

Excerpt Chapters:

The Witch of the Glen: A Viking Love Story

“What do you mean...” Jarek’s thoughts were finally focused on the slight nuisance by his side. “You do *not* wish to leave Laverick?” The man was understandably confused.

“Mayhap these people...the fine citizenry, will nay wish me for a Healer, but,” Hester was excited by new prospects, “I am able and strong and passably intelligent.” She ignored the small grunt of dissension *that* remark caused, sparing Seth McFarland a derogatory glance when the man offered over his opinion on the latter statement. “I will seek other gainful employment.”

Jarek sought an explanation from Seth who stood so gravely quiet beside the diminutive female who had approached only minutes before.

“She ‘*supposes*’,” Seth explained dutifully, “that you could be speaking to Angus McGavin on her behalf, saying the way of things.” The large man repeated his instructions almost verbatim. “As to how she was merely protecting her maidenly reputation upon first encounter that fateful day...and that ‘*witch*’ thing...” He crossed himself trying hard to keep a straight face when the Healer followed his very actions ever so hastily. “Was nothing more than a ways to a means.”

“Means to an end.” Hester corrected, flipping her fingers about to illustrate her meaning.

“I am speaking here.” Seth managed, straight-faced.

“Oh...pardon me, Sir. Continue, please.” Hester immediately fell silent, to Seth’s amazement.

Jarek’s mood lightened a tad for the exchange. “You should not trouble yourself over the blacksmith, Lady.” His brow furrowed once again, his doldrums brought to mind. “I am on m’ way to settle the matter even as we speak.”

Jarek mounted his magnificent steed with effortless grace, staring down to the small, expectant face.

“It would be wise were I to accompany you, My Lord.” Hester suggested evenly. “Tis my battle as much as it tis your’s.”

Jarek smiled gently. “What could you do against such a foe, girl?”

“Words, My Lord, the proper ones, oft times work just as well as...” She sized the man up, “whatever it tis you have in mind.”

“What I have in mind.” The steady, unwavering gaze gave pause for thought. “Will suffice for all concerned.”

Hester placed her hands to her hips looking after the departing man. “He is a man of few words.” She decided.

“He is indeed.” Seth mounted his own steed with practiced ease.

Hester stepped, lifting her hand, her face expectant.

The man, seeing her intent, hesitated.

“I have witnessed men resorting to fisticuffs before, man.”

Hester tsked. “My sensibilities are such,” she assured, “That I am not overly wrought by the sight.”

Still Seth hesitated. “There will be no ‘fisticuffs’, Lady.”

“We waste time.” Already Jarek Greyling was almost to the edge of the village, having covered the road to the haven in record time.

The man made his decision, leaning, grasping the small waist, lifting easily.

Hester gasped for the unexpected move, deposited soundly across the thick thighs, ridiculously close to the man’s warmth.

She pushed on his arm, which lay flat against her abdomen.

“*W-What are y’..*”

“Be still, woman or I shall deposit that sweet ass into yon mud puddle!” He held his smile just, the feel of her body pressing intimately in all the wrong...*right*, places to his, a sensual delight.

“One is *supposed* to mount from behind, you imbecile!” Hester squirmed about, trying to dislodge herself from his fierce hold, well aware of the spectacle they now presented.

“I know all about mounting from behind, rest your little mind on the matter.”

“The hand-hold is hurting me!” She lifted and squirmed accordingly. “This is the most indecent trick you have ever accomplished!” She flushed for all those about were reveling in her embarrassment, women included.

The man urged the horse to motion. “The day is young.” Seth’s eyes fell to the gaping front of her day-dress and the delightfully bouncing little orbs, “Nice tits.” he crooned silkily.

Hester gasped, slapping the man’s shoulder soundly, so much so...she hurt her hand. “You will pay for this you...you...” No word bad enough came to mind. She grasped her bodice tightly shut.

The man spurred the horse to a full trot, amused when the girl grasped hold his shoulders for dear life, sputtering her wrath.

“If...y-you do not release me!” her cheeks blazed heatedly.

“What will you do.” Her bluff was called for the man knew she was open to no further options other than to suffer her fate.

“I shall fix you for this debauchery!” Was all Hester knew for certain. She tried to ignore the bawdy remarks and laughter following their retreat.

Seth’s insidious grin only grew exponentially as he brought his animal to a full gallop.

