

NECTAR FROM A STONE

CHAPTER I — GRAY HILL

North Wales, Summer, 1351

Maelgwyn's 'husbandly attention,' as he called it, went on and on. Strange, how time could creep and crawl.

The room grew darker as the fire died.

"Have you no answer, Elise?"

He had posed a question? Lying there, all she'd heard was the sighing of the wind, outside, and the faint rush of blood in her ears.

He stared down into her face. "Or is this unamiable silence yet another sign of your waywardness?"

This required some reply. "I have never studied to be wayward to you, sir," she said.

"Hah. You require no study, being a born mistress of the art." He reached down to pinch her thigh, his usual way of emphasizing a point. She bit back a cry but knew there would be bruise. "Had you been attending, wife, you would have heard me say your constant lack of response is vexing. Nor am I able to fathom your ingratitude. Who are you to be ungrateful? Better souls than you suffer every hour. As we speak, worthy Welshmen bleed on French battlefields. And in the course of the Great Mortality, thousands of good Christians fell. Yet you survived, Elise. And then you were so fortunate as to come here to me. *Deo dilecti*. But why?"

Deo dilecti. Chosen by God. When had she so offended her Maker that she had been chosen by Him, for this?

"It is as great a mystery to me as it is to you," she said, without equivocation.

“So I should imagine. But are you happy to be alive, rejoicing in my protection and devotion? No, I fear you are not. And the pitiful dowry you brought with you does not compensate me for your relentless ingratitude, I assure you.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, considering that dowry. It had not been pitiful, she knew. But she also knew there was never anything to be gained by contradicting Maelgwyn. So she opened her eyes and said, “Merely I am worn from the demands of the day and the household. There’s only Annora to aid me.” Then she lied. “But I am not ungrateful.”

Would the reasonable excuse of fatigue stem a more grueling interrogation? The truth would never do. She couldn’t tell this cruel man how she loathed and feared him, how the very sight of him—his long, muscled trunk and ox’s neck—had become so abhorrent to her it was almost past bearing. Further, the truth could finally tip the scales of his volatile temper, a temper grown increasingly vicious in the two years since she had come to his rambling old house, *Bryn-Illwyd*. Gray Hill.

“I confess,” he was saying, “I forget from time to time that you are but a woman, the worst sort of stinking rose. The holy philosophers tell us all we need know of the sorry origins of women, do they not?”

He continued, providing endless unwanted instruction even as he resumed his ‘husbandly attention.’

She turned her head away to look down at the wooden floor, hoping to will her mind away to some less hurtful place. A large black spider, speckled with yellow dots, crossed a rough plank near the hearth. It stopped and reared two of its legs, as if searching for some invisible passage. Then it lowered its legs and scurried toward a wall.

What tales had she heard of spiders? What had her servant and friend, Annora, told her? Elise pondered the question to divert herself. Soon she remembered Annora’s words: To their webs spiders entice fallen souls who only appear to poor human eyes as trapped moths or mites, before herding them to Purgatory. But hadn’t Annora also said the creeping things were a blessing, in the house, because they could miraculously absorb the poisonous Pestilence vapor,

bind it to the spots on their backs? Could these tales be true?

The evening wind grew stronger and shifted. Timbers objected. On one wall of their chamber three extravagant new glass panes, Maelgwyn's proudest acquisition and the first, he boasted, of many more to come, had been set into a triptych of branches hacked from a young oak. Still tall in its place but condemned to wither limb-stripped and then tumble down too early, that oak could no longer soften with its used-to-be leaves the view south to the empty Migneint Moor. It was Elise's fancy that the triptych, stolen from the tree's living body, would never contentedly cradle its fragile burden. And so it moaned softly with complaint.

A fierce gust brought the faint scent of the garderobe to the solar. The privy had been corbeled out over the river next to the chamber, and often stank when gales blew from the west.

"Fah, it reeks of cess in here," said Maelgwyn, for once echoing his young wife's thoughts.

But she flinched, for his harsh voice had startled her.

"You're skittish as a maiden, girl. Does my affection overwhelm you, or are you merely in the throes of yet another of your unholy visions?"

This jibe targeted a susceptibility to trance, hers since the season of the Gemini moon in 1343, eight years past, when she was eleven. Terrifying or glorious, her visions came unbidden, mostly eluding interpretation. To the past frustration of her loved ones, and now Maelgwyn, they often featured absolute strangers. Often, but not always.

