

Part 1 Europe, 1349

The woods were smoky and dark, entirely too quiet. Devoid of birds, the numerous ancient trees had tops that reached out to the Heavens, branches spread before God in prayer. Perhaps they were praying for the safe keeping of His people. Perhaps they were raising fists, damning a god who'd punish the land with such merciless fury.

A lone figure moved through the maze of trees. A pale hand clasped together the ends of a brown cloak in an attempt to keep the chill of the air, and the unknown enemy, at bay. Unseen green eyes watched ever vigilant from beneath a large hood which kept the feminine face in shadow. It wasn't wise for a woman to travel alone, especially on foot. A small dagger was gripped in Cara's unseen hand, fingers sweating as they flexed against the wooden handle. The cool metal of the hilt brushed against her skin.

Hearing footfalls in the fallen leaves of the forest floor, the girl pressed her body flat against the trunk of massive oak. The hand, once clasping the cloak, reached up and pushed the hood back slightly. She heard many footfalls — heavy, as if made by boots. That would mean knights or nobles. They were often worse than any highwayman.

Scanning her surroundings, Cara saw that she had little chance of remaining hidden. There were only trees — no caves, no rock overhangings. Sucking in her lower lip and squeezing the handle of the dagger in her palm, she waited.

"I see a body, my Lord," John shouted, his voice echoing throughout the woods. Grimacing, he put a cloth to his mouth and nose. A disgrace. From the distance of three horse lengths, the gender of the corpse couldn't be determined. The skin was mostly black and eaten. The eyes were open, but only one stared out. The other appeared to have been dinner for a small forest creature.

"Well, stay far from it, man!" Lord Avery, Third Duke of Cornwall, shouted back. "We steer around these woods. Forward!"

Cara's heart began to beat again as the noise of the small army receded, their booted footfalls and clanging armor becoming distant, soon only an echo.

"Thank ye, my Lord," she whispered, eyes flickering Heavenward. Not waiting a beat longer, she pushed off the tree, making her way through the woods that she knew so well, the weight of her pouch bumping against her hip as she darted from tree to tree. She, too, had seen the body the soldier had spoken of, and she knew these woods were cursed.

She must hurry.

"Bugger," Merryn growled, tossing the rotten piece of fruit aside. Let the vultures add it to their enormous feast. Crouching as she made her way through the carnage, she stopped, kneeling beside the body of a child. His blue eyes stared up at her, silently begging for help that never came. "Dona look at me, lad," she hissed, throwing a piece of cloth over the child's face.

It had stopped bothering her long ago; now it just annoyed her. The girl never liked to be looked at or noticed by the living, let alone the dead. Even so, the dead offered so much more than the living. Noting the child's hand still clutched around something, she pried his fingers open, wincing at the sound of breaking bones. Damn the stiff ones.

Though it was grotesque work, the treasure inside was worth it. Merryn's blue eyes opened in surprise at the gold that winked at her. Three gold coins had been kept shiny by the child's sweaty palm; that is before the body dried out.

Plucking the precious metal pieces from the dry, gray palm, she quickly wiped one on her cloak before bringing it to her teeth. Satisfied by the small mark made, Merryn pocketed the money then moved on.

"Get out! Flee, ye savage!"

Merryn looked up to see an old, grizzled monk picking his way through the layers of the dead, an angry fist raised in her direction.

"Go back to yer monastery, Father. There's nuthin' here fer ya," she said, tucking a dagger into her belt.

"How dare ye steal from the dead!" he bellowed, grunting as one of his turnshoes was sucked into a badly decomposing body. Unable to hide his disgust, the priest lifted his foot, balancing on the other foot and his walking stick as he leaned down to grab his captured shoe from the mess.

Merryn chuckled, all the while shoving the few valuables she had found into her cloak.

The priest finally reached her, panting heavily after his journey through the street which, from necessity, was now a lane of the dead.

"Go back Father, before t' blackness gets ya, too." Merryn didn't even spare a glance at the old, rotund man. She continued picking through the bodies, shaking out the rags that had once been clothing to see what would fall out. Most in the tiny village were dead, so Merryn had the pick.

"And ye, young boy, thief!" He hobbled over to the cloaked figure, grabbed her by the arm, and swung her around. Merryn glared at him as her hood fell away, exposing a tanned, dirty, and decidedly female face. "God have mercy, a girl!" His glance took in her torn, dirt-encrusted tunic, a belt at the waist with a goodly length of coiled rope and several daggers tucked into it, and a baldric across her chest with a sword dangling from it. His mouth fell open in shocked disgust as he saw her breeches and booted feet.

The old man was about to admonish her when his eyes flickered up. He choked on his words as he looked down the blade of the very sword he'd just spotted. At the other end stood a very unamused young woman.

"Leave it be, Father, or I'll send ya ta yers."

"Burn in Hell, ye will, child," the priest said quietly, yet with great earnestness. Merryn grinned, nodding as she put her hood back in place.

"So 'm told. If'n 'tweren't me, would be some other lad. Leave me be." She lowered her sword, smoothly easing it back into place.

"Damned Celt," he muttered, knowing there wasn't anything he could do. He was no match for the girl and her blade, so instead he turned and blessed the dead, freeing their souls to rest in Heaven. Turning back, he was stunned to see the girl was gone. Nervously he tucked one hand into his robes, grasped his walking stick in the other, and moved on.

Cara sighed with relief when she saw the split stump she knew so well. Just a hundred paces beyond would be the entrance to her village. She began to run now, no longer worrying about being seen alone wandering through the woods.

Her hood flew off her head, allowing her long, golden hair to flow behind her as she ran. The young woman — just fifteen summers old — ran faster the closer she was to town.

