

CHAPTER 1



ENGLAND 1174

From the ramparts, Judith could already see the enemy steadily approaching, and right beside the symbol of Henry's rule, she glimpsed the azure banner which displayed a nimbly black eagle soaring with spread wings.

"My lady," Sir Roderick said in astonishment. "The banner... It's..."

Sir Roderick was in charge of the castle's defence, and there was now a look of deep worry in his eyes.

"I know what the banner is," Judith cut him off with an impatient wave of her hand. "How long can we last if there's a siege?"

"We're well prepared, my lady, and it could be perchance months. Redmore has strong defences and it is one of the few stone keeps in England. But—"

Sir Roderick paused, but Judith already knew what he meant to say. She nodded to herself, coming to see there was no other course. She had pledged her allegiance to the cause of Queen Eleanor and of her son, Young Henry, who had rebelled against

their king together with two of his younger brothers. Nevertheless now Eleanor lay vanquished, and Redmore was one of the last places King Henry's loyal followers hadn't taken. Eleanor's cause was lost, so a siege would be pointless. The enemy would call for reinforcements and the castle would be eventually lost. And many lives would be wasted on both sides. Judith didn't think it fair that her people should die for her choices. They must not perish pointlessly just because their lady had chosen the side which had been vanquished in this war. Henry's victory had been arduous, because Eleanor and her sons had gathered many followers. Still, it was Henry who was victorious and not Eleanor's party.

"They will be upon us in less than an hour," Sir Roderick said, now casting expectant eyes upon his lady.

"You shall raise a white flag and open the gates," Judith answered in a steady voice.

She pulled her shoulders back, knowing too well there was no other course left. She prayed the enemy would prove merciful. Her fervent hope was that mercy would be given to her people. As for herself, she expected no mercy.

Sir Roderick looked relieved and nodded in acknowledgment of his lady's decision.

"I shall be there to meet them at the gates," Judith went on. "But I will need to speak to my lady mother. She does not know what I've resolved, and she needs to be told."

Sir Roderick bowed his head.

"Aye, my lady."

It was with a heavy heart that Judith made her way to the solar which her mother had turned into her chambers. Lady Fenice met her with an anguished look in her fine blue eyes.

"They're at our gates already? Our enemies?" she inquired.

Judith nodded.

"It's just as well then," her mother said, attempting to plaster a brave smile upon her face. "We shall withstand them. Redmore

is strong and it will bear the siege. We've months and months ahead. And even if the castle's taken, we shall be able to take the secret escape tunnel your father built."

Judith knew the next words she would utter would be hard upon her mother. Yet her mother needed to be told the truth at once.

"I have decided to surrender," she said loud and clear.

"Surrender? Why? The castle stands strong."

"Yet our cause is lost. And the siege will end only with our defeat. They will send for more men. Redmore is one of the last castles King Henry hasn't taken. No one will aid us. Eleanor and her sons are vanquished. So there's no choice but to surrender."

"Are you so cowardly? It will be noble to fight to the end!" Lady Fenice countered with a regal tilt of her head.

"Noble, ay! Yet I cannot ask my people to sacrifice their lives over a noble cause. I cannot look them in the eye and tell them it's nobler to die for the sake of my honour," Judith countered in determined tones. "Father would not have wanted this, and you know it. He cared for his own, and, as his heir, I cannot do otherwise."

"They're only commoners," Lady Fenice muttered with a sigh.

Judith stared at her amazed, as she'd often been in these past months, she'd not been able to see before that her mother did not, in truth, care for the people put under their care. Yet it was so, and Judith tried to tell herself it was mainly the melancholy which had become lodged into her mother's soul which was causing this. Her mother had always been gentle and kind, and only of late had she started speaking so disparagingly of others.

"Mother, for all our sakes there is no choice but to surrender. We'll put ourselves at the mercy of our enemies, hoping they will prove gracious in their victory and spare our people."

Lady Fenice started to shake her head, but Judith halted her with a gesture.

