The girl asked, holding up a towel for the Lady to use.

"No, thank you, girls," Gwynneth smiled, deciding she wanted some solitude. "I can manage myself." The girls curtseyed and left the room, Gwynneth locking the door behind them.

As the Lady undressed, she looked over her own body with critical eyes. She realized that, when and if Anton gave himself to her, this would be what she'd be seeing - a female body. Sliding her palms up her thighs, she wondered how they would compare to Anton's thighs. She trailed her fingers up her torso, caressing her stomach and her breasts. *This is what I'll be touching...what I'll be loving*, she thought as her eyes fluttered shut, *a woman's body*.

As she continued with her tentative self-examination, she wondered what Anton might feel like. She had only ever felt Anton's body through his clothes, so she had no idea. Would his skin be silky and smooth, or rough and coarse? She wondered whether any parts of his body would be soft and fleshy like hers, or if it would all be hard and muscular, like a man's.

Stepping into the warm water, Gwynneth considered how her body had become fleshier from her pregnancy. Her once flat stomach was now gently rounded; her pert breasts had become heavy and fuller; her narrow hips and rump were now more pronounced and curvaceous. She cupped her breasts with her hands, feeling their warm weight, wondering what Anton would think of

them. Would he find her appealing? Gwynneth didn't think she had become terribly unattractive, but she had definitely changed; she felt older, more matronly. She could only hope that her husband would find her desirable, as he once did.

A vision crept into her mind, unbidden: she imagined going to Anton's chambers and simply dropping her robe and offering herself to him. What would he do? Gwynneth smiled. He would gladly welcome her to his bed, she was sure of it. She could see the look of surprise that would cross his face...he would whisper her name, his voice tremulous with arousal...he would touch her gently, his fingers trailing fire all over her skin...and he would hold her so tightly as they kissed and touched and loved...

"Mmm," Gwynneth moaned aloud, closing her eyes. She pushed her hands down into the water, letting them slide across her stomach and down her thighs. It felt nice to be touched; it would feel nicer if she weren't doing it herself. She liked the feel of soft, silky skin beneath her hands and decided that she not only wanted Anton to feel her this way, she wanted to feel him as well. *I can only imagine what it might be like to feel Anton's skin against mine...to touch his legs, his stomach, his...*

The Lady blushed as her thoughts produced a hot flush that raced down her body. She was going to drive herself insane if she continued to fantasize and think lustful thoughts. *Only one way to stop the insanity*, she thought, expelling another loud sigh.

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The Marquess had gotten ready for bed some time ago and now sat in front of the fireplace in her chambers, wondering where Gwynneth might be. They had gotten themselves into a comfortable little routine, and Anton very much looked forward to their nights together, even if they were still rather chaste.

Though she wished she could be loving Gwynneth in the flesh, literally, Anton was grateful they were sharing as much as they were. Lying with her wife every night, kissing, touching and holding her close...that in itself was a wonderful gift.

Anton smiled as she thought about Gwynneth. Though she had grown and matured so much as an individual, Anton marveled at how shy and unsure the blonde could still be at times, especially during their more intimate moments. She often wished she could ravage Gwynneth and show her just how much she wanted her, but, no, she would never do such a thing. Anton had promised to take things slowly, and she was bound and determined to do just that. *She will come 'round one day*, Anton told herself as she peered at the dancing flames. *And if she doesn't...I will still be happy and grateful for everything I have*. The Marquess smiled and closed her eyes.

A soft tap at the door opened Anton's eyes and increased her grin. She hopped up out of the chair, anxious to greet her wife.

"Ah, here you are," Anton smiled as she opened the door for the Marchioness. "I thought perhaps

you had fallen asleep in your chambers without me."

Gwynneth half-smiled back, "Oh no, not at all." She entered the room, butterflies filling her stomach. "I took a hot bath, and, uhm...I suppose it ran a bit lengthy." Her mouth twitched in a small grin as she nervously tucked her hair behind her ear.