"No," she breathed, hand coming to her mouth as she quickly stopped. Her eyes widened in stunned shock and dismay at the bodies that littered the landscape. She wasn't sure which face to linger on longest; many were no longer identifiable. Taking slow, careful steps, the girl made her way through the sea of bodies, waving off masses of flies and the awful stench.

She was too late.

"Mother!" Panic setting in, Cara ran as best she could, whimpering as a fear greater than any she'd known before, gripped her heart. She saw the shack she shared with her mother and younger sister, Grace. The plank door was open, the windows dark.

Slowing, Cara tried to distinguish any inside movement. She knew in her gut what she'd find inside, and she really didn't want to see it.

"Oh, Mother," she cried, rushing to the prone figure on the dirt floor. Her mother's skirts rode up over the blackened skin of her swollen legs. Falling to her knees, the girl gently turned the body over. A quick, shrill cry escaped her throat when she looked upon the face of the only parent she'd ever known.

Cara could feel the lunch of berries and bread she'd eaten earlier threatening to rise once again, but swallowed it down. Raising a trembling hand, she brushed dark blonde strands away from her mother's nearly unrecognizable face — eyes open and bulging, a silent scream frozen on the swollen mask. Numerous sores littered the face, the pus that had leaked out in life, dried and smeared in death.

"Oh, mother. I failed ye. Forgive me," the girl cried, hugging the stiff body to her, rocking gently.

"My child," said a soft voice. Cara looked up, her grief so profound she was almost unable to make out the image of the priest standing in the doorway of the shack.

"I was too late, Father Steffen. Too late." New tears began as the young woman buried her face in her mother's dress, almost choking on the smell of death that clung to it.

"No, dear Cara. The Lord had plans for Mary and Grace. Do not blame yourself." The priest walked into the hovel, his walking stick making soft clicking sounds on the dirt floor.

Wanting badly to believe his words, Cara released her mother, laying her gently back onto the floor. She wiped her eyes, but to no avail, as new tears quickly fell. With her shoulders slumped in defeat, Cara untied the thick rope from around her waist, removing it and the bag that hung from it.

"I brought the medicine as quickly as I could." She laughed ruefully, the irony lost neither on her or the priest.

"Keep it for yourself, child." Father Steffen grunted as he lowered himself to his knees, pulling the girl he'd known all her life, into his warm, fatherly embrace. "Ye must go far from here, Cara. Those who lived have gone. Ye must go, too."

"Do ye think I'll go ta Hell, Father? Fer killing my mother and sister?"

Father Steffen looked down into the eyes he'd known for so long. He smiled down at the child who was growing into a lovely woman. Shaking his head, he brushed a few strands of hair from her tear-streaked face.

"Nay, child. Ye have been blessed with life, survivin' the blackness that walks the land. Death came to us, stalkin' our every move." He grabbed the bag, filled with hard won herbs and roots, including rose petals, that would be mashed into a mixture that would relieve the pain and suffering of those who caught the plague. "Go now. Ye've beaten death; do not stop here. Heal those ye find and bring 'em peace with yer lovely smile." Steffen smiled as the very smile he spoke of shone on him.

Cara nodded, giving the priest one last hug before picking herself up, taking the bag he handed to her before he gruntingly got to his feet, also.

"Go, child. Survive this darkness with the light God has given ye." Father Steffen watched the girl leave until she was out of sight. He had always known that someday that girl would be so much more than the peasant life she was born into.

The fire was burning bright, warming a cold, lonely night. Merryn wrapped her cloak around her shoulders a bit tighter, then rotated the rabbit carcass that hung above the fire.

The night was quiet, very quiet. So many had died. Merryn tried not to think about it, knowing that it would do her no good. Death was part of life, just as breathing was.

She'd been wandering for so long now, it seemed. Long before the sickness had scorched the land. Looking down at her pack, she dragged it over to settle it between her booted feet. Pulling her pack open to peer inside, all the goods she'd found over the past few days glittered in the firelight. She'd be able to do some good trading for much of it, using the rest for herself — weapons, clothing, and the blankets that made up her bedding.

Pulled out of her reverie, Merryn realized her dinner was beginning to burn. Leaning over to the fire, she poked at the meat with a dagger, but stopped mid-stab. She scanned the inky forest around her, ears perking up, to determine what exactly she just heard.

Slowly rising to her feet, she turned in a small circle, trying to determine which direction the noise was coming from, and what exactly it was. There were footsteps, hurried, not careful or stealthy.

Then she heard a scream.

Snatching her sword from the baldric, she ran headlong into the dense foliage in the direction the scream came. Up ahead she heard the whimpers of what sounded like a young girl, the muffled words of a man, and lots of thrashing.

As she entered a clearing, Merryn saw the glint of steel in the moonlight, bringing her attention to two dark figures becoming clearer as she got closer. A young girl was pressed against a tree; a man held her there with his body and a blade to the girl's throat, as he loosened the ties of his breeches. The girl was breathing hard, her chest heaving against the rough material of his shirt.

"Please! Help me!" the young girl begged, as she spied Merryn approaching. Merryn grabbed the man by his long, unkempt hair. He howled in pain as he was tossed onto the forest floor, dead leaves and twigs the only things padding his fall. In what Merryn knew would be a brief respite,

she grabbed the girl, yanking her away from the tree by the front of her dress, then pushed her behind her own larger body.

"Ye jus' made a big mistake, girl," the man growled at Merryn as he got to his feet. Again, there was the glint of steel as he brought his dagger up, eyeing Merryn's sword, which she held in a slightly trembling hand.

"Run away 'n ya will only lose yer pride," Merryn said, sounding far more confident than she felt. The man laughed, whipping his head back slightly to toss the dark, greasy locks out of his eyes.