“My mind is set and it is my decision to make, not yours.”

At last, her mother bowed her head, clutching her heart.

“Perchance it is as you say. I am too frail of body. I cannot aid you in this.”

“Take heart! No lord who holds his honour dear would dare harm a lady such as yourself!” Judith said, clasping her mother’s hand.

Lady Fenice nodded with a tremulous smile on her beautiful face.

“Whose banner is the enemy under?” she asked at last, right before Judith could let herself out of the chamber.

Judith breathed in deep as she turned to face her mother yet again.

“De Brunne,” she answered in a voice which only strived to seem steady.

“Ah,” Lady Fenice muttered, and there was a long silence before she spoke again. “Daughter, I fear De Brunne will show you no mercy.”

Judith summoned all the strength she could muster, telling herself not to dwell upon the past any longer.

“Yet he may show *you* mercy. And he will show my people mercy. It’s all I ask,” she said, and then hurried out of her mother’s chamber, knowing time was growing short and that she needed to be at the gates when the enemy reached them.

It was not long before Redmore’s gates were tossed open, to let in the conquering army of men who carried the azure banner with the eagle displayed. Judith stood there straight as an arrow, trying to still her thumping heart, as those who led the army rode in. There were two lord knights on horseback in their hauberks and helmets, accompanied by a man of the Church and the banner men. The lords dismounted, and they were both tall and broad of shoulders, yet one was leaner and slighter of form than the other. He walked to where she was with feline grace, as if the hauberk and helmet did not weigh heavy upon him. He

spoke to her in a voice which sounded melodious, even in spite of its harsh tone. She knew that voice. She had no need of seeing the knight's face to know who he was. He was Tristram de Brunne, and both his face and voice had long haunted her dreams.

"It seems surrendering the castle is the only wise thing you ever did, *wife*," the voice uttered.

Wife. Judith straightened her spine even further, aware of the knights and soldiers now surrounding her and casting her looks of grim displeasure.

"*Sire*, if you recall, we are no longer wed," she said, striving to keep her dignity.

The lord knight didn't answer, but took the time to remove his helmet. He was, Judith noted when she looked better upon him, every bit as beautiful as she recalled him to be, even if his face was grimy with road dust and weary.

"You do not recall?" he flung at her in a bitter voice. "The Church did not agree to the annulment."

Judith stared at him, stunned. She had not known. Surely – the letter which had reached her more than one year ago had plainly stated that the Church had agreed on the annulment for which she'd petitioned. She'd read it herself. Many times. Then how had this come to be?

"Nay," she uttered shaking her head, but by the way Tristram was now looking upon her, it seemed he didn't believe she had not known of this.

The tall, wispy man of the Church came to stand by Tristram's side. He was not much older than Tristram, yet he wore a stern, disapproving expression upon his face, which nearly matched Lord de Brunne's hardened countenance. He spoke disdainfully to Judith, "The Church's word is law. You are still Lord Tristram's wife, my lady, and you're to receive heavy chastisement for the sins against your lord husband!"

Tristram halted the priest with a gesture.

“Cousin, we have decided it is upon me, and not upon the Church, to chastise my wife.”

Wife. So she was still married to Tristram, although she'd been certain the annulment had been granted. But Judith was too distraught to care about what they were talking. It did not truly matter if she was still De Brunne's wife. She had already expected her fate would be dire, yet she had surrendered the castle so her people would be safe.

“The men and the women here, they surrendered freely. And they are not to be harmed!” she uttered, fighting hard to keep her voice from trembling.

“No one will harm them,” Tristram replied tersely, beckoning his soldiers.

The way things unfolded then took place in a daze, as Judith watched the men who'd prepared to besiege her home make themselves masters of it. Yet, true to Lord Tristram's word, his soldiers behaved peacefully, as Sir Roderick and her own people met them with no opposition. Judith watched upon all this with relief, not caring what her own fate would be, and hoping her mother was still safely in the chambers where she'd closeted herself.