Anton noticed her wife's anxiety. She would obviously have to tread very lightly tonight. "No worries, love." She bent and placed a quick kiss on tender lips. "I'll just bank the fire and we can go to sleep."

As the Marquess tended the fire, she wondered what had caused Gwynneth's disquiet tonight. The fact that she was later than usual made the Lord worry that perhaps the Lady was having second thoughts about them sleeping together. Anton felt a slight wave of frustration ripple through her, but she pushed it down. She was absolutely determined to practice patience.

"There we are, that should hold us-" The words died on her lips when she turned around.

Gwynneth stood before her with her white gown unbuttoned and opened wide, exposing herself in all her wondrous, naked glory. Anton could only stare, dumbfounded and open-mouthed.

Gwynneth fidgeted with her hands. It had taken every ounce of courage she had to come to her husband's chambers like this. She didn't want to lose her nerve now. "I-I wondered if tonight we might be...closer." She blushed at Anton's blatant stare but forged on, "if we might feel each other...skin against skin."

Anton still gawked, struggling to grasp what she was seeing and hearing. When it finally registered what Gwynneth was asking, she nodded her head vigorously, "Y-Yes, of course." She walked toward the blonde, coming to stand in front of her, "that would be wonderful." She smiled with relief.

The Lady looked up at her husband shyly, her cheeks still reddened from her bold actions. Gwynneth worried that Anton would think her a harlot for trying to seduce him, but once she saw the flash of hunger in his eyes and tasted the passion on his lips as he bent and kissed her, she knew she'd made the right decision.

"Come," Anton said, taking the Lady by the hand and leading her to the bed. Gwynneth's hand shook, making Anton stop. "You're trembling," she said, sliding arms around the younger woman's waist.

Gwynneth dropped her head and rested her palms against Anton's chest, "I'm a little nervous." She admitted in a whisper.

"Don't be." Anton said, lifting the Lady's chin up. "I love you," He bent and kissed her, "and I'll do whatever you want."

He kissed her again, wanting to reinforce the words, and Gwynneth responded by wrapping her

arms around his neck and kissing him deeply. In between kisses, Anton slowly pushed the rest of her wife's gown off her shoulders until it dropped onto the floor, leaving her completely nude. The Lady shivered as her husband looked at her with darkened eyes.

Anton placed her hands on Gwynneth's shoulders and ran them down the softest arms she'd ever felt, "You're more lovely than ever," she whispered, her voice rough with desire.

"I...I was afraid," Gwynneth whispered ashamedly, "that my body had changed too much...that perhaps I wouldn't be appealing to you any longer."

"Never," Anton hushed, drawing her closer, "you will always be beautiful to me, Gwynneth."

The light from the fire illuminated Anton's face, and Gwynneth could easily see the truth shining in his eyes. She smiled, feeling reassured and emboldened as Anton kissed her again before directing them both up onto the bed.

Lying beside one another, Anton leaned over her wife and smiled down at the lovely flushed face beneath her. She brushed some golden hair away from Gwynneth's face and lightly stroked her cheek, marveling once again at the blonde's beauty.

Reaching up, Gwynneth tenderly traced around Anton's lips with her fingertips, appreciating and enjoying the calm, gentle intimacy of the moment. Anton turned her head and pressed her lips against Gwynneth's palm, making the Lady shiver and blush hotly. Tugging lightly on her husband's neck, Gwynneth brought their lips together in a loving kiss.

True to his word, Anton moved slowly, completely allowing Gwynneth to set the pace. The Lady let herself go to enjoy the soft caress of Anton's lips, the soothing touch of his hands, the mild pressure of his body against hers. She felt her arousal growing steadily and realized how very much she had missed this intimate connection. She was certain now that everything would turn out just fine and they could at last put all their difficulties behind them and be happy once again.

"My love," Anton murmured, breaking their delicious contact. "I have wanted this for so very long." Anton closed her eyes and pressed her face against a soft neck, then pulled away, gazing deeply into Gwynneth's eyes, "Are you certain that you will not hate me come the morn? That you will not feel shame?"