Hester, startled by the move, clung on for dear life for the pace set was a goodly clip.

She could smell his scent, even over the wind whistling about her face. It was ever so pleasant, the mellow earthy tang clinging to the sunburnt flesh of his neckline.

The girl staunchly refused acknowledge the fact, setting her temperament determinedly, stiffening her body.

Her breast rubbed relentlessly against the honed muscles of the man's chest with each and every bounce of the horse's gait.

"You are the worst creature imaginable!" The forced closeness was causing all sorts of odd reactions in the girl's young, ripe body. Hester fought the sensations off, extremely annoyed she must do so.

"And you...." Seth's eyes dropped to where their bodies contacted. "Are the most delightful."

"How dare you embarrass me like this!" She lashed out yet again, her doubled up fist connecting with his shoulder for the second time. Hester gasped, crying out for the move almost dislodged her from the beast beneath her raw bottom.

Only Seth's strong clasp stopped the inevitable.

The deep sensual chuckle tickled Hester's ear. She swiped frantically at the sensation.

"I dare quite a bit, Lady." He reigned the animal to an abrupt halt, forcing the woman into his chest securely. "...Become accustomed to it."

She was unceremoniously slid down and away from the prancing beast.

Hester stepped, stumbling slightly, smacking the thick muscled thigh soundly.

Seth chuckled his amusement, bringing the horse back under control for the crisp smack had disturbed the animal.

Hester glanced up to the smug features, her eyes sparking flame. “You give imbeciles a bad name!”

Seth only laughed more heartily for the insult.

Hester considered the source, allowing the moment to depart from her mind. She tugged smartly on her waistcoat, primly smoothing the folds of her skirt.

Lifting her head proudly, she met the inquisitive stares of those villagers who so blatantly observed her predicament. “Why do you gawk?!” Her foul mood was allowed an outlet. “Do you have nothing better to do with your time?”

The faces continued to stare at the enigma before them.

“A *village* of imbeciles!” Hester mumbled under her breath, dismissing the nuisance in the next instance.

She marched determinedly forward only to stop dead in her tracks when the mammoth form of the blacksmith appeared in the doorway of a cottage, in front of which Jarek Greyling waited patiently.

There was barely a wee crack between the shoulders of Angus McGavin’s frame and the wood door facing in which he reposed.

Hester had forgotten what an imposing figure the large giant cut.

The foreboding scowl on the bearded features gave the girl pause.

The dark eyes stared directly at her, a most unfriendly gleam inside before lazily transferring to his true foe. “...You called for me?” The gravelly voice rumbled deep inside the burly chest.

Jarek seemed neither intimidated nor especially bothered by the gruff approach. The man, as always, came directly to the point. “*Draw...your weapon.*”

Jarek raised from his relaxed position to his full height, his own knife eased fluidly from its masterfully crafted sheaf.

Dark eyes met blue, one set clearly confounded, the other...composed and steady.

“You issued a challenge.” Jarek cleared up any possible miscomprehensions quickly enough. “I am here...to answer the call.”

The blacksmith was clearly thrown, his eyes searching about for any signs of assistance to be offered. He must have found support somewhere for his voice boomed forth. “By what right do you bring a witch into our midst? We fear the Gods’ wrath...you profane this village!”

“*You* profane my very existence.” Jarek was not impressed. “Save your words...the time has passed.”

The blacksmith’s color paled a bit as he met the stoic, unwavering gaze of his opponent.

“...Explain yourself. Your actions.” The blustery bravado returned, the man once more attempting to provoke and incite

disharmony.

“My weapon will provide all the answers needed to your questions.” Jarek’s light eyes had darkened to an almost violet hue.

The blacksmith’s courage was failing, it was evident. He sought a way out of the predicament into which he had fallen.

“We only ask...”

“We?” Jarek’s lazy tone and lifted brow were indicative of his mood, the low clipped words a warning to anyone unwise enough not to heed them. “I see no ‘we’...I see...only *you*.”

The large man swallowed hard. “We have a right...”

“Your ‘rights’ are what I decree.” Jarek cut the tirade short. “Any man that says differently...should feel free to advance and be recognized.”

Jarek stepped closer when no one took up the offer. McGavin had to retreat a step.

“The challenge has been issued.” Jarek’s tone was a sharp one. “*Lift...your weapon!*”

The blacksmith felt all eyes on him...waiting. He had incited doubt and disloyalty. This was his chance.

