

[from "Dark Princess," a novel, copyright 2007, by William Ramsay]

CHAPTER TWO

The smoke from the open hearth was not rising smoothly through the louver above, and her eyes had been stinging. But at least the fire made the unseasonable May chilliness bearable.

Gladys was looking forward to a visit the coming week from her father. It had been over two years since she had come to Brecon Castle as the wife of Reginald, Lord de Briouze, and she missed her father and her home in Aberffraw. Getting accustomed to Englishmen, especially her waspish, haughty husband, had been difficult. She did have Morgan as her steward, but their friendship was inhibited by his work and her position — and the suspicious nature of her husband. Indeed, she enjoyed being the chatelaine of the castle, and just now she was sitting with her accounts, reviewing some of the household expenditures in order to be able to talk to Morgan about them later.

Her fifteen-year-old stepson, William, walked in and came over and stood behind her.

Suddenly she jumped as the youth reached down and grasped her leg.

"Don't do that!" She tried to push his hand away, her shout echoing against the gray stone walls of the common chamber in the central keep. He brushed her hand away and moved his own up her leg, prodding, and she squirmed desperately to get away from him. Her eyes welled with tears, and she no longer noticed the stinging from the smoke. Not this again! she thought.

"It's just a joke." Young Briouze grasped the belt of her surcoat tight with the one hand and moved the other under her surcoat, tunic, and chemise, grasping her buttock. "Oh, what's this?" he said, releasing her and extracting the little horned doll from under the belt.

"Witchcraft?"

Gladys whirled around and grabbed the doll from his hand and stuck it back in her belt. She stared hard into his large blue eyes. "I said don't." She pushed the heavy oak table between them to try to block his way.

"Chère maman!" William reached over the table, seized her by the shoulders, pulled her up and around, and forced her down onto the floor, into the thick piles of rushes.

"Don't!" she screamed.

He lay on top of her and jerked his hand down to grope between her legs. With his short arms, he couldn't quite reach her private parts, and she wriggled to get out of his grasp.

Suddenly -- "Vous avez appelé, madame?" It was Morgan's bass voice, right behind her, his French words intoned with a Welsh lilt.

William reared back and sat up, his handsome face startled. His tunic was pulled up and his drawers and the whole length of his stockings were visible. An erection poked up under the thin linen cloth.

Morgan looked gigantic from where she lay on the floor: he must have outweighed William by some fifty pounds. She scooted to sit upright. "Yes, yes." She tried to slow her breathing. "I need to talk to you, Morgan." She gasped. "The kitchen accounts are all confused." She gasped. "We couldn't have ordered two whole barrels of vinegar." She drew in a breath. "That's ridiculous."

Morgan shook his head and edged over to block William. "Certainly not, milady."

She turned her back on William and took Morgan's hand. He helped her stand up. She adjusted her tunic and left the chamber as Morgan bowed low to William -- "My lord" -- and followed her out.

Outside, she ran up the circular stairway to the walk that ran along the top of the battlemented wall. How had he dared, that half-grown boy! Her heart was beating rapidly;

tears ran down her cheek. She looked out to the south, onto the thatched roofs of the town and beyond into the dark green valley. The sun shone idly off the ripples of the river Usk.

She imagined the white foaming surf smashing off the cliffs far to the north at Aberffraw. A bright watery glow blurred her vision, and she wiped her eyes and blew her nose. She turned around and looked up at the gray stone keep towering above her. A bat-eared gargoyle leered down at her; he seemed to be ridiculing her distress. Across the river, dark-lined clouds sat over the blackish green mountains.

She beat her fists against her thighs and wiped away her tears again. Biting her lips, she took two deep breaths. She nodded her head, reassuring herself: she was not entirely alone. Even here among the ffrancwyr there were the same protective spirits, forces of energy immanent in the water, the trees, and the rocks. She looked to see that no one was observing her, sketched a pentagram on the top of the wall with her index finger and then raised her arms in salute to the familiar mysteries of the unknown. She was too upset to know if she had made contact, but she felt better for trying.

After supper, she fell into conversation with Brother Michael from the nearby monastery of Llanddew. The hair on the rim of his tonsure was graying; she felt warmed by the shy glances from his kind gray eyes.

Could he help her? she wondered silently.

“You’re very young to have left home to live so far away, my dear.”

She nodded, not knowing what to say. She felt she had grown up very quickly, being married to Reginald de Briouze.

Brother Michael patted her hand and nodded his head. “Come to me for confession any time, my daughter.”

But how could she confess the thing with William? It wasn’t her sin.

Later in the evening, behind the draperies in the low bed, after she had satisfied her husband, she came down from her hands and knees and leaned back on the silken pillow. Her husband was now lying back with his eyes half-closed.

“My lord.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Your son has -- I don’t know.”

“Has what?” The eyes came open all the way.

“Touched me.”

“Oh, the devil. Not that again.”

“Yes, again.”

“He’s only a boy.”

“He is not.”

“He’s my only son.”

“But my lord, I’m your wife.”