In trances, sometimes only vaguely remembered by her once they'd passed, she had rightly foretold a rain of dying stars, and spoken, most eerily, with the forgotten voice of the bard, Taliesin, who passed to Rapture in the days of Arthur and Myrddin. She had described strange landscapes, and revealed to a lonely maiden the secret love of a neighbor. Likewise, many times she had predicted pregnancy. Or death.

That final item, predicting death, could not be thought remarkable. Death had lately stopped in many houses. It had thrown its dark cloak over every valley and knoll in Britain.

On the island of Anglesey, where Elise was born, three or four days north from Gray Hill, the gift of prophecy was regarded as God's favor. When she was a child her parents refused coins

from neighbors hoping to crouch nearby, their ears cocked for any mystic rambling that may have chanced to fall from Elise's young lips as she worked the spindle or sorted her mother's herbs.

Deep mystery was in her spells. Among a world of betters why had God chosen her to deliver even the least vital word? Or was it God who had chosen? Elise understood there was no tisane or trick to calm her doubt on this. Was she God's herald, or only Satan's fool?

High wrought by what he called immoral superstition, Maelgwyn rebuked her for her trances without fail, and the previous winter he lashed her with a studded whip one morning as she sat enthralled in a vision. Elise had felt no pain, but revived to the sight of three bright welts across her inner wrist. She smiled down at the marks and said, unexpected to herself, "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

Her husband's face grew chalky white before he added more wounds, blurring the crimson edges of the original three. "Blasphemy!" he cried and flung himself from the room.

His temper had not softened since, but she preferred it more than she could say to his monstrous ardor.

Now, in their solar, he pulled her up by her arms and dragged her from the bed without warning. She made an effort to stand upright, but stumbled backward. Only a wooden chair behind her kept her from sprawling. At her seeming retreat, Maelgwyn's hands dropped to his sides. His blue eyes glinted in the light of the tallow candle flickering on the table near the chamber's closed door.

"So," he said, "you are still sinfully disposed to resist me." Cast into ghostly relief by the candlelight, a dark vein pulsed at his temple. "Two years of marriage have not been enough to teach you your place."

He caught her wrists with one large hand and squeezed so hard that her fingers grew quickly numb as the blood was dammed tight in them. "You choose so blithely to defy my wishes? Then kneel," he said, forcing her to her knees. "Like so. Only now do you strike the proper posture for supplication, Elise."

When she tried to pull away, he tightened his hold and seized the neck of her summer

shift. She gasped as he ripped downward, rending the fine cloth. The ruined shift drifted with a soft hiss to the floor around her.

“Didn’t the great thinker Boethius tell us that woman is a temple built upon a sewer?” he said, breathing a bit harder, but smiling. “Was he not a godly man?” He reached around her and ran the blunt fingernails of his unoccupied hand down her spine. “Some of your gender will call that an overly harsh edict, of course. But what is a righteous man to do? I must align myself with the Church’s precepts, and declare every woman an Eve.”

Face hot, legs icy, Elise ceased any effort to free herself, and sagged into his grip. “I am only fatigued, Maelgwyn, and addled by weariness. I will not fight you anymore,” she said, staring up at him. “Let me rise so we may go on. I’m too aroused to kneel.” She essayed a coy smile, but knew it must be ghastly.

“Ah no, Elise. Gray eyes and middling beauty can’t dupe me further tonight. I am prophet now. And I foresee the most practical way for a willful wife to absorb a husband’s teaching will be low and mean, so she may more easily comprehend it. That thought is balm for my distaste. I only pray my righteous seed is steered by Heaven to a smooth passage down your throat, toward your wicked soul.”

He released her and inclined his head. “Move to me now, to ingest my probity.”

Stronger hints of the privy assailed her as mounting winds buffeted the old manor. Some creature, mouse or bat, disturbed the thatched roof above. Drifting to the floor beyond Maelgwyn, the resulting halo of fine dust shone in the candle’s glow.

Not a soul would come if she called. No one would hear her cries, except perhaps her friend Annora, Bryn-llwyd’s only other human inhabitant. Meanwhile, her bare-chested husband stood between her and the door, hosen around his ankles.

“For shame, woman,” he finally said, as she gave no sign of obeying.

Another gale shook the manor. Hail pinged against glass. With more urgency than grace, she tried to rise, but tangled her feet in her torn shift. Maelgwyn yanked her up by her braid.