Now those gathered waited for the outcome of the reckoning.

Seth McFarland watched the faces of the ensemble. A few hardened souls spoke of an alliance against Jarek.

More simply waited for the outcome, only the two men could decide. Their votes would be cast upon whomever the victor might be.

All, however...turned wary, suspicious stares to Hester Hughes.

A witch!

In their very midst. Witches, after all...held certain powers. How then, would one of Satan's own react to the unfolding drama. And what did it mean for those in this village?

Stupid people! One had but to speak with the woman to know...Hester could never be aligned with such a wicked entity.

Seth was proud those he associated with, called 'friend' belied such dribble.

Oh...it was granted, the Healer was an odd sort, sure enough, with opinionated ways and outspoken beliefs but, nay...she was no more than a mere slip of a girl who had as yet, the benefit of a good man's guidance and corrections.

Jarek's patience waned. "I will not stand here all day!" He snapped. "You had much to say last night at the Inn, I hear tell. Speak those words now...to my face."

"I do not question your leadership." McGavin attempted to salvage his pride but he was smart enough to realize, he was no match for such a formidable foe alone.

He had counted on the village to back him but no one seemed inclined to step forward this day.

It had been different last night with bellies full of ale.

“That is *exactly* what you do!” Jarek’s expression altered to a placid intensity, the odd light in his eyes flicking to life.

Thinking back...Hester could say honestly, *it all happened so quickly*, out of the blue as it were...

Jarek stepped almost casually, the long blade of his knife plunging viciously sharp into the giving flesh of Angus McGavin’s abdomen. All the way to the hilt, with one swift plunge.

Hester’s gasp of horror was the only sound which carried above the wind’s whisper. Those green eyes widened with shock.

It rustled the leaves in the tall oak trees lining the street...gently swayed the waving wheat and barley in the fields.

It carried Angus McGavin’s slight grunt of pain away.

It could not, however, erase the horror etched on the blacksmith’s features as the realization of what had only just occurred, transferred to his senses and brain.

Having witnessed such an unthinkable action, Hester was at first..rooted to the spot, unable to move or articulate a coherent thought.

Upon McGavin’s staggered fall to the ground, she immobilized, instinct kicking in.

In seconds, Hester was by the fallen victim’s side, eyes wide, senses stunned at the turn of events.

Surveying the damage of the savage wound, the girl attempted to halt the flow of blood which poured from the gaping slice in the man's stomach.

Hester grasped the scarf from her neck, stuffing the fabric into the wound, her hands covering the area, pressing hard. She searched about frantically for her medical satchels only to remember, in her haste...they were still on the side board of the Great Room's entrance hall.

"Cloths, woman!" The blood was seeping through the scarf, about her small fingers, wetting the ground beneath the man's body. Hester beseeched the woman who sat, ashen faced, next to her husband's fallen form. "I must stop the flow!"

Hester lifted shock-filled eyes. "Sir!" She sought Seth McFarland's impassive face. "My satchel!"

"It will do little good." Seth spurred his animal back up the hill at a remarkable rate of speed never-the-less.

"Woman!" Hester snapped Mistress McGavin out of her trance. "Find something to stop the bleeding!"

The urgency in Hester's tone sent the woman scurrying hurriedly off, into the darkened recesses of the cottage behind them.

Hester's expression was a grim one as she returned to her patient. She felt so helpless, out of her depth and knowing it. Never had she seen such carnage in a human body before.

She gladly accepted a bundle of garments McGavin's wife

offered over, gently placing the cloths into the wound as best the flow allowed, leaning hard on the wound afterwards.

Hester prayed for guidance. She prayed for this man's wife who seemed so suddenly lost and haggard, the face lined by fear and dread.

At one point, Hester felt someone's acute stare. It burned her face.

She lifted emerald eyes.

"You assist my enemy, girl" Jarek Greyling's tone was slightly accusing.

"I assist one of God's children, My Lord." Hester snapped at such a remark at such a time.

Jarek looked off across the wide fields of his domain. "...Your God has odd ways."

Hester did not have the time or inclination to debate the subject at present, returning to the man at her side.

"A storm comes from the North." Seth approached in his quiet, unassuming way and now stood...towering over the small huddled figure below.

He glanced down. "I thought to find you here." He made himself comfortable beside the girl, his back braced to the cold stone of the parapet walls much as her's.