Reginald sat up and reached for the cup of wine that sat on the floor beside the pile of bedding. He told her that yes, she was his wife, and no, she shouldn’t be making an unnecessary fuss about things that didn’t matter.

Gladys bit her lip and muttered that it mattered to her.

He let his breath out in a harsh rush of sound. “Once you’ve given me a son, then we can talk more about this.”

Gladys sat up and pounded a fist into the pillow. Feathers popped out. “My lord should not let a young man do evil things to his father’s wife.”

Her husband slammed the wine cup down. It splashed on the floor and the coverlet, a dark reddish brown stain spreading wide. “Your grandfather starved my mother and my brother to death in the dungeons of Windsor castle and you talk to me of evil!”

Gladys shrank back, pulling the covers up around herself. "But it's not the same thing at all."

Reginald's large hand suddenly appeared in a flash of red and pink, almost hitting her in the head, stopping at the last moment.

"Pity, my lord," she said. She ducked her head. "Please. Please." Suddenly she had to pee.

"Vous, canaille Galloise," he shouted, and he raised his hand again and hit her hard in the left breast.

She gasped, surprised at the depth of the agony, feeling the pain mount to a climax and then spread out into a throbbing soreness. She gave out a great sob.

It took a second for her to absorb the outrage. She gasped for breath. Her face felt like fire.

Her husband got up and stamped out of her chamber.

She put her hand to her throat. The devil was at work. She was flesh of the flesh of the devil. She had fallen into her own private inferno.

What could she do? The devil was infinitely clever, and he seemed to be perfectly able to appear in the guise of coldness and brutishness.

Where could she run to? Nowhere. How could she protect herself? No human being could help. Perhaps the spirits -- but how?

She knelt and prayed to St. David, the patron of Wales, asking him to help her bear her suffering in the present. And especially to preserve her for the future work she hoped she could do for Wales.

She wished she had someone to talk to about the trap she was in -- she had never felt so alone.

Later that week, with the sun out and the weather now pleasantly warm, she could still feel some soreness in her breast as she knelt in front of her father, who was making his first visit to her married home. Llywelyn sat enthroned on the highest seat in the great hall, surrounded by a bevy of English courtiers and by a number of the Welshmen of his own teulu with their round shields, short swords, and bare feet. Her father kissed her on both cheeks. “My little girl a wife.”

“Yes, my lord.” She kissed his hand and he gently grasped hers.

She noticed her dark-haired cousin Merfyn, her father’s sister’s child, bow to her from his place in the teulu.

Her father turned to her husband. “We are honored to be a part of your family,” he said loudly -- in French, so that the Briouze household would understand him.

“It’s good to be at peace again, sir,” said Reginald, in Welsh for the ears of the teulu. He was referring to the agreement that Llywelyn had just reached in Worcester with King Henry, ending several years of war between the crown and the principality following the death of King John two years ago in 1216. Gladys had been upset when Reginald had made his submission to the crown before the Welsh did, because in the interval there had ensued bitter fighting between the Welsh and the Briouzes.

She heard a buzz from the crowd of servants in the back of the hall -- a group of them was speaking English, a language she was just beginning to learn. Her father glanced at her fondly, catching her eye, examining her closely -- and she abruptly realized why her husband had refrained from striking her in the face during their quarrel.

What could she say to anyone about the quarrel and that cowardly blow? Nothing. Not that she wouldn’t have liked to say a good deal! But then it occurred to her that she should be proud of her position as a bridge between her two peoples -- a sore breast was perhaps a small price to pay. Her father was now recognized as supreme in pura Wallia, the part of Wales

where native princes ruled and Welsh was spoken, and his relationships with barons like her husband had been a key factor in the political settlement. Someday her nation could well demand much more of her.

Yes, she thought, but still -- what would her great-grandmother Eleanor have done to any man who had treated her that way?

Her father beckoned to her, and she came over to him. He motioned the servants to move away out of earshot. He smiled at her lovingly. "Is there anything I can do for you, Gladys?" he said in a soft voice.

"Oh, Father, yes."

"What is it, my sweet?"

"I want you to send Marared here to Brecon. You can't imagine how much I miss her."

"Of course. If she'll leave Aberffraw."

"Tell her I must have her here -- I must!"

Her father laughed.

He was the most wonderful man in the world -- she could depend on him.

"Well," he said, "in that case, I'll have her brought in chains, if I have to!"

Gladys laughed: she didn't envy any jailer who would have to hold Marrie captive.

"And now, Gladys, I want to ask you to do something for me."

"For you, Da? Of course!"

And he explained to her that his alliance with her husband was very important to the future of the principality.

"I want you to keep that in mind," said her father. "I'd like you to let me know if you hear of anything that happens here that might be important to the Welsh. Anything at all."

She promised she would be watchful. And she asked him to give her love to her brother and her sisters and tell them how much she missed them.

After she was back in her chamber, she told herself that it had all been worthwhile, the troubles she had gone through. As Lady de Briouze of Brecon, she would do her best to be a help to her father — and her country.

And Marrie would be coming to join her! Now at least she wouldn't feel so alone at night, with just herself and the silent spirits of the natural world. And with him, her lord and master, her demon, her fate.