"Slit ye from gullet to that pretty mouth of yers, I will, wench. I say ye walk away and leave me to me business and maybe I'll let ye live." He shifted his weight from foot to foot, waiting and watching to see what the girl would do. Maybe he could have fun with the both of them.

"Try it and tell yer tale to Satan, himself, lad." Merryn could feel the girl behind her, clinging on to her cloak with claw-like fingers, her breathing fast and erratic.

"Ye've go'a big mouth on ye, lass. There are far better things for it than this rubbish." With that, he attacked, using brute strength against the smaller girl.

Merryn hadn't been prepared for the attack and was knocked to the ground, the other girl backing out of the way and screaming in frightened surprise. Within moments the man was on top of Merryn, trying to press his advantage of surprise and size.

Merryn's head hit the forest floor with a resounding thud that echoed through her brain as he grabbed a handful of her long hair, using it to pound her head into the ground a second time. She swore she saw stars flying in front of her eyes, as the second pounding made her teeth clash together, nipping her tongue in the process. The warm, salty taste of blood filled her mouth. She knew she had to do something and quickly, before this thug got the upper hand and knocked her out. If that happened, neither she nor the other girl would be safe.

With a mighty grunt and heave, Merryn leveraged the thug by pushing with her feet against the ground. The movement she used caused them to reverse their positions. Now sitting astride the man, she used the pommel of her sword, slamming it into his jaw. A resounding crack filled the night, followed closely by a cry of pain. Blood leaked out of the man's mouth, oozing black in the moonlight.

"Nasty wench!" he shouted. Bringing a fist up, he connecting solidly with Merryn's own jaw, throwing her head to the side. A hot flash of pain filled the right side of her mouth as something very hard was loose against her tongue. Spitting her tooth to the ground, she bared her remaining teeth, using every ounce of strength she had to pummel the fool silly. His head whipped this way and that, crashing again and again into the hard ground beneath him.

"Stop! Ye'll kill 'im," a soft voice said from just behind and above Merryn. She glanced briefly behind her to see the other girl, huddled in her cloak, her face the picture of worry and fear.

"If'n I dona, he'll kill us," Merryn said, turning back to the man whose eyes, half-hooded, showed the world closing in around him until finally his head stopped moving, as blackness enfolded him.

"Is he...?" The girl with the blonde hair couldn't bring herself to say it, after seeing so much death lately.

"Nay. He's out o' his head." Merryn got to her feet, her head pounding, her jaw badly hurting and bleeding.

"Ye're hurt," the girl said, hurrying over to look up into Merryn's face with the kindest, gentlest eyes. Merryn pulled her face away from exploring hands.

"M fine." Turning back to the man, she knew she'd have to do something with him. She could leave him be, but, when he awoke, he'd want to find the wench who'd done this to him. She couldn't very well kill him just like that. "Go ta my campsite back yonder, grab ta rope inside ta pack. ... *Go!*" she shouted when the girl hadn't moved. As she ran off into the darkness, Merryn turned back to the man. Maybe she could run him through while the girl was gone? "Bloody hell," she growled, knowing she couldn't do that.

Sooner than she expected, she heard the girl's voice again, "Here's the rope."

Merryn took it from the shaking hands of the girl.

"Now get out o' here," she growled, turning to the man who was starting to come round. "I said go!" she yelled over her shoulder, heaving a mighty kick at the man's head. He grunted then was out again like a snuffed torch.

The girl gasped, covering her mouth with her hands, her eyes huge as she looked at the panting Merryn.

"I tol' ya ta go," Merryn growled as she knelt, using the rope to tie the man's hands and feet. The girl said something, but it went unheard as the man's head fell to the side as she moved him. Leaning in a bit, she hissed, jumping to her feet. Behind his ear and down the side of his neck were the telltale marks of the sickness. "Bugger me."

Without another word, she grabbed the man's dagger, which he had dropped, planting it firmly in the soil next to the man's unconscious body. He could cut himself free, if he had the strength.

Ignoring the girl, Merryn went back to her campsite, where she began to pack up.

"What are ye doing? What's happened?" the girl asked, not sure what to do or where to go.

"Ya've brought death ta my campsite," Merryn said, pointing an accusing finger at her.

"What? I do not understand..."

"Ta lad has got ta sickness," Merryn snarled, roughly gathering up her pack. The remaining rope was not coiled since the whole thing had toppled over. "He'll be dead by mornin', most likely," she muttered absently, tossing a few things back into the pack.

"What is this?" Quick as lightning, the girl was kneeling at her side and reaching into the pack. The girl's hand glittered in the firelight as she brought out gold coins. "Stealing from a child, are ye?"

Merryn looked at two of the three gold pieces she'd taken off the boy. "He was dead! Hardly needs 'em anymore." She reached to snatch them away, but the girl was too quick, jumping to her feet.

"I gave these to that boy," Cara whispered, looking at the shiny gold resting in her palm. "He's dead, ye say?"

"Aye. Quite," Merryn smirked, the smile fading quickly when she saw the deadly look aimed at her. Clearing her throat, she stood. "Give 'em here." Holding out her hand, she stared into narrowed green eyes, made golden by the firelight.

"No." Cara closed her fingers around the coins, holding her fist close to her chest. "Where's the third?"

"There were only two," Merryn lied, hoping she could at least get good use out of the last piece. It was obvious the girl didn't believe a word she said, but she didn't care. You had to survive any way you could.

"Thief," Cara muttered, slipping the gold pieces into the pouch tethered to her waist. The girls stared each other down, a battle of the wills showing in their eyes.

As Merryn stared into those deep, soulful eyes, she was stunned by the way they seemed to be looking into her very soul. She began to squirm, worried about what the girl saw there.