Gwynneth smiled and ran her hands through his hair, pulling him to her and kissing him hard before peering back into open, hope-filled eyes of the most beautiful blue. "No," she whispered, "I shall not." Anton visibly relaxed and smiled.

Shifting and sliding their bodies so that they were even closer, they kissed again and again before Anton changed her focus and began to trail her lips down Gwynneth's neck.

The Lady pushed her hands into her husband's dark locks as he continued to kiss a path all along her collar bones and her chest until he reached the warm, downy valley between her breasts. When hot, moist lips wrapped around a nipple without hesitation, Gwynneth gasped quietly, her

eyes fluttering shut.

Anton smiled at the soft noises Gwynneth made as she gently tasted and sucked each turgid nipple before continuing her exploration. Her hands eagerly stroked and caressed while lips kissed, nipped, and sampled soft skin. Squeezing tender buttocks, Anton returned her mouth to Gwynneth's and they kissed deeply while her hand finally parted soft thighs.

As soon as her husband's fingers slid into her wetness, Gwynneth cried out, her body automatically arching up against Anton's. Her hands grasped at broad shoulders and her legs wantonly spread open as the fingers pushed deeper into her.

Anton felt the sting of fingernails digging into her shoulders and she kissed her wife passionately, loving the feel and texture of the body she'd remembered so well. She continued to move her hand, pressing her palm against the center of her wife's pleasure as she touched her deep inside.

"You're beautiful," Anton whispered against Gwynneth's lips.

Gwynneth struggled to open her eyes. When she looked at Anton, he was smiling, and he kissed her face tenderly.

"You're so beautiful, Gwyn."

Tears filled the Lady's eyes, and she reached up to lay a hand on her husband's cheek. "I love you, Anton," she whispered with great emotion. Gwynneth kept her hand on Anton's face, needing to maintain the connection as her pleasure rose higher and higher until she felt herself erupting. She gasped loudly, shuddering and clutching Anton's shoulders as her climax ripped through her body. Tears leaked from her eyes, the emotions overwhelming her as her body slowly began to relax. It was so wonderful to be loved this way again. Gwynneth felt as though an unbearable weight had finally been lifted from her shoulders and she'd been set free at last.

Anton gathered the small blonde in her arms and held her, pressing her face against silky hair. "Gwyn," Anton whispered as she held the blonde tight, "I adore you." She kissed a damp forehead and stroked blonde hair gently. Gwynneth wound her hands around her husband's waist, letting her tears flow freely as she absorbed the soothing touch of his hands and listened to the thumping of his heart. They lay like that for a long time, the only sounds being their thunderous heartbeats and ragged breathing.

At last the tears ceased and Gwynneth raised her head to look at her love. Anton's eyes were soft, his face wearing a most tender expression. He reached out and touched Gwynneth's face with gentle fingers, wiping away the traces of tears.

"No second thoughts?" Anton whispered, her voice laced with cautious hope.

Gwynneth smiled warmly, "None." Wrapping her arms around her husband, she kissed him soundly, laying his fears to rest.

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Anton awoke with a start, surprised to realize that she'd fallen asleep so quickly. She sat up slowly, trying not to disturb her bedmate. Seeing that the fire was all right, the Lord turned her attention to the blonde beauty lying beside her.

Gwynneth always looked like an angel when she slumbered. Anton smiled down at her, adoring this lovely creature more than she ever had. The intimacy they'd shared tonight went a long way in healing all the rifts between them, and for the first time, Anton truly felt as though the deep slashes in her heart were beginning to heal.

Feeling eyes upon her, Gwynneth awoke. She blinked and turned her head to find bright blue eyes twinkling at her. She smiled and reached up to touch her husband's face. "Did I fall asleep on you? I'm sorry."

Anton grasped her hand and kissed it. "Don't be; I dozed off as well."

The Lady smiled. "Were you watching me then?"

The Marquess lay back down on her side, propping herself up on her elbow. "Mm hmm. I like to watch you sleep." She reached out and caressed her wife's face. "I like to listen to you breathe. It soothes me." Gwynneth blushed, embarrassed yet pleased with Anton's words. Seeing the blonde's shy reaction, Anton smiled and leaned down to press their lips together. It didn't take long for the kisses to grow in intensity.