“Where is the lady Fenice?” Tristram asked, as if in echo of her thoughts, after his squires had helped him out of his hauberk.

“Please, do not harm my mother!” Judith pleaded, casting anguished glances at the grim priest and at the other man, a tall, broad-shouldered lord with brown hair about Tristram's own age.

The priest gave her a look of sheer disdain, and wanted to speak, but Tristram silenced him.

“She's ailing,” Judith added, knowing she was not stating the full truth, however clinging to the hope her mother would escape the besiegers' wrath.

The priest scoffed, yet the other lord, whom Tristram had

earlier addressed as FitzRolf, said with a gracious bow of his head. "No honourable knight would harm an ailing woman. Besides, my lady, it is only you who has betrayed your allegiance to your husband. Lady Fenice is guilty only of standing against King Henry. And Henry has decided to show himself magnanimous to his foes, even if they erred against him. It is known to him that your mother is already ailing, so the lady shall be forgiven for her deeds."

Judith nodded in sheer relief. Her mother and her people were then safe. As for her own fate... She looked upon Tristram's hard, handsome face, and at once knew he would not be inclined to show her any mercy.

They were now in the inner bailey, and many eyes were upon them, when the priest spoke in a thundering voice for everyone to hear, "You've disobeyed your wedding vows! You have betrayed your husband!"

Tristram swiftly cut off the rest of the words the priest had meant to say, "'Tis best I deal with it. Here and now," he uttered grimly.

Judith had no time to understand what he meant by it. With widened eyes, she watched him beckon a squire and hand him the sword he'd refastened earlier on his hip after he'd shed his hauberk. With widened eyes still, she watched him as he calmly unbuckled his sword belt to the approving exclamations of his men. It took a while to understand why the men had begun to clamour in approval. She was still stunned when she felt Tristram's strong hand grab her by the arm. And then she shouted in more outrage than pain when Tristram's sword belt landed upon her bottom with a loud crack, although the outrage soon melted, overshadowed by the unexpected sting of the belt which began to fall upon her bottom again, and then again. And again. Judith tried to run away from the sheer sting of the belt, but her captor had a strong hold of her arm, as he was dragging her towards one of the wooden benches in the inner bailey. The belt kept

landing with unfailing precision upon her behind and thighs, which soon began to burn as if stung by angry bees.

“Wait! I—” Judith tried to speak, but her punisher didn’t heed any of her words.

The doubled sword belt he held in his hand was still busy sizzling her behind, and when they reached the bench, Judith was already feeling scalding tears of pain falling upon her cheeks. She’d never been given to easy tears, yet she couldn’t help but succumb to them. Tristram forcefully dragged her across his lap, after seating himself on the bench, and Judith gritted her teeth to prevent herself from starting to sob. She tried to brace herself against the infernal sting of the accursed belt which she was certain would now land even more harshly upon her, and she vowed to herself she would be valiant until it was all over. However she’d not expected the sheer humiliation which followed. Her captor hoisted her skirts to expose her bare bottom to the approving cheers of the soldiers who were rejoicing in the punishment.

“Wait!” Judith found herself wailing, as she blushed in sheer mortification at the thought that not only Tristram’s men, but her own people could now see her bare bottom and thighs which the belt must have already striped with angry red.

Soon she forgot to even feel humiliated as the doubled belt landed across her bare behind with a mightily loud crack. It hurt ten thousand times more to feel the belt upon her bare skin, and Judith no longer cared to hold back her tears. She cried. And then, when the belt cruelly caught the sensitive part of her sit spots, again and again, she simply started sobbing. As the accursed belt did its work, her whole bottom and upper thighs began to feel as if a blazing fire was burning there.

She was now weeping so hard, she only belatedly understood the demon who’d delivered her punishment had stopped at last, resting a battle-calloused hand on her scorched behind. Strangely, she felt a fire not only inside her bottom, but an

unbearable heat inside her sex when he deigned to speak, in a hard, dispassionate voice, "Do you think you've learnt your lesson, wife?"