Hester had drawn her legs up, close to her form. Seth adopted a more casual repose, his long legs stretched out before him, crossed at the ankles, his high boots cushioning his calves. He crossed his burly arms, settling in for the duration.

The winds were strong and fierce this night especially so high in this perch above the countryside.

The girl stared out at an angry sea between the staggered stones of the high, sturdy wall. She sought for something to say for she appreciated another's presence...at least, this man's.

Everything seemed so insignificant however, so she remained silent.

"You did not truly believe you could save him, did you?" Seth broke the silence voicing his thoughts.

"I...had to try, Sir." Her tone held an infinite sadness.

"I know you did." Seth nodded sedately, the silence returning for a long beat.

"Do you wish you were out there?" Hester was fascinated by the wild undulation of the sea, the crisp white caps riding atop ever growing waves.

"I find my present location," the man turned a lazy, indulgent stare to the pretty profile. "Quite satisfactory."

Hester missed the meaning of his statement, so engrossed in her miseries was she.

“I felt so helpless.” She shared finally for the man had remained quiet, allowing her to gather her thoughts. “So...useless.”

She made a sound in her throat, a soft disgusted grunt that slid along the man’s spine like honey on buttered bread.

“*Healer.*” It was disdained. “I profane the word and profession.” She had long since decided. “That is why it is imperative I gain more knowledge...but *how?*”

Hester arose, the restlessness overtaking her. “I am a woman. Women are not allowed into an institute of higher learning...of *any* sort of learning.”

She threw up her hands, resting them on the parapet surface. Her cloak whipped rhythmically in the wind, the long hair playfully dancing in the after math.

She raked the dark strands from her face, “I have perused the books in the library...there are no medical texts. None.”

“Spain oft times allows a woman to study certain subjects at their universities.” Seth noted how small her feet were in the worn slippers beneath her dress hem.

“You speak of women of Higher Status, I assume.” Hester could not believe someone of *her* class would be given such consideration.

“The only difference between you and a female of such a station in life.. is coin.” Seth’s dry reply caused Hester to frown. The man arose, dusting his backside of supposed debris.

“An insurmountable obstacle, Sir.” Hester reminded, turning

her back to the wide panorama of the sea.

“You could become a nun.” Seth quipped. “I hear tell, the Convents offer a reasonable educational system.”

Hester sighed, her eyes absently studying the man’s body. “I do not wish to be a nun.” it suddenly dawned on her.

“I am ever so pleased to hear it.” He drawled. “...do you like what you see?”

Hester started, only just realizing she had been staring. “Oh!” She flushed slightly, gathering her wits hastily. “...I...I was not looking at *you*, Sir! I was merely...thinking! Pondering, if you will.”

Seth let the matter fall by the wayside. “There *are* a few medical texts actually. They are not in the library, however.”

“It is the height of egotism to think the Universe revolves around...” Hester’s mind caught up with the swift manner in which the man switched topics. “...You said what?” She moved decidedly closer, her senses straining. “There are...*what*?! What was it you said?”

“If you will hold your tongue for but a moment, a Herculean task in your case, I know.” He man moved strategically, blocking the wind and cold, “I shall repeat myself. Something I am loathe to do in the best of circumstances, by the way.”

Hester waited patiently but when the reply was long in coming for the man deliberately held off continuing his words just to see her reaction.

“*Well?!*” Hester was beside herself.

Seth chuckled lowly. “That was all of four seconds, girl.” He pointed out. “Your patience is non-existent.” He pulled the ties of her cloak shut against the wind’s cold draft.

Hester knocked his hands aside. “Do not take liberties! *Where?*” She demanded. “*Where* are these so-called texts?”

“There you have it then, do you not.” The devilish eyes danced mischievously, “a man must advance his good fortune where he may. Surely you have *something* of value to *trade* for this immeasurable treasure you seek?”

Hester was confused and then she was not, her expression altering. “What is it you wish, you vile creature...in exchange for this alleged treasure?” Her mouth tightened.

“I am not certain.” Seth pondered his options. “How desperate is your need?” He inquired politely.

“I can use the knowledge within those books to assist others, Sir.” Hester was dumbfounded. “They hold no *personal* value.” She was aghast this conversation was even taking place. “Do you care *nothing* for other people’s well-being?”