To Gwynneth's surprise, she felt her desire flare to life once more, the strength of it shocking. But she did not want to concentrate on her desire this time. She wanted to venture in a different direction. "You make me feel so loved, Anton." she whispered against his lips, "I want to make you feel loved too."

Anton tensed slightly at the implications of her wife's words. "I do feel loved, dearest." She resumed the kissing but the Lady pulled away again.

"Wait," Gwynneth said, placing a hand against Anton's chest and looking deep into his eyes. "Darling, can we not partake in pleasure together this time?"

Anton ceased all movement and averted her eyes. She was wondering when, and how, they'd cross this hurdle.

Gwynneth reached up to cup Anton's face, forcing him to look at her, "The pleasure you give to me is so wonderful; I would like for you to feel such bliss too."

Anton half smiled, "Giving you pleasure gives me pleasure." It was a weak argument, but she had to try.

"Anton, you know what I mean." Gwynneth was surprised to see a blush cross his face as he dropped his gaze. She smiled and placed a quick kiss on solemn lips, "I would like so much to make you feel good, my love." The Marquess closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. "Please," Gwynneth wasn't giving up, "show me how to touch you and please you...teach me what to do." Anton sighed. "Please, love...trust in me."

Anton opened her eyes and looked at Gwynneth, "I do trust you, it's just..." she couldn't complete her thought and she lay back down on the bed, feeling anxious and a little embarrassed.

The Lady expected for her proposal to be met with some uncertainty and resistance, and truthfully, she was nervous about going into uncharted territory. But she knew that she wanted to do this; she wanted to make love with Anton, truly and completely. Now what she needed to do was convince him that she wanted him - the man and the woman.

Gwynneth propped herself up on her elbow and looked down at Anton. She reached out and stroked the side of his face, wanting to ease his fears, "I know that this is new for us, and you may feel a bit uneasy - I do as well - but I assure you, love...I want this more than anything." She leaned down and kissed him gently, "I want you, Anton...*all* of you."

Anton looked up into understanding blue-green depths and felt her discomfort lessen, but only a little. "I just don't want you to be disappointed...or worse." Her timid whisper conveyed her feeling of unease. "What if you don't like what you see?"

"Never." Gwynneth kissed him again, wanting to dispel his fears, "I could never be disappointed with you, Anton. I love you, every bit of you."

They held gazes for a long moment until Anton finally sat up and began to loosen the ties of his nightshirt. Gwynneth sat up too and watched with excited amazement as Anton slowly lifted the shirt over his head, leaving him exposed, save a white band of cloth wrapped around his chest.

When Anton looked at Gwynneth hesitantly, the Lady knew she was witnessing something very precious and fragile. Here, at last, was the real Anton. She was seeing her husband as she'd never seen him before, completely vulnerable, with his secret and his soul totally exposed. Her actions and words right now were far more important than any desire she felt. She had to tread carefully. She wanted him to remove the cloth band, but she knew that removing it would signify complete trust, complete surrender. Would Anton do that? Would he reveal himself - reveal *herself* - completely?

Wanting to ease Anton's fears and proceed as carefully as possible, Gwynneth scooted close to him and gently leaned in to press tender kisses on the pale skin of his shoulder. She traced her fingers along the edge of the cloth band that bound Anton's breasts, finally resting her hand in the center of the wrap. Looking up into hesitant eyes, she whispered, "Will you take this off too?"

Anton took a deep breath. Surely Gwynneth realized how hard this was. All kinds of doubts and fears ran through the Lord's mind. What if Gwynneth ended up being wrong about her feelings?

What if the revelation of her true gender, not to mention her ugly, scarred body, repulsed the Lady? Unsteadily releasing her breath, Anton gave her wife a last pleading look, hoping that somehow she'd change her mind. But Gwynneth was still looking at her with hope-filled love and understanding. Her hands shaking, Anton unwrapped the binding. As it fell away, she held her breath and closed her eyes.