When she didn't swiftly answer, the accursed belt landed across the spot where her bottom met her thighs, and she could do nothing but sob, "Aye, husband!"

Blissfully, the demon seemed satisfied with her answer, but Judith's knees felt far too weak as he let her off his lap, after he'd straightened her skirts. He had to stand up and help support her, as she painfully tried to keep her balance. She'd never been spanked in her life, but now she understood why some of her childhood friends had feared their parents' punishment so much. The sting in her bottom was simply infernal, and she had to bite her lip hard, nearly tasting blood, in order to prevent herself from hopping from one foot to another. Instead, she just shifted her weight, trying to alleviate the sheer sting she now felt. The belting had mercifully stopped, yet she could still feel the fierce fire of it across her skin.

The jeers and laughter from Tristram's men stung nearly as much as her bottom, and through the haze of her tears, she could now perceive that even some of her own people had started smirking somewhat, callously finding amusement in her misery.

"'Tis done," Tristram tossed out, letting go of her arm, as it was obvious she could at last stand up by herself.

"Mild punishment," the priest scoffed, and Judith nearly shook her head in incredulity.

Mild? It didn't feel at all like mild punishment to her. In truth, she'd never felt as wretched in her life. Uncaring her gesture was unladylike, she simply wiped her teary face with the sleeve of her gown. She glowered at the demon who'd punished her, who, she noted, looked, as usual, nothing like a demon, but rather like an angel, with hair the colour of dark honey and long-lashed, brooding eyes. She felt disgusted with herself for

noting his beauty at this very time. Her mother had been right then. Tristram de Brunne was indeed a fiend in spite of his angelic appearance.

"The punishment will suffice," Tristram flung grimly in his cousin's direction.

The priest glared and looked displeased, while the other knight gave a grave nod.

"It was a fair punishment," FitzRolf said.

Judith had a hard time holding her tongue, and she opened her mouth to protest, but a pointed look from Tristram made her clamp it shut. He was still holding the doubled belt in one hand, and she had no doubt he would make renewed use of it if she didn't hold her peace.

"Aye," Tristram tossed out at FitzRolf with a grim nod of his own. "Now that it's done and over with, we'll rest and break our fast."

He cast a telling glance in her direction, and she stared at him.

"Our men are hungry and weary," Tristram went on in that hard voice he employed of late. "You're still the lady of this house, aren't you?" he added pointedly.

She widened her eyes at him, barely able to comprehend. She'd already surrendered her home to him, which meant she now no longer held any status here. Unless he meant to keep her on as his wife. But this seemed incomprehensible to her. She'd spurned him and had sought an annulment of their marriage. And she'd chosen Eleanor's cause over Henry's. Surely, she could no longer be Tristram's wife or the lady of this house. She was now just a vanquished foe he meant to swiftly remove. Yet Tristram's dark eyes bored into her, making her focus on his words.

"Give orders, *wife*, and ready things for our rest and repast," Tristram called out sharply.

Judith breathed in deeply and decided to gather her thoughts later. It was now better to hurry to do her punisher's bidding.

Her tarrying or nursing her sore bottom would be to no avail. She was soon to learn what fate he had in store for her anyway, and at this time it seemed better to behave sensibly. Her pointless defiance would not help her people or her mother or, for that matter, herself. Striving hard to regain her composure and not to rub her blazing bottom, Judith proceeded to do her duty as the lady of the house, going to instruct the servants on what needed to be readied.

It was good to dwell upon menial chores, rather than on the sting in her behind and on the humiliation Tristram had bestowed upon her. Dame Berthe, who'd been responsible for most of the household duties, had passed away this winter due to a fever, and now these duties fell mainly upon Judith, since her mother's health and disposition were far too frail. In the past years, Judith had sought to learn these duties as well as she'd been able to, so now they came naturally to her. She now conferred with her people regarding the lodging and feeding of the men who'd come upon them. To Judith's relief, none of her people chose to ask how she fared after the punishment she'd received, and she felt grateful for it, finding it easier to forgive those who'd seemed to find a measure of entertainment in her spanking.