“Very little.” Seth was not moved, confessing his shortcomings freely.

“I doubt very much these texts exist at t’all!” Hester was certain they did not, in fact.

Seth spread large hands, his expression innocence itself. “Ask

Jarek.”

“Why would *you* wish medical texts?” Hester demanded to know. “I understand you have somehow *acquired* them...”

“Because, I sensed, sooner or later,” he patiently explained. “*You*...would wish them.”

Hester’s annoyance grew. “Have you no conscience?”

“None of which I am aware.”

“His Lordship will allow me...”

“I have thought of that.” Seth lifted a staying hand. “I now *own* the texts. Jarek owed me...I collected. You will be dealing with...*me*, Lady.”

“Of course I shall.” It was all perfectly clear to the girl now. “And...what price must I pay?”

Seth cocked his head, sizing up his opponent for a long moment. “All sorts of ‘vile’ things dance in my head, I will admit.”

“This comes as no great shock.” Hester managed tightly.

“I will ‘lend’ you Volume One...” Seth specified his terms, “..for a wee kiss.”

Hester closed her eyes, shaking those long tresses woefully. “I have had one hell of a day, Sir. *Do not test me!*”

“I realize as much, ergo...” He patiently explained, “I require only the kiss. I had intended something far more disagreeable. Count yourself fortunate.”

Hester stalked to the balustrade, in a fine mood. “This is unconscionable, even for you!”

Seth nodded sympathetically. “I feel such a cad making such a request.”

Hester shifted annoyed eyes. “Then *change* your request.”

“No.” Seth shook his head negatively. “I do not think so.”

Hester crossed her arms stubbornly. “I will *see* these books first, I think.”

“Doubting my word.” He seemed to find amusement in the reality. “I am deeply hurt, Healer...the texts are in my room.

She balked instantly. “Then...bring them *here!*”

“The light fades.” He stated innocently, motioning to the setting sun. “besides, little coward, what do you suppose I could do in my room that I would not attempt...*here?*”

“The mind boggles but at least *here,*” the girl glanced over the parapet wall. “I have an avenue of escape.”

The man chuckled lowly for the wit displayed. “You prefer jumping to your death to any advances I might make?”

“Decidedly.” Hester was certain she made the right call on this one.

“Oh...*my god.*” Hester’s whispered reverence was the only audible sound in the quiet of the room.

The pages were perused greedily, the yellowed parchment ever so gently flipped as diagrams and words jumped out to the girl’s astonished eyes.

“...Oh my God, Sir.” She sought her companion. “This is..” The emerald eyes showed every emotion she was feeling. “Incredible! Beyond my wildest dreams.”

“Your dreams are very sedate.” The man didn’t seem particularly impressed by the statement. “But keep in mind, this is only Volume One.” It was dutifully reminded. “Save some enthusiasm.”

Hester closed the thick, heavy book carefully. “Yes! Unbelievable that God would send such a gift!”

“*God* did not.” The man took possession of his property.

Hester was reminded of the dues she must pay, swallowing hard, checking the peripheral of the room. “..Well,” she wrung her hands nervously, “I..I am not certain exactly how to...pay my debt, Sir.” It was confessed. “I am not versed in such things.”

Seth enjoyed the soft flush on her cheeks. “*I am.*” The deep voice sent shivers of expectation down the woman’s spine.

He lay the book aside, returning his gaze. Hester weathered the intent stare.

The tip of her tongue wetted a small portion of her upper, then lower lip as she contemplated the mess she had gotten herself

into.

Seth did not miss the sensual sweep, his blood heating dangerously.

Hester compressed her lips, dimpling her cheeks. She was unaware of the appeal the move caused.

She smoothed her hands down the sides of her day-dress. “Would...you have me recline on the divan?” She lifted trembling hands to indicate the richly brocade blue of the small couch which dressed the window seat to her left. *Is that how it was done, she pondered?*

Seth followed the motion of her hand, his eyes robbing Hester of her usual self-assuredness. “Not if you wish me to stop at a kiss.”

Hester stared hard at the small divan.

Seth took pity, stepping casually. His calloused palm gently traced a path about Hester’s tiny waist.

She stared at the expanse of the man’s chest, dutifully studying the dull ivory of the buttons on his shirt which was far preferable to meeting his brooding stare.