A silent moment passed and then Anton felt the bed shift as Gwynneth moved. Before she could open her eyes, she felt small, warm hands touch her naked chest. Anton drew in a sharp breath, the sensation so shocking. When she opened her eyes, she saw that Gwynneth was kneeling right beside her, her wide eyes riveted to the flesh that was exposed to her at long last. When those eyes lifted to meet hers and Gwynneth smiled brilliantly at her, Anton expelled the breath she'd been holding, her eyes immediately pricking with tears.

Gwynneth saw and felt Anton's reaction; she knew this was difficult for him, and she loved him even more for being so brave and trusting her with something so intensely personal. She reached out and turned his face to her, kissing him deeply, trying to convey all the feelings and love she had inside her. Anton responded in kind, and they kissed lasciviously until the Lady broke away. "Lie back," Gwynneth whispered, wanting to see and feel more of the wonder that was Anton. The Lord hesitated, and Gwynneth pressed a gentle kiss against his lips. "Please...I want to touch you," she whispered against his lips.

Anton mutely acquiesced and lay back down on the bed. Every nerve and fiber of her being was on edge, and she nearly felt sick. The sickness almost flew from her mouth when she suddenly felt Gwynneth maneuver herself to straddle one of her thighs.

Seeing the shocked expression on Anton's face, Gwynneth feared that she was pushing too far, too fast. Honestly, she wasn't sure where her boldness was coming from; she only knew that she had an overwhelming need to connect with Anton and see, touch, and taste him like never before. "Is this alright?" she asked with quiet uncertainty.

Anton swallowed her shock and slid her hands up to caress Gwynneth's thighs, needing to ground herself with the feel of her wife's body. She managed a nod and whispered back, "Yes...it's alright." In truth, it was more than alright; for Anton, it was nothing short of a miracle.

Even though a part of her was relieved to be free of the secret that had kept her from being truly close with her wife, Anton was still uneasy about uncovering the truth. With every inquisitive step that Gwynneth took, she kept expecting the blonde to suddenly stop and turn away from her in disgust. But, as Gwynneth continued to touch her with gentle determination, she did not waver. Gwynneth said that she loved her, and because of that, she would not be disappointed. It seemed that those words, and her feelings, were true. Anton couldn't imagine that it could all be so simple, but it appeared that it was. She tried to let her nervous thoughts drift away and just concentrate on the warm, gentle caresses of her wife's dainty hands as they explored.

Gwynneth was absolutely fascinated with the body beneath her and her eyes flitted all over Anton's body, greedily absorbing every detail. Given that Anton had always appeared, quite nicely, to be a man, it was incredible to see him, in the flesh, as he truly was. As the Lady

continued to delicately touch and take it all in, Anton's physical gender became very real to her. But instead of feeling confusion or aversion, Gwynneth felt amazement. There before her was evidence that Anton was a woman, and yet, in Gwynneth's mind, he was a man. Anton was an amazing combination of both man and woman, and he was the most wondrous creature she'd ever seen.

Running her hands all over her husband's pale skin, Gwynneth marveled at its smooth, silky texture. Despite the scars and obvious injuries he'd suffered from battle, Anton's body appeared very strong and fit. The muscles of his broad shoulders and arms were evident, but they weren't brawny or overly rugged; they were lean, toned and taut. The small breasts were firm and colored with dark pink nipples, which stood out starkly against white skin. Below that, a flat stomach, trim waist and narrow hips were followed by two long, sinewy legs that seemed to stretch on forever. And between those legs, hiding the most intimate, private treasure of all, was a small triangular patch of dark curls.

Gwynneth's face flushed, her mind whirling with a dozen different thoughts and feelings. Again, she did not feel one bit of repulsion; she only felt excitement, curiosity, and arousal. A rush of heat coursed through her body and ended up as a hot surge between her legs, convincing her that she was most definitely feeling arousal.