It was perhaps an hour later that things were ready for a meal, with benches and tables set in the Hall to accommodate each and every new man. Judith was loath to share the meal at the lord's table which she'd readied for Tristram and his peers, yet she had no choice but to comply when her husband beckoned her by his side, making it all too plain he was still her lord.

"Sit, wife," he bid, not even deigning to look at her.

Judith tried to sit down, but jolted upright due to the fierce sting in her behind. It seemed Sir Tristram's belt had done an even more thorough job than she'd thought.

"I'd rather stand, my lord," she said with a heartfelt glower.

The laughter which reverberated around her made her blush

crimson, as Tristram's men began to make merry over the chastisement the lady of the house had received. Even the dour priest gave a malicious grin, but Tristram didn't laugh or smile.

"Was that defiance I saw in your eyes, wife?" Tristram asked, his voice was steely.

Judith straightened her shoulders.

"What do you wish me to say?" she countered, feeling truly weary of what had gone on today.

"She's still defiant," the priest cut in, with a look of sheer disdain. "'Tis obvious you should cast her away and send her to a convent for her treachery. It is the only course left."

Judith simply shuddered at the words, imagining harsh scissors cutting away her long hair, which she'd always thought her one glory. She imagined grey walls, stifling silence, and joyless prayer. Was this the fate Tristram had in store for her? She stared at him with undisguised anger in her eyes. Tristram didn't miss her look.

"Perchance you wish me to teach you another lesson here and now, wife," he said as their gazes locked.

She now openly glared at him, no longer caring what would happen to her. It was the other knight's voice, the one called FitzRolf, which cut in pointedly, "My Lord De Brunne, perhaps you and your wife should settle this in private."

Judith could only feel grateful this lord would spare her the humiliation of another public spanking. But her heart started thumping in anguish when Tristram took his friend's advice and grabbed her by the arm, leading her to the stairs, and then to her bedchamber. He knew very well where her bedchamber was. After all, they'd shared it for the brief time he'd resided in her home. Judith recalled those times, and she recalled a Tristram who had behaved very differently from the grim, forceful knight he'd now proven himself to be. When they reached her chamber, he swiftly closed the door behind them, and Judith fully expected him to take her over his knee again. She cast him a

defiant look, vowing to bite her tongue rather than succumb to new tears when he spanked her.

Nevertheless, Tristram made no gesture after he sat himself in a chair. Instead he talked, in that hard voice he'd used all day, "We both know you've betrayed me, but we are still wed, in spite of your endeavours to undo our match. The Church and the King urge me to cast you aside and force you to join a convent. Your home and lands will be mine by rights, since you've no kin on your father's side they could revert to. Besides, you have surrendered them yourself. Now Redmore will be secure and will become a stronghold against Henry's enemies."

Judith closed her eyes in weariness. She should have expected this, since there seemed to be no other course open to her. She'd not thought herself married to Tristram any longer, but the Church's ruling had made her into both a sinner and a traitor. Since they were still wed, she was formally guilty of standing not only against the King, but also against her husband.

"However," Tristram added, "no law in this world forbids a husband from seeking reconciliation with an estranged wife. Since we are still wed, no man, even a king or a priest, can overrule my word in this. You could remain here, as the lady of this house and as my lady."

Judith opened her eyes in sheer surprise.

"In spite of everything, you would be willing to keep me as your wife?" she asked with raised eyebrows.

"Aye. As my *chastened, repentant* wife," Tristram said stressing words which made Judith purse her lips in sheer anger.