Most men of the day sported ties, but the dark blue fabric of the shirt was adorned with a neat set of the pearly objects which fascinated her so...three which were undone, showing a fine tuft of dark black hair peeking out of the opening.

Seth stepped closer still, his arm tightening slightly about the small of Hester’s back.

The action pressed her abdomen to the hard muscles of his own. The emerald eyes searched out the handsome face.

Seth had carefully trimmed his beard earlier in the day but already a dark stubble graced his jaw line. He had neglected his appearance for months now but suddenly, it was imperative that he present a cohesive front for this woman.

He resented the fact, he felt he must. It was illogical, yes. But, there it was.

Hester felt her entire body stiffening, striving hard for sophistication. “T-This is strictly business.” She reminded herself more than her companion, at such a time.

“*We shall see.*” The gravelly statement sent a shot of adrenalin down the woman’s legs from the pit of her stomach.

Hester’s fingers gripped the fabric covering the mammoth biceps for support.

Seth’s dark scowl puzzled and intrigued. The grey orbs stared into Hester’s soul. She attempted to lower her eyes...to break the spell the man was weaving but it was an impossible feat.

Seth’s fingers gently but firmly lifted the small chin when Hester would have refused him such a tactic.

Those steel eyes darkened, as the man stared moodily at the full mouth which so captivated.

He slowly, painstakingly so...lowered his head, his forearm muscles flexing, forcing Hester further into his sphere of

influence.

The girl's insides were a quivering mass of indecision and chaotic confusion.

“..N-No.” She whispered brokenly, her courage failing miserably.

“Allow me in!” The grated demand silenced any denial as the man's lips ever so gently brushed the pout awaiting his exploration.

Hester's breath caught and held as an electrical shock traversed her body at the fleeting touch of the warm mouth.

Seth settled his lips upon the sweet fullness of Hester's mouth, the moment one of pure bliss.

He ran his free hand up the small of the girl's back, molding the warm, fragrant body to his straining one.

He could feel the brush of her thighs to his, the bulge of her breasts embedding themselves to his chest.

He kept his emotions in tight control, not wishing to frighten his prey off so early on, willing his cock to remain in its dormant state.

The woman's heated breath on his cheek heightened his response, however.

The pressure of his lips increased as he fitted their lips more assuredly. Hester's small whimper of distress delighted the man's senses. Her small moan of denial caused his cock to

twitch experimentally.

Seth cursed his lack of control but the lips he kissed were sensually delicious, Hester's breath smelling of honied tea.

The man stepped, forcing his thigh between the silk of Hester's parted legs, his arms now bands of steel about the pliable little frame.

Hester gave her emotions free reign for a brief second, her arms lifting about the sturdy neckline as she tip-toed into Seth's embrace, her mouth parting willingly to the demands the man made.

The warm hollow of his mouth drew her senses in, the sensation shooting quicksilver jolts of pleasure throughout her body.

The man broke the seal of their mouths, his lips experimenting with indulgent, probing positions that titillated, teased ...tantalized.

Hester groaned piteously, at once both wishing to break away from such lethal influence and yet...*not*...

Seth parted the perfection of Hester's lips, the very tip of his tongue flicking erotically into the hot hollow of her mouth.

She stiffened, her stomach lurching spasmodically, but the man's lips melded into a pruriently indulgent caress which left Hester weak and pliable in it's wake.

She groaned indecisively, responding in kind for one brief second, her passion coloring her judgement.

Seth felt the surrender, his cock expanding to a painful erection within seconds.

Hester, in turn...felt the hard bulge run the length of her stomach...and beyond. She hastily broke away from the disturbing sensation.

Seth released a shaky rasp, grunting curtly. “*Shit!*” He whispered for her move, but allowed it all the same.

He took a moment to get his equilibrium back, breathing in slow, steady breaths of cleansing air, hands on hips as he waited the interval out.

He lifted a sensual stare to the wide, shocked eyes awaiting just that moment. “What the hell did you expect, girl? I am but a man!”

Hester’s brow was furrowed with concern. “...I do not understand.” Had she offended the man in some way? “Why...are you angry?”

Seth drew in a slow, uneven breath. He knew now, he had greatly misjudged the girl’s naivete. He studied the facts as they now lay before him.

She had been kissed, aye but never by someone who knew how.

She learned quickly. She responded with a natural, almost sultry femininity that surprised for one so young. But...nay, even with that face and delectable little body...Hester Hughes staggered his imagination. She was a woman-child, awaiting to be awakened.