Licking her lips, Gwynneth trailed her hands all over Anton's flat stomach, watching as the body beneath her tensed and the muscles became more pronounced. She lifted her eyes to Anton's face and saw that his eyes were closed, his head tilted back slightly as he breathed open-mouthed. Another rush raced through Gwynneth as she realized that her touches were pleasing to Anton. Eager to feel more and do more, she reached up and gently cupped the small breasts with both hands.

With that touch, Anton released a throaty groan. "Oh god, Gwynneth," she whispered, ready to explode from the sensations she felt.

Gwynneth leaned close, excitement flooding her again, "Does that feel good, love?"

"Yes, god yes!" Anton gasped, bringing her hands up around Gwynneth's back and urging her down against her. When their naked flesh pressed together, both of them moaned aloud. The feeling was like fire, and both felt the flames licking at their skin, scorching them as they kissed with desperate hunger.

Gwynneth was the one who broke away. "I want to feel more of you, Anton." She hovered over him, kissing his face and raking a hand through his dark hair. "I want to feel *all* of you."

Still plagued with a feeling of uncertainty, Anton hesitated. The uncertainty grew ever weaker, though, as Gwynneth continued to run her hands all over Anton's body, gooseflesh erupting from the fluttering, gossamer caresses. Gazing up into those beautiful blue-green eyes she knew so well, Anton knew she was powerless to resist. She would do whatever Gwynneth wanted. Reaching up, she touched her wife's face, "Whatever you want, my love...I give myself to you."

Gwynneth smiled, happy at last to have fully gained Anton's trust. Bestowing another kiss upon her husband's lips, she sat back, sliding both hands along Anton's stomach and hips. She drew a deep breath and paused, wanting to express her gratitude. "For so long, I've wanted to see you the way you saw me...wanted to touch you as you touched me." Her voice was a reverent whisper and Anton held her breath, hanging on the blonde's every word. "You are truly beautiful, Anton. More beautiful than I could have ever imagined." Gwynneth leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. "Thank you...thank you for trusting me with this most precious gift."

Her eyes welling with tears, Anton cupped the blonde's face, replying in a hushed voice, "No, thank you, Gwynneth, for loving me so unconditionally." Gwynneth smiled and they kissed again, first their mouths, and then more as the Lady veered away and began to press her lips all along Anton's neck, then his chest, and finally his taut stomach.

Gwynneth loved the feel of tender skin beneath her lips, but she had no idea what she was supposed to do next. She only knew that she wanted desperately to please Anton. Allowing her instincts to continue to lead her, Gwynneth caressed Anton's legs and thighs, luxuriating in the warm skin as she stroked gently. She felt a tremor pass through Anton, and she looked up to meet his wide eyes.

"I want to touch you everywhere, Anton," Gwynneth held his eyes as she continued to caress, "May I?"

Anton trembled, waves of heat racing through her body as the blonde's tentative touches continued to fill her with fire. "Yes," she croaked, swallowing against a dry throat. She was breathing hard, a light sheen of sweat covering her from muscles tensing and clenching over and over.

Slowly, carefully, Gwynneth ran her hands all along Anton's hips and upper thighs, dancing near but not touching the dark treasure buried within. As she did this, a unique sensation suffused her and settled deep in her belly. She was more aroused than ever before and her want of Anton was overwhelming...she just wasn't quite sure what she should and could do.

Desperate to forge ahead and give pleasure, Gwynneth leaned down and kissed Anton fiercely, "Tell me what to do, my love...tell me how to please you!" she begged.

"Anything, darling, anything - just touch me!"

Gwynneth quickly slid her hand down to cup the nest of curls at the apex of Anton's legs. She flushed with arousal as her fingers gently tangled in the dark patch.

"God!" Anton gasped, feeling a surge of wetness between her legs. She reached out blindly, her hands seeking purchase anywhere on the blonde's body.

Pleased at Anton's reaction, Gwynneth smiled. "Tell me what I should do now, love...show me!" She was nearly breathless with excitement.

"Just keep touching me," Anton begged. "Here," she rasped, taking Gwynneth's wrist and guiding her hand further between her legs. "Touch me here, like this."