She had spurned him by seeking to end their marriage—that was true. Yet she'd not betrayed him in any way. She had not meant to stand against him. It was just the decision of supporting Eleanor's cause against Henry's which she'd made. It was a decision several other noble families had made, and that Judith understood she would make again, because she believed Eleanor's cause to be right. Nevertheless, Eleanor's supporters

had been defeated and Henry now kept her imprisoned. Judith assumed most of Eleanor's vanquished followers had been punished with exile or even death. So she supposed Tristram's offer was gracious, but she couldn't help feeling anger at the disdainful way he spat the word *chastened*. The fierce sting in her behind made her go over the hard spanking she'd received in front of all to see.

Tristram must have perceived the anger in her eyes, because he laughed mirthlessly. "A bleak choice for you, my lady, is it not? Joining a convent or staying on as my wife. As I recall, being my wife seemed to you a fate worse than death, did it not?"

Judith avoided looking at him, because she fully recalled how it had been between them. And she did not want to think upon what had been. She strived to look only upon the present time. Two choices then. Both bleak.

Tristram went on savagely, with a disdainful wave of his hand, "Not that you deserve it, but I'll give you a third choice. You and your mother could escape in the deep of the night, and I'll bid my men tell they haven't seen you. Your mother has kin in Aquitaine. So you could head for Dover and find a ship. And you'll be free of me, just as you've always wished."

Judith thought of her mother, and of how her mother had always hated this cold land.

"What of our vows? You said we are still wed."

Tristram shook his head with a mocking smile on his lips.

"I'll ask for an annulment. And something tells me the Church will be inclined to grant it *this time*."

The sunny picture of Aquitaine was however replaced by the image of her home in Judith's mind. Redmore was her home. And she'd always loved it fiercely.

"So you'll have me leave my home in the dead of the night as if I were a thief. This is my home! And you're the thief!" she cried in a high voice, not caring he'll make good on his threat and give her another spanking right here and now.

"It *was* your home, which you lost through your own treachery. You've just surrendered it and it is rightfully and honourably mine. And you..."

He paused with a twist of those sinfully beautiful lips.

"You are mightily lucky I'm still willing to suffer you as my wife," he added at last, staring away from her in sheer disdain.

Judith hated the word *suffer* just as much as she'd hated it when he'd spoken of her as *chastened*. Yet she raked a hand through her hair understanding the choices before her were clear. Life entombed in a convent. Escape to a new land, leaving behind everything she'd known. Or a life of bleak servitude in her former home, on Tristram's sufferance. All were hard choices.

"Your wife..." she found herself repeating with a shake of her head.

"Aye. *Mine*. To share my bed as a proper wife should. To do as I see fit, and be chastened for disobedience whenever I see fit."

Judith had the urge of instantly rubbing her scorched bottom. The manner in which Tristram had chastened her today left no room for doubt he had sound punishments in store for her. It was hard to reconcile the picture of the hard, grim warrior who'd spanked her with his sword belt with that of the gentle, courteous knight who had slept chastely by her side in those first days of their marriage. She had not allowed him to bed her, even if he had been within his rights to do so, and he had not pressed for it. He had not forced her to lie with him. But things had changed, and she had no doubt now he'd demand what he had graciously refrained from taking. She thought of sharing her body with Tristram, and blushed fiercely, understanding, like so many times before, that this was a part of their marriage she'd have no difficulty complying with. As always, she lusted after him, even after the hard spanking he'd given her today.

"Your wife," she repeated, dumbly, striving to hate this man for what he'd done to her.

Tristram said nothing, and Judith frantically wondered, like so many times before, if she'd ever managed to fully hide from him the scorching lust she felt whenever she glanced upon his beautiful form.

She reasoned there was no helping it. A convent was the last place where she wanted to spend her life, and Aquitaine was an uncertain choice and an arduous journey for her mother. Most of all, she could never leave her people. With her father gone, they depended upon her. She just couldn't leave them at the mercy of the man who'd nearly set siege to her castle.

"I-I choose to stay," she muttered almost inaudibly.

Tristram raised his dark eyebrows, which were, just like his eyes, in such strange yet pleasing contrast with his fair hair.