Clearing her throat again Merryn turned away, pretending that breaking up camp was far more important than some silly game. Once everything was bundled and hidden under her cloak, and her weapons were in place, she began to kick dirt onto the fire. She kept her eyes off her unwanted guest, but knew the girl still stood nearby. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a hand reach out and grab the badly burnt rabbit from the fire.

"We'll need this fer the road," Cara said softly, wrapping the meat in a cloth.

"You are not coming with me, lass," Merryn said, walking over to the girl. As she reached out to snatch the food, it was promptly moved out of reach. She sighed. "Dona play wit' me, girl. 'M in no mood."

"My name is Cara, not 'girl'. And ye owe me."

"I owe ya not one thing! Fine. Keep the damned meat. 'Tis burnt anyhow." Like a child, Merryn stomped on the dying embers and set out into the dark forest. Cara quickly followed after, mindful that her skirts didn't drag through the red pit.

"Ye stole from me," Cara said, having to hurry to keep up.

"Ya lie," Merryn tossed back over her shoulder.

"I gave those coins to David, and ye stole 'em from 'im." It took everything Cara had to keep her voice steady, and not give in to the emotion she felt in her throat. She knew she had to stay strong, especially around this girl. She wasn't entirely sure she was successful.

"No time for tears now, lass. Ta boy was dead, and he certainly wouldn't need 'em ta get through Heaven's gates, now would he?"

Cara sniffled, trying to swallow the growing sadness that welled up inside her. "Ye still shouldn't have taken them. 'Tis disrespectful." Cara yelled in surprise as she nearly ran headlong into the other girl, who had turned on her.

"Respect dona keep ya alive, lass. Remember that." Standing toe to toe, they looked into each others eyes, one looking for a weakness of any kind, the other looking to see how she could exploit the other in the quickest way and get rid of her. Finally Merryn broke the silence. "If'n yer gonna follow me around like a dog, keep yer trap shut. These woods are no' a safe place, if ya hadn't noticed."

Cara grudgingly nodded her consent. They traveled in near silence for what seemed like days, but was actually a few hours. Cara was starting to wobble on her feet.

"Wait," she said, slowing to lean against a tree. "I need te stop."

Merryn turned, looking back to see the girl leaning against the tree, hand on the trunk, head bowed.

"Sick, 're ya?" she asked warily, keeping her distance. Merryn was fine with the dead ones, but had trouble watching the live ones die.

"Nay. Jus' tired."

Merryn sighed, looking up at the sky, trying to determine what time it was. It was very late, and as much as she didn't want to admit it, she was exhausted herself.

Without a word, she struck deeper into the wood, trying to find a good place to camp for the night.

Cara noticed that her companion had picked out a suitable location. "I'll gather some wood," Cara offered, starting off, though keeping her hand near the dagger at her side.

Cara had been walking all day, trying to find life somewhere, *anywhere*. She had found wanderers like herself, everyone afraid to stay with their homes. The dead were piling up faster, the stench of burning and rotting flesh everywhere, making Cara nauseous. The man in the woods had taken her by surprise, grabbing her from behind and slamming her against that tree. She shivered at the thought of what would have happened had her dark companion not shown up.

Making her way back into the circle of their camp with her load of wood, Cara asked, "What 'tis yer name?"

The other girl looked up from where she'd been laying her bedding on a cleared spot and answered, "Matters not."

"Does. I dona want to call out 'what 'tis yer name', and I want te know who te give my gratitude to."

The other girl sighed, stood up, and took the armlod of wood from Cara. "Merryn."

"Merryn." Cara tasted the name, deciding she liked it. "Well, thank ye fer what ye did, Merryn. I owe my life te ye."

"Ya owe nothin'. And dona thank me, Cara, because this time tomorrow, ya will be on yer own," Merryn said as she placed the load of wood by the fire.

Cara was silent as she bent over and readjusted a few sticks in the fire circle, helping them to catch. The fire began to illuminate their surroundings, sending shadows over everything the light of the flames didn't lick.

"'Twould be safer for us to travel together, Merryn," she said, her voice soft. She glanced at the other girl who stood by the fire, feet planted wide apart, arms crossed over her chest.

"I dona need ya with me, lass. If 'tweren't far ya, I'd be sound asleep by now." Merryn's eyes were cold as she stood there, unmoving, both body and soul. Without a word, Cara nodded, dropping her eyes as she untied the pouch around her waist.

"'Tis yer choice, Merryn. Let me have a look at yer mouth."

"'Tis fine—"

"Sit."

Merryn landed on a log with an "oomph" as Cara stood above her. Glaring up at the girl, she stayed put. Cara knelt before the stubborn girl, raising gentle, warm fingers to examine the damage and to see what would be needed.

Merryn watched, fascinated, as the girl pulled out a small bowl, carved from a single piece of wood, and sprinkled various herbs into its depths. Setting the bowl aside, the girl tore off a sprig of something Merryn had never seen before. She put the weed into her mouth, chewing for a few moments before spitting the newly-made mush into the bowl.

"Have ye any water?" Cara asked, raising her eyes to the confused look of her temporary companion. She smiled softly when the girl nodded dumbly. Merryn reached to her small pile of belongings and handed over a small animal bladder.

Pouring a little water into her mixture, Cara pulled out a small, thick stick from her pouch and began to mix it all together, making a strong-smelling paste.

"Ya look a bit young to be an apothecary," Merryn said quietly, her eyes never leaving Cara's movements. The other girl smiled.

"Because I am not."

"Yer da, then?"

Cara shook her head, meeting Merryn's gaze. "Since I was a small child I've understood what would help those who were ill." She shrugged. "Father Steffen used to say I was a chosen one." She smiled shyly. "I dona believe that, but 'tmight have saved my life. A man in my village was struck with the black sickness, so I left to gather what would help 'im. I was gone but a few days, and at my return..." her voice broke.