Gwynneth's mouth dropped open as her fingers pushed through soft curls and came into contact with moist heat. It was like nothing she'd ever felt or done before. Even when she'd been daring enough to touch herself, she'd never been as hot or as wet as Anton was now.

"Now bring your body up here," Anton husked, positioning Gwynneth so that she lay upon her while straddling a thigh, "and move with me."

Letting her fingers work between Anton's thighs, Gwynneth pressed herself against her husband, her hips moving of their own accord. Her body was on fire with carnal sensations, and she moaned softly at the pleasurable feelings racing through her.

They continued to move and thrust against each other, their mutual arousal quickly building until it crested in no time at all and they cried out, both erupting and shattering in climax.

The two of them remained still for a long while, both of them so shattered they were able only to lay there and pant raggedly. When she was finally able to move, Anton urged Gwynneth upward, pulling her close until the blonde was one with her, their bodies and hearts intertwined as they held each other.

Anton was exhausted, both mentally and physically, but her heart was full. Full of love and admiration for the woman who lay, spent, in her arms. The evening had ended in a blissful culmination of total trust and emotional, soulful merging. After everything they'd been through, they were at long last healed.

Gwynneth closed her eyes and listened to the gentle thumping of Anton's heart while feeling his fingertips idly trace circles all over her back and shoulders. She felt happy, satisfied, and complete. She had made love to Anton, with Anton, and she had done it well. Tilting her face up, she kissed her husband's cheek, "I love you," she whispered before burying her face in his soft skin.

Anton smiled, "I love you too...so very much." She tightened her hold on Gwynneth's shoulders, wanting to stay forever in the safe haven of pure love that they'd created there in that room.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN - Six months later

Late Summer was a beautiful time of year at Weldon. The air was crisp and the lands were full of energy as everyone hustled and bustled about working in their fields and preparing to harvest their crops.

Gwynneth walked along the bank of the small stream, seeking out the last flowers of the season.

She spied a small cluster of meadowsweet and plucked a few white blooms, holding them up to her nose and inhaling the strong, sweet smell. She smiled, thinking that they'd do nicely in a little bouquet in her chambers. Now if only she could find some lavender.

The sound of laughter interrupted the Lady's thoughts and she smiled wider, knowing who the laugh belonged to and why she was hearing it. Hitching up her skirts with her free hand, Gwynneth turned and headed off toward the pleasant noise.

"Come on now, stay here, you little imp." Anton laughed as she scooped Anna Catherine up with her free hand, preventing the crawling baby girl from escaping the safety of the blanket they sat upon. The Marquess cradled a sleeping baby Edgar in her other arm, which made it difficult to continually chase down the determined little girl.

"You're being quite a nosey little bird today. No wonder Mummy wanted to get away for a spell." Anton kissed the baby girl's head and she squirmed, whining her displeasure at having her father hold her captive. She didn't want to be coddled; she wanted to investigate that curious green stuff at the edge of the blanket!

"What are you laughing about?" Gwynneth asked as she appeared beneath the tree where the blanket lay.

"This one's being a pip." Anton said, motioning toward Anna Catherine, who was again on the move and crawling purposefully toward the grass.

Gwynneth smiled, "Ah yes." She deposited her flowers on the blanket and walked over to pick up the little girl. "My fleet-kneed little poppet," she crooned, cradling the baby in her arms and kissing her soft forehead. "Always on the go, aren't you?" The baby voiced her annoyance with another whine.

"I thought you said she'd sleep out here? She's been awake and rambunctious the entire time." Anton complained mildly.

The Lady stifled a giggle. She often found humor in watching her husband try to manage both children. Gwynneth spent much more time with them, so she of course knew just how to handle them, but Anton was easily flustered by the babies and, though it wasn't very nice, Gwynneth couldn't help but find it amusing.

"She's stubborn." Gwynneth grinned at her husband, "Edgar is much more calm and laid-back." She maneuvered the little girl in her arms and began swinging her gently back and forth while patting her bottom. "You have to work a little harder to get her to drop off, don't you, sweetling?" She cooed to the girl in a sing-song voice, smiling while continuing to rock her. Within minutes the little girl was quiet and still.