“Any bleating ewe would be less trouble,” he said, dragging her back toward the bed.

Twisting away at the last moment, she ran to the window. There, after two long years of cowardice, her caution deserted her. It dissolved like a tattered shadow. But in its stead it left a wild, quick-blossoming rage. Her head fairly swam with rage.

“A ewe? I recommend one, sir,” she said, breath uneven. “Or an ass. A fine great ass for your mighty probity.” Without conscious thought, she began, shockingly, to laugh like a madwoman.

His thick brows drew together to form one black line. “Yet more shame, Elise.”

Her laughter ceased as abruptly as it had begun. “Maelgwyn, can you not feel it? Something taints you. Some evil. In this house you are the fountainhead of everything unholy, for your pleasure can only be bought with pain. How sad and rotten your soul must be, how endless your fear. Indict me if you must”—she wrapped her arms around herself, covering her breasts—“but you know full well your own foul craving will condemn you straight to Hell.”

A sickly half-smile played at the corners of his mouth, and his nostrils flared.

Forcing herself to look into his face, she was shocked to catch a glimmer of fear, fear she had discerned in him only once before.

He drew back slightly, as if sensing her discovery.

“You’re afraid,” she said.

He took a breath—his broad chest swelled with it. And the fear disappeared from his eyes.

“Afraid?” he said. The word dripped with scorn. His teeth showed in a wider, crueler smile. “Of a godless female? You’re a greater fool than I supposed.”

“Likely I am. But I saw it. You had that same look another time, one other time only, just after I came here.”

“Poor Elise. It’s almost amusing to witness your attempts to evade my wrath, and God’s.”

Her eyes did not leave his face. She would will him to answer, will him to pay for his violent gratification with one brief moment of truth. “You know it’s true. That first time, I described a vision I’d had. It was before I knew to keep my visions secret from you when I could. I told you I saw a woman. She stood naked by a river and she wore a necklace of tiny starfish. She

called your name. She--”

“Your tactics pall.”

“Who was she? Your first wife? Your mother?”

Silence fell, absorbing any warmth remaining in the room. Gooseflesh climbed her limbs. Her dark hair had come undone and spilled down her back to her waist. Outside, the hail stopped, and the wind grew less violent.

After a near eternity of quiet he spoke. He brought his hands to his chin, palms together as if in prayer. “What do you hope to gain by spewing your wicked tales, Elise? You and I both know your visions are only a sorry plea for my attention. We both know you never prattled to me of any woman.”

“I did.”

He went on as if she had not spoken. “But by mouthing your lies, your evil fantasies, you have damned yourself with words. Finally, Elise. Finally, you cause me to kill you, as I’ve imagined I might since we wed, if only to do God and other men a service.”

He took a step toward her, and another.

She shrank back with a cry.

He stopped and gazed past her, to his new panes and the darkness beyond, to the unseen rushing river. “Who will weep? I’ll say you fell to a revisiting of the Mortality. I’ll say you divined it yourself from a glimpse, in a vision, of a lake burning with brimstone. Is that not prophetic? Tomorrow morning or the next, what fool would burrow into your grave to confirm the sad symptoms?”

Without moving his head he shifted his focus, regarding her from the corner of his eye.

“Let she who is ripe...fall.”

“You’re mad,” she whispered.

He lunged.

Slammed back against the window, her knuckles hit a pane. Glass shattered, scoring uneven red lines down her arm. He struck her across the face with the side of his broad hand.

As blood dripped from her elbow to her foot, he struck again.

Shielding her head with her sound arm, she fell to the floor. "If I am to die," she cried, "at least let me say a prayer of contrition."

He loomed over her, breathing hard. "My dear," he said, with sudden real dismay, "I fear you are in the right. Yes, you must pray to Mary Magdalene. You must ask her to petition Heaven on your behalf--although I suspect it will be futile."

She cringed when he reached out, obscenely gentle, to stroke her hair. "Poor girl, where is my Christian compassion? Yes, yes, you must certainly pray."

She looked up at him as he bent over her. "I already have," she said--and drove a sharp glass dagger upward, hard, into his groin.

He crashed to the floor, but then staggered up at once to his knees. "Satan's bitch," he gasped. His arms shot out. His hands closed around her throat.

As a gray mist swirled up before her, she lashed out blindly with the shard and heard him curse again. His hands dropped away from her neck.

Once more, the room grew still.