Merryn cleared her throat softly, guilt consuming her. "How did ya know those gold pieces belonged to the boy?"

Cara quickly swiped at her eyes. Now was not the time to mourn. She finished mixing, moving closer to her patient.

"Because I gave 'em to 'im. A soldier had passed through our village. He had been hurt in battle, his leg growing dark with sickness. I helped 'im," Cara said, a slight smile of pride spreading across her lips as she cleaned Merryn's bloody mouth. "I'm sorry. I'm being as gentle as I can," she said when the other girl winced.

Merryn did her best to not react as the gentle fingers touched her. She focused on Cara's face as the girl continued her story. She was a beautiful thing. Merryn wondered what wondrous colors would jump from the girl's expressive eyes come the light of sun.

"So grateful was he that he gave me the three gold pieces." She glanced up briefly to meet Merryn's eyes. "I knew they were the ones that belonged to the boy because we're so near my village and gold pieces are rare around here, pieces of gold like that aren't laying around just anywhere."

Again, Merryn felt a stab of guilt and looked away. A gentle touch on her chin told her not to move. She kept her patience as the paste was applied to her face with the stick and tapped down lightly with a fingertip.

Merryn was stunned as the pain began to recede. Her jaw was sore, indeed, but the cuts and bruises seemed to shrink under Cara's care.

As if reading Merryn's mind, Cara spoke, "I've made ye a bit extra so ye can take it along with ye." She sat back on her heels, looking at her handy work. "Within a day or so yer wounds will be healed."

"What is in this?" Merryn asked, taking the bowl and holding it up to her nose before quickly jerking back. The smell was not unpleasant, but potent.

Cara smiled. "'Tis secret."

"Oh?" Merryn raised a brow, letting the bowl be taken back from her hand.

Cara nodded. "'Tis." She scraped the remnants of the paste onto a cloth, wrapping it before handing it to Merryn, who was adjusting her jaw.

"Like magic," Merryn murmured. She could have sworn the lad had broken her jaw.

"Dona breathe that too loud, Merryn, or get me hunted, ye will."

Merryn smirked, then stood, walking over to her sleeping rags. Without another word, she made herself comfortable and fell asleep.

Cara watched her go, a sense of sadness washing over her. Yet alone she'd be again. Sitting by the fire, the girl brought her knees up, wrapping her arms around them and staring up into the Heavens.

For her whole life she'd been surrounded by those who loved her, and those she loved. Her father had died many, many years ago, but her mother and Grace... Cara felt tears chilling her skin as they fell silently. She wished she'd been able to give her mother a proper burial. At least she'd been able to say goodbye, which is more than she could say about her sister, Grace. A mere child, Grace had been the light of Cara's life.

Forehead resting against her knees, she really began to sob, unable to keep it in any longer. She was devastated and filled with a profound sadness. What now? Where would she go? What would she do?

Startled, Cara looked up as her fingers found the rough material of the cloak that had just been wrapped around her shoulders. She brought the warmth closer around her. She tried to curb her emotion, thinking that Merryn was not likely to be the crying type, but she just couldn't control it. Glancing up over her shoulder, she saw Merryn heading back to her bedding. As she sat down upon the pile of rags, she met Cara's gaze for a short moment. A brief smile, and she lay back down, cocooning herself in the rags.

Cara sighed, grateful for the kind gesture. She decided to try and get some sleep. She curled up within the cloak, which was bigger than her own, allowing her to create a bubble of warmth around her. Her own cloak served nicely as a pillow.

A deep breath. Then another. And another. A green eye opened. The sideways world showed a fire crackling, and a small, iron pot sat on a few flat rocks in the flames.

The world righted itself as Cara sat up, running a hand through her hair. A deep rumbling in her stomach reminded her that she hadn't eaten since midday the day before. Movement behind her caught her attention, and she watched as Merryn tugged on leather twine between her teeth, repairing one of her bracers, which were simple brown leather with no decorations or ornamentation.

"Stir that, will ya, lass?" Merryn asked, not looking at Cara as she set the bracer aside, grabbing one of her boots.

Without comment, Cara made her way to the pot to stir the contents, using the wooden spoon that rested on a rock outside the fire ring. Leaning over the wonderful-smelling stew, she was mindful of her sleeve and the licking flames as she stirred the concoction, roots and wild potatoes bobbing in the mix, along with chunks of cut up meat. Bringing the spoon to her lips, she blew over the broth, made of mostly water, and the few juices left over from the rabbit the night before.

"'Tis just about ready," she said, setting the spoon back on the rock. Standing, she stretched her arms high over her head, balancing on her toes for a moment to stretch out her calves and arches. A day full of walking was torturous on the body.

Merryn did not reply. She tugged on her boot, which Cara could tell was slightly too large for her. Boots were rare, and Cara's curiosity got the best of her.

"Where did ye steal those?" She neatly folded Merryn's cloak, which had been put over her shoulders the night before. Blue eyes twinkled up at her.

"Who knows? Let us say that there's a soldier out there wit' cold feet."

Cara grinned, shaking her head as she gently set the heavy garment atop Merryn's belongings. Seeing the cloth filled with the remains of her herbal mixture, she walked over to Merryn. Squatting in front of her, she raised a hand.

"Let me have a look at yer mouth," she said quietly.

Merryn held still, allowing Cara to do what she needed to. She focused on the girl's face, seeing the skin, surprisingly smooth considering the hard life the girl had already endured. Slightly arched, dark blonde brows drew slightly as the girl's concentration deepened. Merryn looked at her eyes, such an unusual color. They were green, but it wasn't the color that caught the attention. There was a depth to them, a wisdom far beyond the girl's maybe sixteen years.