"God above, *how* do you do that?" Gwynneth laughed softly at Anton's exasperated question. "That *never* works for me!"

The Lady walked over and laid the baby down on the blanket. "I told you, she's stubborn." She glanced sidelong at Anton, "A bit too much like her Poppa, perhaps?"

Anton feigned a hurt expression, but was inwardly humored by her wife's gentle ribbing. Gwynneth, and her mother too in fact, teased the Marquess often about how much Anna Catherine resembled her and how alike their personalities seemed to be at times.

"Don't listen to her, Anna Catherine," Anton whispered toward the baby, "It's good that you've got a strong spirit." Gwynneth laughed lightly and Anton leaned over to quiet her with a kiss on the lips. Taking little Edgar from his father, Gwynneth laid him down beside his sister and the babies slept peacefully.

"You're so incredibly good with them, Gwynneth. You never cease to amaze me." Anton remarked as the Lady came to sit beside him.

"Oh, you say that all the time." She snuggled up against her husband's side.

"It's always true. You know just how to handle little Anna Catherine, even when she's at her most stubborn."

Gwynneth smiled. "She can be a handful, can't she?"

"Mmm," Anton murmured in agreement. "Do you really think she's so much like me?"

"Well, I only know of your childhood from what your mother says, but yes, it certainly sounds as though she's a great deal like you."

"Hmm, well, I suppose it's conceited of me, but I do hope she grows up the same way I did."

Gwynneth stilled, curious as to what Anton meant. They hadn't really discussed how they'd raise the children, nor what 'proper' roles or duties they would fulfill, or not fulfill. Given the unusual manner in which Anton was raised, the Lady couldn't help but wonder what Anton might have in mind.

Unable to keep from voicing her thoughts, Gwynneth sat up and looked at her husband. "When you say 'grow up the same way I did,' do you mean that you want her to be raised as you were...*exactly*?"

Anton frowned, not understanding what the blonde meant. When realization dawned, she laughed lightly, "Oh, wait - you think I want her to behave as a boy?" Gwynneth gave a questioning shrug. "Oh no, of course I don't want that. I'm just saying, what I *do* want is for Anna Catherine to have the same freedoms and opportunities that I had. I want her to experience the things I experienced and learn the things I learned, if she so desires. She may be a girl, Gwynneth, but I shan't have her be helpless and weak-willed. I want her to be independent and able to take care of herself. She's an heir to Weldon and Wextony, just as Edgar is, and she must learn to be strong and competent so that she's prepared for any challenge Fate might hand her."

Gwynneth was silent, her face turned away. Sensing that she might have hurt her wife's feelings somehow, Anton touched her chin and turned her face back. Finding tears in the blonde's eyes, Anton felt bad. "Gwyn, what is it? Did I say something wrong?"

"No," Gwynneth shook her head, "I just," she hesitated, "I'm sorry...I know that it would be best for you to have a second son, and I know that I won't be able to give you any more children, but-

"Shh-shh," Anton shook her head, placing a finger on the Lady's lips. "Hush with that nonsense, love." Anton whispered, slipping both arms around her wife and kissing her tenderly.

"Gwynneth, you have given me two healthy, beautiful children - something I never thought I'd have, not in my wildest dreams. And *you* did that, dearest - you alone have given me everything I've ever wanted. This," she squeezed Gwynneth's waist and tipped her head toward the slumbering children, "this is all I shall ever need in my life."

Her worry easing, Gwynneth smiled and pressed her face against Anton's chest, hugging him tight.

"You're a blessing to me...a truly magnificent gift," Anton continued, his voice soft and full of emotion, "I am eternally grateful to Fate for bringing you into my life." She reached down and brought Gwynneth's face up to her again, "I love you more than words can say."

Tears spilled from Gwynneth's eyes, "I love you, too."

They came together, hugging and kissing with all the love and adoration they felt inside.

They lay back on the blanket and rested peacefully together, their whirlwind, fate-entwined lives evolving, at last, into happiness.

END

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