He suspected her to be a virgin. Of course she was untouched. Any man worth his salt knew that much. But the depth of the innocence staggered.

Hester's cheeks crimsoned. "W-Why do you look at me so?" Had she failed the test so abysmally?

"You are a virgin." He lifted a scolding, almost accusing, stare.

Hester felt like dropping into a deep hole. Was it so obvious? She clearly lacked the experience or capability to please such a man. And she thought, at first, it was all going so well for a spell...

Showed how stupid and gullible she was, did it not. Her face flushed yet again as she averted her countenance. She was mortified.

"It i-is considered a virtue, Sir!" Her voice lacked any real conviction. "In some more civilized circles." She lashed out, hurting from his reaction. "It was you who insisted upon this farce!"

It was his turn to be mystified by her mood.

"If I did not meet your exacting standards, who then is to truly blame?" Hester's movements were jerky, transmitting her anger.

"What the hell..." The man demanded. "Are you talking about?"

Hester released a pent-up sigh. "Just hand the text over. I have done m' part as best I am able!"

She turned him a cool glance. “I am sorry to disappoint but, a bargain is a bargain even in your world, I imagine.”

“*Disappoint?*” Seth was stunned. “Y’ dinna ‘disappoint’ y’ little gutter snipe!” He hissed plaintively. “It has never felt so ‘right!’ if you must know *and...*” He practically bellowed. “So early on at that. You succubus!”

Hester’s brow furrowed drastically. “I do not know that word, but it is a demeaning term, of course.” She took for granted.

“Of course it tis a virtue!” The man settled his temperament, trying to curb his natural tendency to maim and kill, bringing matters back on track. “I never said it was not...did I?”

“You intimidated!” Hester snapped right back. “And I will look that word up, just be forewarned!” Before the end of this day, the woman was determined to know exactly what horrid qualities a ‘succubus’ possessed.

Seth closed his eyes. “How can something go from ‘perfect’ to ‘*by the Gods*’...so very quickly?”

“I am sure I do not know!” Hester turned up her pert nose. “Give over m’ book!” She held out a hand only to clench her trembling fingers into a tight fist of embarrassment.

Seth’s hand covered the tiny appendage, his palm dwarfing the cold fingers. “*Listen* to m’ words, woman!”

Hester pulled her hand away. “I have heard enough for one night.”

“A man’s organ hardens when he is aroused.” Seth addressed the elephant in the room. “Did you...or did you not, feel the evidence of my...*involvement*.” He had his answer in the bright pink shade creeping unto the ivory flesh of her cheeks. “Then why would you stand there and accuse me of not holding up my end.”

“I..I dinna say any such...”

“Which stands to reason, you held up your’s as well, seeing as ‘the evidence’ was there for any and all to see...care they look.” he grated his loss of control.

The man wanted desperately to move past this obstacle that he could return to the former state of affairs with this bewitching opponent.

“*Stop talking about your organ!*” She insisted he do so. “It is unseemly. One simply does not speak of such things to a lady.”

Hester shifted about nervously, clearly wishing to be away from the topic...and the man. Something nagged at her psyche, however. *What had he said?*

Hester was given pause for thought. “...I...held up my end?” Had she heard correctly? “Are you simply being kind?” She dismissed the accusation even as she rethought what she had said.

Hester had to admit, the statement was ludicrous..

And Seth’s ‘look’ spoke volumes. “Does that *sound* like something I would do?”

The woman settled in time, his words soothing some of the pain he had inflicted earlier. Emerald eyes lifted, searching out his countenance. “..Do you arouse easily, then?” Her mouth fell agape, realizing how improper a question she had just asked.

“I pride myself, I do not.” He answered truthfully. “A man likes to believe, he has control over *any* situation...but especially ones involving sex.”

Hester’s mouth tightened. “*You are simply too plain spoken, Sir.*”

Seth shrugged. “Perhaps.”

The woman drew in an uneven breath. “I shall adjust my thinking..and reactions.” She decided a course of action when dealing with the man.

She walked to the desk, picking up the medical text, cradling it to her breast. “I shall take good care of your property, Sir.” She nodded her farewell and was gone within a matter of seconds.

Seth McFarland stood, looking after the enigma as Hester Hughes flounced away, disappearing at length into the shadowy foyer of the Great Castle.