Those eyes glanced up to meet her own for a moment. Cara smiled encouragement before she returned to her task.

"Ye've healed well, Merryn. One more day and ye should be fine. Perhaps a bit of a bruise, but nothin' more."

Merryn nodded her acknowledgement of the news, sitting as still as she could as Cara applied a second layer of the paste.

"How long have ye been alone?" Cara asked, surprising her companion with the softly spoken question.

"Many a year, lass," Merryn said just as softly, as Cara gently wiped away a smudge of the paste she'd accidentally spilled onto her patient's cheek.

Cara sat back on her heels, looking up at the girl who sat upon a large rock. "Don't ye ever get lonely?"

Merryn shrugged, suddenly feeling shy. "Sometimes. 'Tis the way of things, and I move forward."

"Where are yer parents?"

"I know not. Was left on the steps of the nuns, and I ran from that place."

"I'm sorry," Cara whispered. She was amazed at the pain she could see in those incredibly bright, blue eyes, which shone even brighter from the dirty face they looked out of.

"Do not. 'Tisn't worth pity, Cara. I'm alive and no longer anyone's whipping boy. Nor will I be again."

Cara nodded her understanding.

"How have you managed to avoid the black sickness, lass?" Merryn asked, putting voice to a question she had been wondering about since the day before.

"Father Steffen said 'twas because I was blessed, but I think 'tis more because I found that cleanliness is next to Godliness." She smiled sweetly, standing.

"What does that mean?" Merryn also stood, walking over to the fire, using her knife to hook into the iron loop on the pan, tugging it from the fire.

"The sickness seems to live in the dirt, the mire, and dung. Since I was a small child, I wash nearly every day—"

"Ev'ry day! Are ya out of yer mind, lass?" Merryn cried, stopping mid-scoop when she heard the outrageous boast. "Man nor beast needs that. How have ya got any skin left?" She looked at the girl's face and arms, shocked.

Cara laughed. "Ye won't lose yer skin, Merryn. 'Tis better fer ye and, from the looks and smell of ye, a trip to a river would be a good idea."

"Not on yer life."

The lake was cold. Very cold.

"Tell me again why I didn't let that bugger do away with ya last eve?" Merryn growled, eyeing her companion, who was clearing the water out of her eyes. Cara grinned.

"Because deep down ye want someone ta travel with ye, and the moment ye laid eyes on me, ye knew I could be yer very own troubadour."

"That *must* be it." Merryn rolled her eyes before dunking herself under the surface of the cool water, rinsing off the last of the herbs Cara said would clean her hair. Running her hands down the rope of wet strands, she squeezed some of the extra water out of them. She had to admit, though it would never be to Cara, that she felt much better and liked the feel of a clean body.

Cara grinned, ignoring the sarcasm in her new friend's voice. She swam around a little to stretch her arms and legs before deciding she was cold enough. Walking out onto the rocky shore, she quickly grabbed her clothing.

"Wait, lass," Merryn said, wading to the shore. "Ya may not die from the black sickness, but ya'll catch yer death if you make your garments cold and wet."

Cara watched as Merryn quickly got a fire started, right there on the shore, seemingly unconcerned with her nakedness. She looked away, wanting to give her friend some privacy.

"Come here, lass. Warm yerself." Merryn laid herself down on her cloak, her hands tucked behind her head. It was a beautiful day, and the sun was shining down to warm their skin. For the first time in — she couldn't remember how long, Merryn was enjoying herself. She glanced across the dancing flames at Cara, who lay in almost the exact same position.

"So where are we going?" Cara said, eyes twinkling. Merryn smirked.

"We, lass?" she asked, with her brow raised. Cara smiled sweetly, but said nothing. Merryn shook her head, incredulously. She was filled with guilt once again, as her thoughts turned to where she was off to next. Yes, she should take Cara with her, and yes, they had fun in the lake. Perhaps this washing thing isn't so bad, but would Cara drive her crazy as time went on? Merryn was a loner, always had been, always would be. "I'll take ya to the next town, maybe London if ya're lucky. But at that, lass, we part ways."

Cara looked at her friend, her heart dropping, but she nodded in agreement. She would have to be grateful for what she could get.

"Are ye a character in the Bible?"

"Nay," Merryn said absently, looking around as they made their way through the forest. The snow had fallen heavy and brutal, and their breaths and words immediately crystallized in the air. She worried they wouldn't be able to find any dry wood for a fire.

"Dead or livin'?" Cara asked, brows furrowed as her mind brought up image after image of possible candidates for their game.

"Dead."

"Dead. Alright." Cara stopped for a moment, head cocked to the side. Merryn had heard something, too. "What is that?"

Ignoring the question she had no answer for, Merryn struck off toward the left, hearing the sound get louder. Soon she was running, her cloak fanning out behind her, and her boots crunching in the snow.

Cara waited, but ran towards the sound when her name echoed through the wood. Out of breath yet grateful for the warmth that spread through her body from the exertion, she burst through the trees into a clearing, stopping suddenly.

Merryn slammed her sword into the frozen ground with a grunt. "Give me yer rope," Merryn shouted, seeing Cara over her shoulder.

Cara gasped at the site before her. The noise they had heard was a horse that had fallen through the ice of the river.

"Now, girl!" Merryn shouted, desperation in her voice as she threw her cloak to the ground, stripping herself of all her weapons. Acting purely out of instinct, Cara untied the rope with trembling fingers, her eyes never leaving the beautiful horse thrashing in the ice, desperately trying to keep its head above water.

Merryn took the rope thrown to her and quickly tied one end to the cross-guard of her sword and the other around her ankle.