"I would have you state it loud and clear," he uttered in a tone which left no doubt who held the advantage in this arrangement.

Judith suppressed a sigh. It was, she tried to tell herself, the only choice she had left.

"I shall be your wife," she said resolutely, knowing this was a bond she would no longer be able to undo.

"There's no return from it. And I will have no more false pledges or treachery from you," Tristram told her in a hard voice.

In silence, they returned to the Hall, to join the table, and Judith tried to hold her head high and her back straight, knowing all eyes were upon her and recalling they'd witnessed her deep humiliation.

"Strive to look repentant!" Tristram hissed to her between his teeth right before they reached the high table.

"Whatever for?" Judith couldn't help saying venomously. "Besides I am certain you already plan to teach me repentance later."

"That I do," Tristram retorted softly, taking hold of her arm and leading her to the table.

Judith began to fear he would truly spank her anew, right there at the table in front of all to see, just as callously as he'd done before, but he only made her sit by his side, on the hard wooden bench. Judith winced at the pain in her rear as she did so, but the pain seemed somewhat lesser than earlier. It was uncomfortable to sit down, yet she could bear it. So she bore it, resolving not to give Tristram or any of the men at the table the chance to see her eyes fill with tears.

Tristram's cousin, the churchman who was called Isidore, instantly perceived she meant to defy them.

"Your wife doesn't look chastened to me."

"Desist. She has already been punished today," Tristram said quietly, taking a sip of wine from the goblet which lay in front of him.

There were displeased mutters from several of the men in the Hall, who, Judith thought in rancour, were without doubt keen on witnessing her further humiliation.

"Her eyes are dry of tears, and she stares upon us haughtily," Isidore persisted, casting Judith a glance meant to thwart her.

"I have already vowed to school her to obedience. And I shall certainly make it my purpose. Now can I eat in peace?" Tristram flung out.

Isidore frowned in return.

"Her head's uncovered. She looks like a loose woman!"

Judith's long black hair was fashioned in a simple long plait which she wore upon one shoulder. Of late she had become used to wearing it like this again, since she'd considered herself an unmarried woman and it had been simpler not to wear a wimple. But Isidore plainly took her uncovered hair as a sign of her sinful behaviour and of the way he thought she'd spurned her marriage vows. In churchmen's eyes it was shameful for married women not to cover their hair.

Tristram shrugged, as if he was not greatly concerned by the priest's words, and Judith painfully recalled him telling her once that her black hair looked wondrous and that it was a shame to cover it. She gritted her teeth, striving not to dwell upon the past, but only on the present moment. At present, Tristram was speaking in a level voice.

"Rest assured, cousin. My lady wife is bound to learn only too well what is expected of her."

Isidore arched an eyebrow, but under Tristram's steady gaze, he reluctantly refocused his attention on his own meal. Judith stared at the trencher in front of her, recalling she hadn't had a morsel to eat today, but knowing she wouldn't be able to force a single bite down her throat. Yet her husband wouldn't let her be.

"Eat. Now. I say," he commanded her in a terse voice which left no room to wonder what he would do if she didn't comply with his command right now.

Was this what her life with her husband would always be from now on? This life with this new and different Tristram? But perchance Tristram had always been like this – willing to completely rule over her – and she'd not been able to see it before. Judith stifled a sigh and she willed herself to chew on a chunk of bread. However it was not for fear of Tristram's punishment that she was forcing herself to eat, but rather because she knew she would feel ill and faint later this evening if she didn't. She forced herself to take the morsel of meat on Tristram's knife, which he had cut for her.

"Thank you, my lord," she muttered in a sullen voice, making her ungracious tone at odds with her gracious words.

His dark eyes looked daggers at her.

"I've given you a kind reprieve, but soon I shall cure you of your defiant ways," he said grimly, and his words rang loud, for all to hear.

Judith strived to make herself ignore the deep feeling of shame she still harboured about the way he'd chastened her.