"Hold on to my sword, lass," she said quietly over her shoulder as she edged toward the ice. Cara hurried over to the blade, fell to her knees, and wrapped her cold-reddened hands around the grip. She flexed her fingers before lacing them, making a stronger hold. Her heart was beating fast as she watched Merryn make slow but sure progress across the ice, her boots sliding, her arms out for balance.

Cara listened as Merryn murmured calming words and sounds to the terrified horse. Then a sharp crack rent the air. Merryn stopped in her tracks, her eyes huge as she tried to find the source of the crack. The horse was making things worse, the cries of terror and distress almost deafening.

Realizing that the horse would tire soon and then it would be too late, Merryn continued, sliding faster across the ice until she reached the animal.

Cara's hands flew to her mouth as Merryn fell into the water with the animal. Remembering what she was supposed to do, she quickly wrapped them around the grip again, her heart stopped cold in her chest.

Merryn's breath was stolen from her lungs as she was immersed into the frigid water. Going under, she quickly forced her way back to the surface, reaching down to untie the rope from her ankle. She had to be very mindful of the frightened animal's movements, as the horse could easily kill her in its frantic state. She jumped onto the horse's back, a death grip on its neck.

Cara watched as Merryn fought to get the rope tied around the animal's neck.

"Tug on the rope, Cara!" Merryn cried, her lips barely able to get the words out, so frozen they were.

Jumping into action, Cara wrapped her hands around the rope, using her body weight to pull. With her eyes squeezed shut, her teeth bared, and as an echoing cry erupting from her throat, the horse began to move.

Another crack, then another, and another. Cara's eyes opened in time to see a spider web of cracks rush across the ice, the horse following as the ice parted.

"Pull, lass! Pull!" Merryn cried, half in desperation and half in laughter, as the horse broke its own way out of the river. But the laughter was cut short when the horse reared up, throwing Merryn and sending her crashing through the ice, disappearing under the surface.

"Merryn!" Leaving the sword, Cara ran toward the ice as the horse jerked forward, running toward her as it broke through the last of the ice. Getting out of the galloping animal's way and wading her way into the water, Cara continued to cry out, "Merryn!"

Seeing movement, she sent thanks to the Heavens and hurried forward, gasping as the water rose until she had to swim.

"Merryn," she panted, seeing the darkness of long hair. Hurrying over to it, she grabbed at her friend, startled, but immensely happy when Merryn gasped loudly, taking in a long breath. Cara grabbed her, tugging quickly, knowing she had to get them both out of the frigid water as soon as possible. "I've got ye," she panted, kicking her way toward the shore in the open waters created by the horse. "I've got ye."

Finally able to touch the bottom of the river, Cara dragged the coughing, shivering girl toward the shore. "'Tis all right, Merryn," she encouraged, helping the girl to the ground. Looking around, she saw a long, deep trail in the snow and realized it was from Merryn's sword. The mare had pulled the weapon out of the ground and had dragged it behind her in her haste to escape her terrifying confinement.

"I'll be back quickly," she said, gently squeezing Merryn's shoulder.

Hearing heavy breathing and snorting, Cara scurried through the trees, ignoring her own shivering as she stepped carefully around the trees, not wanting to frighten the animal. When she finally found her, she saw the horse was lying on its side, ribs heaving. Each hot breath managed to melt a bit of snow at its head, forming a small trench. The rope was still around the horse's neck. She was finally able to see that this was a beautiful mare. So as carefully as she could, and conscious of a big brown eye watching her, Cara untied the rope from around the sword, which lay not far behind the horse, and tied the rope to a nearby tree.

"I'll be back, girl," she murmured, kneeling at the animal's head and gently running a hand over the mare's nose.

She ran back to Merryn, who lay where she'd been left, huddled in upon her own body, which was shivering violently. Ignoring her own chills, Cara made quick work of searching through Merryn's belongings, tugging out her sleeping blankets.

"Here, Merryn. Sit up," she said, her voice soft and soothing. Merryn did as she was bidden, her lips almost as blue as her eyes. Cara untied the laces of Merryn's shirt as quickly as her trembling fingers would allow. Once the shirt was removed, she wrapped the blanket around Merryn's icy shoulders.

"I'll make a fire," she said, rubbing her hands frantically up and down her friend's arms, trying desperately to put some warmth back into her. Merryn nodded, still unable to say anything.

The wood was damp, causing her to cry out in frustration several times. Cara was desperate to get a fire lit, knowing it was the last hope for the two of them. Finally, she got it started.

"Thank ye, Lord," she whispered, hurrying over to her friend. "Come, Merryn. Let us warm ye." With a groan, Merryn stood, shakily, and walked the short distance to the fire.

"Ya need to warm yerself, as well, lass," Merryn said, looking at the shivering girl.

"Soon," Cara said, hurrying back through the woods to the mare. She found the horse on her feet, still too exhausted and cold to put up a fight. Cara untied the rope and led the weary animal back to camp, tying her to a tree near the fire. The mare immediately went about nosing the snow out of the way, finding grass at the base of the tree.

Finally out of energy as the cold took over, Cara collapsed next to Merryn. Quickly, she untied her cloak which was heavy and water-logged.

Both girls absorbed the warmth that finally managed to permeate the layer of ice on their skin. As feeling returned to Merryn's body, she turned to Cara, who was staring into the flames.

"Ya saved me, lass," she whispered. When green eyes met hers, she smiled. "Ya saved my life."

"Then we're even," Cara smiled back.

"We are."

"M alright, lass," Merryn said, though the last word was interrupted by another violent coughing fit. Cara rubbed small circles across the heaving back, her brows knitted in worry. It had been two days since they had rescued the horse from the icy waters, and Merryn's health was faltering quickly.

"No, Merryn, ye're not. Ye've gotten worse."

"Nay." Merryn waved off her words of concern, determined to go on. She'd been sick before and could beat it this time, too. She didn't need to be pampered as if she was a child. "M fine."

Cara said nothing more to the stubborn girl, but kept an eye on her as she led the mare, yet to be named, through the trees. They traveled down the path they had been following since starting out that morning, toward London.

Merryn's pace slowed more and more as the day passed, and she finally agreed to stop for the night. Cara tried to get her to eat the soup made of a few roots they'd been lucky enough to find during the day. They really needed to get to London soon, so that Merryn could get out of the cold.

"Please eat, Merryn," Cara pleaded, bringing their one bowl to her. The steam from the food warmed Merryn's face, but the smell made her nauseous. Turning away, she brought a hand up, tucking the other against her stomach.

"I canna, lass," she groaned, the bile rising in her throat. Sighing, Cara looked down at the food, uncertain what to do. Merryn hadn't eaten more than a few spoonfuls of food in two days. She was weak and unable to travel for long lengths of time.

"Please, Merryn?" she tried again. "Fer me? Just a couple bites?" Cara's green eyes looked into the sunken blue ones of her companion. Merryn nodded, accepting the bowl.

Not long after, she helped Merryn to bed. That is, as much as the proud girl would allow.

"Stop yer fussing," Cara gently admonished, her patience being tried. She grabbed the heel of one of Merryn's boots and gave it a mighty tug while keeping her balance so she wouldn't fly back into the fire once the boot came loose. Setting it aside, she pulled off the second one, noticing the sole was beginning to wear. "We need to get this repaired when we get to London," she said absently, setting the boot aside and grabbing Merryn's cloak.

"A bit breezy," Merryn whispered, her voice hoarse, just before she was racked with another coughing fit.

"Shhh," Cara cooed, moving up to the girl's head. Cara looked down with concerned eyes, bringing a hand up to gently brush dark hair away from a sweaty brow. She thought for a moment, then began to sing, her voice soft on the cold night air. She wouldn't be London's next minstrel, but her voice wasn't unpleasant, either. It helped to calm and lull Merryn into an uneasy sleep.

Exhausted herself but knowing what must be done, Cara grabbed her pack, sifting through until she found what she sought. Pinching a few of the dried leaves between her fingers, she moved back over to the sleeping Merryn, gently parting her lips before placing the leaves on her tongue. Merryn's brows drew for a moment, and her lips briefly tucked inside her mouth as the dried leaves tingled against the soft flesh of her gums and tongue. Finally with a soft sigh of contentment, Merryn was still, her breathing even.

"Sleep well, my friend," Cara whispered, placing a gentle kiss on Merryn's clammy forehead. She swept mahogany locks away from Merryn's face, usually so beautiful, but now pale and sickly.

Merryn's fevered mind wandered through the trees, under the surface of the river, ice bumping into her face, giving her the shivers. This caused the fear of flame to lick at her body, causing a great sweat that turned into a small glacier, which she stumbled over. Her blue eyes widened in terror as the deep brown mare turned into a raging beast, a dragon of old. Fire, flaring from its dilated nostrils, hit her with a wave of heat, making her cry out as it singed her mind.

A voice. A sweet, lovely voice. "Merryn? Come back to me, Merryn." The voice echoed, bouncing around between her ears, like a ball of string she once had. The string now unwound, tugs at a litter. The dragon pulled the litter, tugging her with the unwound string. "Merryn? Are ye hungry?"

Food. What food comes back to life to snap at you? Crazy lass gave her food that bit at your throat, stung the inside of your mouth, and made your tongue tingle like so much ale.

Cold. So cold. So very cold.

Softness. Do the clouds fall from the skies? Lie upon the land like so much dew? Warmth and softness are found along her body and in her mind. The wool keeping her ears apart had grown soggy, capturing her thoughts into tiny little caves where spiders crawled in and out of them.

Warmth.

Her blue eyes slowly fluttered open, blinking several times before becoming focused. Quickly Merryn squeezed them shut again, her head pounding, her temples pulsing.

"Shhh, 'tis all right, Merryn. I know it hurts," a soft, warm voice said to her right. Turning her face in that direction, Merryn kept her eyes closed as she felt coolness spread across her forehead, and a small, calloused hand take her own. "The pain will pass, I promise."

"Where am I?" she whispered, her voice as scratchy as her throat after little use.

"The nuns at St. Michael's were kind enough to allow us respite," Cara explained softly.

"How..." Merryn cleared her throat, trying again. "How long 'ave we been here?" She attempted to open her eyes again, squinting in the dim light of a single candle that rested in its holder upon the small table next to Cara's chair.

"Three days," Cara said, her head cocked slightly as it was tilted down to look at her patient.

"Why does my head hurt so badly?" Merryn blinked again, grateful to feel the pain beginning to ease.

"'Tis the comler root I gave ye. 'Twill break yer fever, as it seems to have done."

"To what horror," Merryn groaned. She saw a small smile briefly cross Cara's lips.

"I'm sorry, Merryn, but a pounding head is more welcome than the raging fever of a week in age." Cara removed the damp cloth, the coolness sucked right out by the wicked heat of Merryn's skin. She dunked it in the wooden bowl, filled with cool water that the sisters had provided her with. Wringing out the cloth, she reapplied it, gently wiping away the few beads of sweat that remained. Merryn closed her eyes once more at the cooling sensation, which helped to ease her headache. "Other than a hurting head, how do ye feel?"

Merryn paused before she answered that question, taking stock of her body and all its moving parts.

"I'll live, lass," she whispered, pleased at the soft chuckle that received.